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**OCR AoS2: The Concerto Through Time – the Romantic concerto**

by Simon Rushby

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**INTRODUCTION**

The Concerto Through Time, one of OCR’s new areas of study, covers the Baroque, Classical and Romantic eras and expects students to be able to identify stylistic features in a range of concertos from 1650 to 1910. This includes *solo concertos* and *concerti grossi* from the Baroque period, and concertos from the Classical period, covered in a recent *Music Teacher* resource (October 2016).

This month we will focus on the Romantic concerto. Specifically, students need to understand how the concerto developed through the 19th century, and how the role and instruments of the orchestra and the soloist have also developed. They should also understand and be able to identify the characteristics of the Romantic style through the concertos they study, be able to name some concertos and their composers, and know something of the context behind their creation.

As ever, the core of this study should be the elements of music: melody, harmony, tonality, rhythm, texture, instrumentation and structure. Romantic concertos suggested in the appendix of OCR’s specification are by Brahms and Rachmaninov, but these are only suggestions and in this resource we will consider music from a range of composers.

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**WHAT SORT OF QUESTIONS MIGHT BE ASKED?**

The OCR Specimen Paper, available from their website, includes two questions from this area of study. One is based on an extract from a concerto by Mozart and includes a short score of its melody, and the other asks students to compare extracts from two violin concertos.

Looking at these and the other questions on the specimen paper gives a very helpful picture of the types of questions that can be asked of the students, and it makes it quite easy to come up with similar questions on any music that you choose to study. These include:

- Filling in missing notes or rhythms on a score.
- Identifying instruments.
- Identifying important chord progressions (such as cadences) or intervals.
- Identifying tonality, simple keys or modulations.
- Identifying metre.
- Identifying musical devices.
- Describing, comparing or identifying features of melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, instrumentation, dynamics or structure.

There will also be questions that require students to have knowledge of the relevant context of this area of study, such as names of relevant composers, key stylistic features of the Baroque, Classical and Romantic periods, knowledge of relevant instrument design and technology, awareness of social and historical context, and awareness of performing opportunities at the time.

While the majority of the questions will require short answers or be multi-choice or tick-box style questions, there will be some opportunities for students to write extended answers, and this should be practised regularly, emphasising the need for concise, clear and well-planned answers.
THE CONCERTO THROUGH TIME

The previous Music Teacher resource on Baroque and Classical concertos (October 2016) provides a wealth of practical ideas for introducing these forms to your GCSE class, but before we look in detail at the Romantic concerto, we should briefly trace the genre back to its roots, with a little suggested listening thrown in.

The word ‘concerto’ has gone through various meanings across time. Its literal translation from Italian is simply ‘playing together’, and in the early Baroque the phrase stile concertato described music where groups of instruments or voices shared a melody. This created a kind of alternating texture known as antiphony and was championed in St Mark’s, Venice, where uncle and nephew Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli composed wonderfully ‘stereophonic’ music using the unique interior design of the cathedral, which had two choir galleries opposite each other. You can see this really clearly in Giovanni Gabrieli’s piece Sonata pian e forte.

This idea of ‘opposing’ groups of voices or instruments, sometimes called cori spezzati or ‘split choirs’, took off quickly around Europe, and it wasn’t long before music was written that pitched groups of musicians ‘against’ each other. However, in the early Baroque the word ‘concerto’ remained a term to describe music where instruments and voices tended to have separate parts rather than merely doubling each other.

It was Corelli in the later Baroque period who began to popularise the idea of having a smaller group of soloists, called a concertino, and a larger, orchestra-like group called a ripieno. This was an expansion of the concept of the trio sonata, which was a composition for two instruments and a basso continuo, and more often than not the concertino group consisted of two violins and a cello and would have more technically demanding and soloistic parts than the accompanying ripieno group. Corelli called this kind of composition concerto grosso, and the model was imitated and developed by the Baroque greats Bach and Handel who varied the make-up of the concertino in their offerings – for example, the concertino in Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 in D comprises a flute, violin and harpsichord.

The ‘Italian style’ of composition was all the rage in the Baroque period, and so the concerto as a musical form really took off. Vivaldi, Torelli, Albinoni, Telemann and many others started to write solo concertos where the concertino became a single instrument, given licence to ‘show off’ and engage in dialogue with the accompanying group. This instrument was often a violin, but concertos for cello or wind instruments such as the oboe started to become more common, and occasionally keyboard concertos appeared. Vivaldi quickly became the master of the style, writing hundreds of solo concertos including, most famously, his Four Seasons, which was a collection of violin concertos. Vivaldi developed a form for his concertos called ritornello form which relied on a returning refrain punctuated by contrasting episodes, and Bach adopted and refined this form in his Brandenburg Concertos.

