

Evolution of the concerto grosso music essay



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Describe the evolution of the concerto grosso from its origins up to the time of JS Bach and Handel. Include references to specific composers and works.

The concerto grosso is an early form of concerto which is distinguishable from other types of concerto by its two groups of instrumentation, the continuo and the ripieno. Concerto grosso translates roughly as 'great concerted performance'.

Late in the renaissance period composers such as Giovanni Gabrieli were using methods of contrast and opposition in their works, evident in Gabrieli's polychoral canzonas, which were so effectively developed in St marks Cathedral, Venice. The use of St Marks many choir lofts brought new timbres and techniques to such composers, which would develop further in the Baroque era. As in the polychoral music of Gabreili, the concerto grosso would set a concertino - small group of solo instruments - against the ripieno - a full string orchestra. Typically there would be a basso continuo which would be a harpsichord or an organ which would add texture to the ripieno and would support the continuo with harmonies. Ritornello form will typically be found in the faster movements of concerto grossi, the ritornello will start, played by the ripieno, the concertino will then join in stating the main theme. The ritornello and concertino's episode will then alternate with the main theme being reintroduced shortened, altered or in full.

TUTTI

SOLO

TUTTI

SOLO

TUTTI

RITORNELLO

CONCERTINO

RITORNELLO

CONCERTINO

RITORNELLO

This pattern would happen many times and in different keys, but the main theme would've been likely to be repeated in full, and in the tonic key, only at the end. Although this form looks to be quite clear cut, there were many variants, composers such as Corelli, Handel and Vivaldi experimented with the form.

The origins of the concerto grosso can be found around 1675, one of the first concerti grossi is by Alessandro Stradella (1642-82), but some of the more celebrated early works are the twelve concerti grossi of Corelli's opus six. These works of Corelli seem to have been key in the emergence the concerto grosso. Written in 4, 5 or even six movements and alternating between fast and slow, Corelli based his musical ideas on dances of the baroque period like the allemande, the courante and the gigue. In these compositions Corelli had started to define a strong contrast between soli and tutti, which may have developed from his church sonatas.

The development of the orchestra during this period had an effect on the evolving concerto grosso. The relatively new violin family had replaced that of the viols and players were becoming specialists, giving composers more flexibility when writing. Whilst there was no standardisation of the baroque orchestra, it would consist predominately of stringed instruments of the violin family which would double on parts as the colour of timbre was quite limited. The three keyboard instruments of the time, the clavichord, the organ and the harpsichord all benefited from the now commonplace tempered tuning technique. This era started to see virtuosic performers arise in musical 'schools', mainly in Italy. For example, in the church of San Petronio, Bologna, there was a regular group of performers who became accomplished in their fields, but when the occasion suited ensembles were increased in size by the use of more modestly talented instrumentalists. This created a different standard of difficulty between the concertino solo passages and the fuller ripieno episodes.

One of the most notable figures in the 'Bologna School' was Giuseppe Torelli (1658 - 1709), Torelli contributed a lot to the development of the concerto grosso. It was he who settled on a three movement, fast - slow - fast structure. In his opus eight concerti, he has developed a distinctive style with a very clear use of the ritornello form in his allegro movements. It is here in the time of Torelli that the markings of a typical concerto grosso start to emerge with its allegro - adagio - allegro structure, the strong and strict use of ritornello form and then the use of more virtuoso writing for the continuo instruments.

With this three movement structure becoming almost standard it is by the works of Antonio Vivaldi that it becomes established. Vivaldi shows a development of melody and rhythm, writing in distinct form which had grown to be expected of a baroque concerto, but at the same time he enhanced the writing of solo lines in a way seen previously by Torelli and Albinoni. Vivaldi started to introduce wind instruments such as flutes, bassoons and horns to the orchestra and sometimes to the continuo, which, in turn led to a more colourful demonstration of timbre. The adagio movement became just as important to Vivaldi as the allegro movements, gaining equal importance; this is something which other composers such as Johannes Sebastian Bach took into their works.

Around 1720, Johannes Sebastian Bach wrote a set of six concerti of which three were concerto grosso, numbers 2, 4 and 5. Bach was influenced by the works of Corelli, Albinoni and Vivaldi but started to create more complex texture with counterpoint and sonority. Although developing the style of writing, he largely conformed to the structure set before him. George Fredric Handel (1685 - 1759) differed here, whilst still writing with the newer, more complex techniques his concerti grossi were more in keeping on a structure basis with those of Corelli. In his concerti he uses more movements and relates them to the baroque dances, for example, opus six, concerto grosso no six. Within this work there is an opening larghetto e affettuoso, a fugal allegro, a pastoral in the form of a musette en rondeau and a minuet like allegro. The concerti of Handel show diversity and variety, which may be due to the fact he was ' more travelled' than other composers of his time.

