

THE ROMANTIC PERIOD

THE CONCERTO

The concerto

A concerto is a large-scale composition for an orchestra with a soloist or a group of soloists. The solo performers will alternate between playing with or alongside the larger ensemble.

Concertos have three movements – fast, slow, fast.

The concerto in the Baroque period (roughly 1600-1750)

Baroque composers who wrote concertos include Vivaldi, Bach and Handel. Vivaldi wrote over 500 concertos and half of them were for violin.

There were two types of Baroque concerto - the **concerto grosso** and the **solo concerto**.

The Baroque concerto grosso:

- is written for a group of solo instruments (the **concertino**) and for a larger ensemble (the **ripieno**)
- has well-known examples like Bach's six *Brandenburg Concertos*

Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 4* is an example of the concerto grosso. When the piece opens there is a solo group of violin and two flutes are prominent and they are joined by the **ripieno** strings. The harpsichord is played in the **continuo**.

The Baroque solo concerto:

- is written for one solo instrument and the orchestra
- often has brilliant and technically demanding passages for the soloist to play

Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* is a well-known example of the Baroque solo violin concerto. In this piece there is a marked contrast between solo violin and **ripieno** passages.

The concerto in the Classical period (roughly 1750-1800)

The concerto was a popular form during the **Classical** period (roughly 1750-1800). It had three movements – the two fast outer movements and a slow lyrical middle movement.

The Classical concerto introduced the **cadenza**, a brilliant dramatic solo passage where the soloist plays and the orchestra pauses and remains silent.

The cadenza:

- is usually played towards the end of the first movement
- is improvised and based on one or more themes from the first movement
- shows off the skills of the soloist
- often ends on a trill

Mozart wrote 21 concertos for piano as well as concertos for violin, French horn, clarinet, and flute. Another famous Classical concerto is Haydn's *Trumpet Concerto in E flat*.

The first movement of Mozart's *Piano Concerto No.20 in D minor* has a cadenza passage that demonstrates the musical attributes of the cadenza.

The Romantic Era (C. 1790–1915)

Between the Romantic and the Classical concerto there occurred no such marked, relatively abrupt changes in form or style as were observed earlier here between the Classical and the Baroque concerto. The onset of the Romantic era was not signalled by any shift in the concerto's musical structure.

As with much other Romantic music, the Romantic concerto was marked by an extension or expansion of those same Classical trends in all directions. This development led eventually to their exaggeration and ultimately to their extremes or breaking points. The concerto as a genre became more than ever the ideal showpiece at public concerts, doing much for the composer's profit, the performer's triumph, and the listener's delectation. Indeed, Franz Liszt, the dominant composer-pianist of his time, distinguished between the concerto and the sonata, calling the first a public showpiece and the second a private, personal expression.

Orchestration

Another expansion of Classical trends is seen in the concerto **orchestra**, with the larger number, greater variety, and more discriminating use of its instruments. It is true that only the thinnest possible "support" for the soloist sufficed for composer-performers such as the pianist **Chopin**, the violinist **Paganini**, and others whose musical thinking ranged but little beyond the spheres of their own instruments. But the orchestra developed the status of a genuine if not superior adversary of the soloist in newly resourceful orchestrations by composers of wider instrumental perspective.

At the same time, the piano, as the ideal Romantic instrument, secured ever more firmly its Classical supremacy as the preferred solo vehicle of the concerto. Although the total output of violin concerti in particular was very great, there was a decided majority of piano concerti among all concerti that appeared on printed public concert programs. In turn, the use of the piano in concerti was one main incentive for further advances in piano construction. By the mid-19th century the instrument reached a peak very close to the sonorous, seven-octave, triple-strung, cast-iron framed behemoth (giant) that is the modern "concert grand." With its perfection came also the extension of keyboard technique to the last reaches of athletic dexterity.

The wind instruments used in concerto solos underwent mechanical advances, too, and both they and the stringed instruments enjoyed similar exploitations of their technical possibilities in this century of virtuosos—not only of **Liszt** (and so many more) on the piano but of others such as **Paganini** on the violin, Alfredo **Piatti** on the cello, and Domenico **Dragonetti** on the double bass.

Romantic innovations

The most significant extension or expansion of the concerto principle in the Romantic era might in one sense be called a contraction, for it concerns a continuing effort to consolidate, interrelate, and fuse the over-all cycle, both within and between the movements. Certain composers, mostly forgotten, yet including as important and successful composers as Chopin, were satisfied to pour new wine into old bottles. Thus many concerti accepted without question the movement forms and cycle that by then had become self-conscious stereotypes, especially “sonata form” in the first movement. Brahms largely preferred to accept the traditional cycle and forms, too, but with the masterful individuality, flexibility, and logic that were needed to revitalize them. On the other hand, most of the Romantics whose concerti are still played sought to modernize and advance the traditional structural principles. These changes may be summed up in **six** categories.

First, there is the **elimination of the long initial tutti section** in the opening movement. This innovation corresponded to the elimination in the sonata of the previously customary repeat of the exposition, a change that had begun in Beethoven’s late sonatas and had soon become general. Such is the pattern in Schumann’s *Piano Concerto in A Minor*, Opus 54 (1845), in which the soloist enters at the outset and proceeds promptly to an almost constant interrelationship with the orchestra as the exposition unfolds but once.