It was during the period of Vivaldi, Bach and Handel that the concerto grosso was to become less popular amongst composers, the writing of virtuoso lines leant itself better to the solo concerto, although the term concerto grosso has still been used in the 20th century by composers such as Bloch and Vaughn Williams.

Word Count - 992

SUBMISSION 1 – ASSIGNMENT TWO

Assignment 2A Question 2

Discuss the variety of instrumentation in Bach's Brandenburg Concertos.

Johannes Sebastian Bach used an extremely varied combination of instruments in his set of Brandenburg Concertos. For the period, late baroque, it was almost experimental, leaving no stone unturned as he searched for the sonority to compliment his distinctive counterpoint. Because the instrumentation is so varied I will describe each of the concertos separate scoring before discussing the many combinations and instruments.

Brandenburg Concerto No. 1 in F major

Instrumentation -

Concertino - Two Corni da Caccia (Natural Horn), Three Oboes, Bassoon and a Violino Piccolo (Small Violin).

Ripieno - Two Violins, Viola, Cello and Basso Continuo (Harpsichord).

Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 in F major (Concerto Grosso)

Instrumentation -

Concertino - Tromba (Trumpet), Recorder, Oboe, Violin

Ripieno - Two Violins, Viola, Cello and Basso Continuo (Harpsichord).

Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G major

Instrumentation -

Concertino - Three Violins, Three Violas and Three cellos (split into three groups of equal instrumentation).

Ripieno - Basso Continuo (Harpsichord).

Brandenburg Concerto No. 4 in G major (Concerto Grosso)

Instrumentation -

Concertino - Violin and Two Flauti d'echo (Recorder).

Ripieno - Two Violins, Viola, Cello and Basso Continuo (Harpsichord).

Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 in D major (Concerto grosso)

Instrumentation -

Concertino - Harpsichord, Violin and Flute.

Ripieno - Violin, Viola, Cello and Violone.

Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 in B flat major

Instrumentation -

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Concertino – Two Violas and a Cello.

Ripieno – Two Viola da Gamba (In unison), a Cello, a Violone and Basso Continuo.

There are many things which strike you about Bach's instrumentation when you see it classified in this way. Firstly, for the period, it seems to be quite experimental and certainly in Concerto No. 6, the use of the Viola da Gamba, a somewhat dated instrument of the time, could suggest Bach was searching hard for exactly the texture he wanted, or that in fact Concerto No. 6 predates the other five and is not as the date on the presentation score. This concerto also displays a lack of treble instrumentation, creating a much darker timbre. Also on show is Bach's exposition of wind ensemble, Concertos No. 1 and No. 2 display wind groups as the concertino, adding a real sense of colour and texture to the works. The Harpsichord makes an appearance as the soloist in Concerto No. 5, showing a reluctance to conform to the standard practise of keeping the keyboard instrument in the continuo.

Amongst the scoring of the Brandenburg concertos are some Instruments which may be unfamiliar to today's audience. In Concerto No. 1, the only brass instruments are the two Corno da Caccia. Now this is not the Horn that we know today, but would have been a small, natural, valve less horn, not too dissimilar to a hunting horn. This instrument allowed Bach to write the same virtuosity as for a trumpet, but would have given slightly less edge to the sound. The Flauti D'echo of the fourth concerto stirs up a lot of debate as to exactly what instrument Bach actually meant. Malcom Boyd, in his book '

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Bach, The Brandenburg Concertos' discuss' the possibility of the Flauti of the second concerto, the recorder, being the same instrument as the Flauti D'echo and in fact not a different version at all. This is a matter that many academics are yet to agree on.

The Violin Piccolo is scored in the first concerto amongst the concertino, this instrument, as the name would suggest, is a smaller version of the violin we know today. The violin piccolo is recorded as being pitched either a minor third, or a fourth above the concert violin, but as Malcom Boyd writes in his book " It is doubtful whether one can really speak about the violin piccolo as one might about the violin or the viola".

Concerto No. 6 gives us the Viola de Gamba, An older instrument, the viola de gamba is a member of the viol family, a six string instrument played with a bow and held between the legs, equivalent to today's double bass. Also required in each one of the six concertos is a violone, this would have been similar to the viola de gamba, a bass like instrument used in the basso continuo.

Bach's treatment of concertino and ripieno differs somewhat to that of other concerto composers such as Vivaldi, as he treats the concertino as not just a solo group but likes to bring different instruments to the fore, and create unusual pairings of different instruments. As referred to in The Cambridge Music Guide, in concerto No. 2 the solo instruments are paired in every combination, this makes me wonder if there was also some mathematical logic behind this sort of scoring.

Every soloists performs on there own and with the group, and lines are passed seamlessly around the ensemble. Throughout the Brandenburg Concertos, Bach uses the instrumentation to such effect, that there are so many colours and textures on display. However, with the ambiguity of what some of the instruments were it is impossible to recreate the colour and texture that Bach himself was looking for.

Word count = 826

SUBMISSION 1 – ASSIGNMENT TWO

Assignment 2A Question 3

Give a detailed analysis of the first movement of Brandenburg Concerto no. 2 in F major. Include a brief background to this work.

It is widely believed that much of the music that Bach wrote during his years as the Kapellmeister in Cothen has been lost, fortunately amongst the surviving works are the celebrated scores of the Brandenburg Concertos.

Due to the complex contrapuntal nature of the six instrumental works, they could possibly be classed as chamber works rather than orchestral works. All six concertos are written for differing musical combinations, combinations which show a desire to create new sounds but also celebrate sounds of the period. These six concertos were dedicated in a presentation score to Christian Ludwig, The Margrave of Brandenburg, with the year 1721 as the year on the manuscript. It was whilst on a trip to Berlin during the year of 1719 that Bach met the Margrave, Bach's musicianship as a performer had interested the Margrave so much that he invited Bach to write him some compositions for his extensive library. It was two years later that Bach

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obliged the offer of the Margrave, sending him the scores to what are now known as The Brandenburg Concertos. This gesture by Bach is widely suggested amongst scholars of the musical world to be Bach's way of submitting his CV, in the hope of earning a job in the court of Christian Ludwig, a job which never materialised. The now labelled Brandenburg Concertos are amongst Bach's most celebrated works, performers, composers and academics regard them as some of the finest musical output of the baroque era.

This idea of writing for various combinations of instruments was a new concept in Germany; Bach however had studied the published works of composers such as Antonio Vivaldi, and wrote closely to the Italian style with the use of a clear ritornello form. With the six concertos having mainly a three movement structure of quick - slow - quick, as per the concertos of Bach's Italian counterparts, it is the varied instrumentation that sets these works apart.

Brandenburg concerto No. 2 could be said to be one of the more colourful concertos of the set. Written in F major and scored for a concertino of trumpet, recorder, oboe and violin, supported in tutti sections by the typical ripieno section of strings and continuo (commonly a Harpsichord). It is the wind ensemble that delivers the richness of sound yet has the sensitivity to explore the fine counterpoint which so effortlessly flows through the parts.

The set of six concertos are some of Bach's most famous works and I now aim to deliver a detailed analysis of the first movement of his Brandenburg Concerto No 2. in F major.

Bach's Brandenburg concerto no 2 was written in three movements as follows:

Allegro

Andante

Allegro assai

The concerto is written in the key of F major and conforms to the style considered a Concerto Grosso. The composition uses the following instrumentation: - Strings, Trumpet, Flute (originally a recorder), Oboe with strings and basso continuo (commonly a Harpsichord). The continuo is never omitted from the movement as it provides the harmonic foundation of the whole movement. This first movement of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No 2 is written in ritornello form as is his Brandenburg concerto No 5.

Example 1 below shows the opening eight bars which I consider to be the ritornello theme, in the tonic key of F major it is written for all instruments throughout the movement.

Example 1 Bars 1-8.

This ritornello theme is never repeated in full and can be broken down into 6 smaller motifs, shown below in Example 2, as the movement evolves these motifs are introduced at different points.

Example 2

The solo subjects can also be split down into their own theme being called S1 and a countersubject called S2. These two lines are shown below in Example

3. This Solo line could be considered as a second ritornello as it is a recurring theme which can be heard to a total of eight times throughout the movement. Interestingly, this theme is only scored to be played by the concertino, unlike the main ritornello theme which passes through the solo and ripieno instruments. As we will see throughout this analysis a large percentage of the melodic material written is manufactured from the two themes that I am calling S1 and S2.