Second, **there is the interlocking of the movements**, achieved by leading not only from one movement to the next without appreciable pause in time or sound but also without either a definitive **cadence** (stopping point made clear by the harmonies) or full break in the continuity of harmonies or tonality. Thus in the *Violin Concerto in E Minor*, Opus 64 (1844), of **Felix Mendelssohn**, a lone bassoon suspends one note of the final chord of the first movement. Preventing a pause in time or sound, it leads directly into the middle movement. Again, between the middle and final movements a brief interlude, midway in tempo, mood, and intensity, supplies the continuity and avoids any full break.

A third Romantic innovation is the effort to bind the cycle more positively through **the use of related themes and motives in the successive movements**. Among well-known examples is the tight thematic organization, with its final retrospective summary, in the four interconnected movements of Liszt’s *Piano Concerto No. 1 (Triangle Concerto)*, published 1857), a work Liszt himself claimed to be innervational on this account.

Fourth, there are certain other, more incidental, yet effective means of unifying the cycle. These include the sense of culminating joy or triumph in those many concerti that change from a minor home key to its tonic major (for example, from A minor to A major) for the finale; or the consistency of musical textures caused by making all the movements similar in weight and style; or the stronger sense of return achieved by a finale that follows a middle movement characterized by a marked sense of departure or contrast.

The remaining two categories of changes concern Romantic developments that go somewhat beyond expansions (or contractions) of Classical concerto traditions. As a fifth category, there is the extramusical **unification of the cycle by means of a program**—that is, a story or image. Unlike the Romantic sonata, the Romantic concerto abounds in examples. One of the earliest such examples is the image that the German composer Carl Maria von Weber identified with his *Konzertstück (Concert Piece)* for piano and orchestra (1821). Its four interconnected movements are said to describe a medieval lady’s longing for her absent knight, her agonized fears for his safety, the excitement of his impending return, and the joys of reunion and love.

Sixth and last, there are numerous efforts to contract or consolidate the concerto cycle still more drastically, by **fusion of movements**. Four different solutions may be cited as representative. Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1 in B Flat Minor* (1875) follows a number of symphonies and sonatas of the period by integrating the slow movement with the scherzo (a lively movement that had become a rather frequent additional item in the cycle). Liszt's *Piano Concerto No. 2 in A Major* (published 1863) is a pioneer among the several concerti that reduce the separate movements to sharply contrasting sections within a single movement. And the Russian Nikolay Medtner's *Piano Concerto in G Minor* is a single, experimental variation of "sonata form." It consists, as he himself explains,

of an exposition, [a short, transitional cadenza,] a series of [nine] variations on the two chief themes, constituting the development [section], and then the recapitulation.

Major contributions

From beginning to end in the Romantic era, Germany reigned supreme in the concerto, both as leader and producer, as with all the major instrumental forms. The majority of the non-Germans whose concerti were more or less successful in their day were at least trained in Germany. Here, in one loose chronology, may be mentioned the most important of the Romantics from both in and out of Germany, along with their most important concerti, which generally are those with the best chance still of being heard today. The once successful piano concerti of the Czech Jan Ladislav Dussek and the Germans Johann Nepomuk Hummel and Ignaz Moscheles—all renowned virtuoso pianists—have given way to other early Romantic works. These include the *Konzertstücke* of Weber, two concerti by Mendelssohn, and, especially, two by Chopin and the one by Schumann. Mendelssohn's two piano concerti are rapidly slipping into the status of "student concerti" today, but his *Violin Concerto in E Minor* continues to hold top position in its class, along with the violin concerti of Beethoven, Brahms, and Tchaikovsky. These works followed and eclipsed the successes of Viotti, Paganini, the German Ludwig Spohr, and other violinist composers. Schumann left one of the era's few most played cello concerti, two others being the later ones by Saint-Saëns and the Czech Antonín Dvořák. As noted, Liszt was a pathbreaker with his two piano concerti. His other, more programmatic works for piano and orchestra are less played today, but they also exercised a variety of influences on such different late-Romantics as Grieg, Franck, the American Edward MacDowell, Rachmaninoff, Richard Strauss, and the Hungarian Ernő Dohnányi. Brahms's concerti, every one a highly popular masterpiece today, mark a peak for the era on the conservative side. They include besides the two piano concerti in D minor and B-flat major, the *Violin Concerto in D Major* and the *Double Concerto in A Minor* (with violin and cello as the solo instruments). Among later romantic concerti, though those onetime favourites for violin by Henri Vieuxtemps, Henryk Wieniawski, Max Bruch, Karl Goldmark, Aleksandr Glazunov, and Sir Edward Elgar have recently lost much ground in the concert hall, those of Dvořák, Saint-Saëns, the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius, and, especially, Tchaikovsky still hold strong. Similarly, while the piano concerti of the famed piano virtuoso Anton Rubinstein are all but forgotten, two (in G minor and C minor) out of the five by Saint-Saëns and the *Concerto No. 2 in D Minor* by MacDowell get occasional hearings, and those already mentioned by Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff remain among the most successful. Certain concerti are less likely to be heard at least partly because they are written for less usual solo instruments. These include works for bassoon by Weber; for clarinet by Spohr, Weber, and Ferruccio Busoni; and for horn by Weber and Richard Strauss.