Example 3

On completion of the ritornello theme the concertino violin plays a solo (S1) for 2 bars and then it returns back to the ritornello (R1) theme for the following 2 bars. This solo is accompanied by just the cello and is then joined by all the ensemble instruments to play the ritornello theme as in the opening. Bar 13 has the oboe playing a solo (S1) for 2 bars with the violin playing the solo counter subject (S2) once again accompanied by the cello. There is then a modulation for the first time into the dominant key of C Major for 2 bars of the ritornello (R1) theme. This sequence then continues until bar 23, with the flute and then the trumpet each playing solos (S1) for 2 bars with oboe, whilst the flute then plays the solo counter subject (S2). In Bar 23 it is back to the ritornello theme for 6 bars but this time it is with the introduction of the R4, R5 and R6 motifs in the dominant key. The movement then modulates to B flat major (the sub-dominant) and the trumpet plays a small solo (S1) for 2 bars. This solo is not accompanied by the normal counter subject (S2) as heard previously, but the violin continues to play a semi-quaver rhythm which is leading us on to different ideas. This solo is also harmonised with the other concertino instruments and the cello of the

ripieno, Bach is gradually building the instrumentation of the solo lines in comparison to what was heard at the beginning of the movement.

At bar 31 the ritornello theme (R1) begins to move the music in the direction of the key of D minor, this is done using a cycle of fifths, the chords are as follows; D Minor – G Minor – Cdom7 – Fmaj7 – Bbmaj7 – E Minor – Adom7 – D Minor. The texture within this cycle of fifths becomes very thick and extremely complex, with the flute and cello playing together in thirds at bars 33-35. The solo violin can be heard playing a pulsating and energetic chordal harmony figure in a virtuosic style whilst the trumpet and the oboe are “pigeon stepping” from the end of bar 32 until bar 35 (See example 4). This “pigeon stepping” technique is also written in the viola and violone from bar 33 until bar 35(See example 5). These ideas are used to give a sense of direction and it also helps to disguise the circle of fifths, stopping the idea from becoming a simple cliché.

Example 4 Bars 32 – 35.

Example 5 Bars 33 – 35.

This cycle of fifths leads the music back to the ritornello theme (R1) at bar 40 for two bars in D Minor and then it begins to travel back to the tonic key, through another cycle of fifths; D Minor – G Minor – C Major – F Major.

Throughout this cycle of fifths the ritornello theme (R1) can be heard to pass through the trumpet, flute and lastly the oboe lasting for two bars in each line. Whilst this ritornello theme is passing around the concertino instruments the other solo lines are accompanying it with a fluid semi-quaver rhythm, with the trumpet and then the flute moving in contrary motion against the oboe and violin. There continues to be heard the ritornello theme

from bar 46 in the tonic key but it is abruptly interrupted at bar 50 owing to the fact that if the theme was to be heard again here in full, in the tonic key, then you could expect that movement would have had to finish at this point. Bar 46 sees the continuo and cello take over the fluid semiquaver rhythm which seems to be in support of the solo violin this however only lasts for 2 bars until the reintroduction of this figure in the flute and oboe, along with Violin 1 of the ripieno.

It is at this point (Bar 50) we can see that Bach begins to introduce a V-I rising sequence with a very strong 7th feel to each of the chords. Beginning with the chord of F7 at bar 50 moving to - D7 (V) at bar 51 - G7 (I) at bar 52 - E7 (V) at bar 53 - Amin7 (I) at bar 54 - F7 (V) at bar 55 - Bb7 (I) at bar 56. This rising sequence starts to move the music away from the tonic key so as not to give the feeling that the movement is coming to the end. This time, however, the ritornello theme R5 is heard to be played in this sequence by the Violin, Oboe, Flute, Violin again Oboe again and then lastly the Trumpet, each for 1 bar at a time. Whilst this theme is being passed seamlessly through the concertino the underlying moving semi-quaver idea is also being passed through the concertino instruments, cleverly intertwining with the ritornello theme R5. Bar 56 sees the continuo and Cello now playing the theme R5 with the Trumpet decorating it in the treble. The end of this section is announced with the introduction of the ritornello theme R6 which is an ending theme.

At the introduction of this ending theme, R6, we are in the key of B flat (sub-dominant) for 4 bars and a reversion back to the now seemingly solitary solo (S1) and counter subject solo (S2), from the flute and Violin respectively,

with just the continuo adding a simple harmonic accompaniment the music can then be heard to modulate to G minor at bar 62 for two bars, with the solo lines reversing and the Violin playing the Solo (S1) and the Flute playing the counter subject (S2). The Oboe then takes over this Solo line (S1) with the violin playing the counter subject (S2) but there is a modulation once again, this time to E flat major, at this point Bach begins building the harmony and texture again, introducing the flute playing an interrupted quaver rhythm. For the final time in this sequence the music modulates once again to C minor, with the Trumpet playing the Solo Line (S1) and the Oboe playing the counter subject (S2). There is a definite feeling of rebuilding of the texture here again as the flute and solo violin, playing the interrupted quaver rhythm, are heard together at bar 66. All throughout this, from bar 60, it has remained a simple accompaniment from just the continuo with the tutti strings tacet. This idea is the same as in bars 9 - 23 but without the fragments of the Ritornello theme.

Again can be heard the ritornello theme from bar 68, still in the key of C Minor (dominant minor), however, this is soon interrupted by a rising sequence of V - I at bar 72. This time it begins with C Minor (V) at bar 72, moving to F major 7 (I) at bar 73. Bar 74 is in D major 7 (V) leading us back to the ritornello theme at bar 75 in G Minor (I). This rising V-I section once again uses the idea of passing the ritornello theme R6 around the concertino instruments, with the fluid semi-quaver movement flowing effortlessly through the solo lines. This ritornello theme modulates to G minor using another cycle of fifths, the chords it uses are as follows; G minor - C minor 7 - F 7 - B flat major 7 - E major - A minor 7 - D major - G Minor. In bar 72

there is a very subtle use of syncopation in the tutti violin part which seems to bind the ripieno ensemble.

Bach again uses the “pigeon stepping” device, but this time it is heard in the trumpet and the oboe from the end of bar 76 up until bar 79. There is also another example of the “pigeon stepping” in the viola and continuo from bar 77 until bar 79 along with the Cello and Violin playing in 3rds. This again has disguised the circle of fifths and made the texture very rich and extremely complex.

In bar 86 I get a very definite feeling that the movement is heading to its climax, the long sustained chords, lasting up until bar 93, within the violins and the viola of the ripieno are something new, seeming to create a different texture and binding to the intricate figures of the concertino and the harmony of the continuo.

Bar 94 sees another return of the ritornello theme in A minor, however this time it is introduced by the flute and the violin for two beats, and then the trumpet and oboe join in with an echo effect, maybe a hint of Bach's fugal ideas. This ritornello theme is extremely short lived as once again there is more use of the cycle of fifths from bar 96, D minor - G7 - C Major - F Major - B minor7 - E Major 7 - A minor. Heard again is the same idea as previously heard with the Flute and Violin “pigeon stepping” from bars 95 - 99, this “pigeon stepping” is also displayed in the Viola and Violone whilst the Oboe and Cello play the fluid semi-quavers in 3rds.

The music stays in the key of A minor for 3 bars and the final ritornello theme is stated, in unison and in octaves, back in the tonic key of F major.

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This is a sudden change back to the tonic key with the whole ensemble having a quaver rest before. This idea is a stylistic/form aspect from another type of composition - the da capo aria. It is with this sudden change back to the tonic and with the ensemble playing in unison that you are tricked into thinking it's the end of the movement, but Bach leads off again with another rising V-I Sequence. Beginning this V-I sequence in F Major (V) moving to B flat major 7 (I) at bar 107. Bar 108 moves to G dominant 7 th (V) and leads onto C dominant 7th (I) at bar 109. A dominant 7th (V) begins bar 110 resolving to D dominant 7th (I) at bar 111, and then to finish the sequence it is a diminished 7th on B leading in to C major. This diminished 7th on B natural strengthens the return back to the tonic F major. The rising V - I section uses the idea which is previously heard of weaving the ritornello theme R5 through the concertino instruments. Heard then is the ritornello theme R5 played by the Violone and Cello at bar 113.

Bar 115 sees the music return to the tonic key of F major and the ritornello theme is stated for the very last time, however, Bach does not write the ritornello theme in full as you would expect with ritornello form, it is left to ritornello theme R5 for 2 bars and then the ending theme R6 to finish the movement.

Although this movement can be recognised as being in ritornello form It has become clear during my analysis, that it is very hard to distinguish between the solos and ritornello theme. This is because Bach has used material from the original ritornello theme throughout the whole of this movement and integrated them so seamlessly and subtly into the solo passages.

Word count = 2, 576