In the Classical period it was, predictably, Mozart who took the concerto genre and developed it into what we know today, following on from Bach’s son CPE Bach, who wrote concertos for instruments including keyboard, flute and oboe. Mozart wrote 27 concertos for the piano, and also concertos for violin, clarinet, flute, oboe and bassoon, as well as four well-known horn concertos, and all of these works are standards in the instrumental repertoire. He also wrote ‘double’ concertos for two instruments, such as his Concerto for Flute and Harp.

Mozart’s concertos had three movements arranged into a fast-slow-fast pattern. The first movement was in the popular Classical structure of sonata form, which was developed by Mozart so that the orchestra began with an exposition of the main musical material before the soloist got their chance to do likewise, and there followed a dialogue between the two. Middle slow movements were usually lyrical and structurally more simple, and the final movements tended to be jaunty rondos in a form most closely linked to the Baroque ritornello structure.
THE ROMANTIC CONCERTO

So we come to Beethoven, who single-handedly brought the concerto into the 19th century and set the template for a number of Romantic composers after him. Beethoven wrote five piano concertos and a very well-known Violin Concerto, and these are still quite Classical in style but on a larger scale than those of Mozart.

It was Beethoven who started to innovate and break down the expected forms that Mozart had developed, by, for example, beginning his Piano Concerto No. 4 with the soloist alone, or opening the huge Piano Concerto No. 5 (nicknamed the Emperor) with a flashy fantasia from the piano, linking two of the movements together and writing out the cadenza – previously these were usually improvised by the soloist.

Beethoven was a talented and highly respected concert pianist, and so it was inevitable that the solo parts in his concertos became more virtuosic and heralded an era of concertos that made considerable demands on the soloist. The Romantic period became the age of the virtuoso, a performer of great technical ability who might enjoy celebrity status. Concertos in the 19th century made great demands on the soloist (and sometimes the orchestra too). Chopin, who wrote almost exclusively for the piano as a solo instrument, wrote two piano concertos, and the legendary violinist Paganini wrote showy violin concertos for himself to play.

It was Mendelssohn who led the way in adapting the sonata form model that Mozart had cemented in place, making his concertos more flexible in form and more fantasy-like. His Violin Concerto in E minor has linked movements and there is less obvious ‘division’ between the soloist and orchestra. Cadenzas started to pop up in less predictable places – for example, in Grieg’s famous Piano Concerto (discussed later in this article), the soloist launches straight into a short cadenza after an opening orchestral chord. Romantic concertos became more like epic struggles for the upper hand between soloist and orchestra.

However, as in all other genres during the Romantic period, some composers remained conservative and true to the Classical design of the concerto form. Brahms wrote concertos for piano and violin, as well as a Double Concerto for violin and cello, harking back to the concerti grossi of the Baroque era. Elgar wrote a much-loved Cello Concerto, which had four rather than three movements, the first two being linked.
It is important for students to understand what the word ‘Romantic’ means in the context of musical style, and a good way to do this is to focus on Romantic traits in a concerto of the period.

Consider doing this with your students, perhaps when they are a few months into their GCSE course and feeling more confident and experienced with comparing pieces. In this article I am going to compare the first movements of two piano concertos: Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 23 in A, K488, which was written in 1786, in the heart of the Classical period; and Grieg’s Piano Concerto in A minor, written by the 24-year-old composer in 1868.

Both concertos have become very popular, but unlike the Mozart Concerto, Grieg’s was the only concerto he wrote. Both concertos, however, were written with the intention that the composers themselves would play the solo part. Mozart is very likely to have been the soloist at the premiere of his work, but Grieg’s other performing commitments meant that his was first played by the pianist Edmund Neupert in Denmark (which, rather than Norway, was actually where Grieg composed the Concerto).

The key difference, perhaps, between Classical and Romantic styles is the differing approach to form and balance taken by composers of these periods. Classical composers saw nature as a kind of model for order and symmetry, while Romantic artists saw a world of mystery and fantasy. So it follows that one of the clearest differences between the two concertos is that of form, and Grieg takes a far more flexible approach. Both concertos are in three movements, but we can see some clear differences by looking at the structure of the first movement of each. I have picked YouTube performances of both that display the score as the music plays, which is likely to be very helpful.

The first movements of both concertos are in sonata form, which, as your students may already have discovered, has the following broad plan:

- **Exposition**: where two themes (known as subjects) are presented, the first in the tonic key and the second in a related key such as the dominant. The key change between first and second subject takes place during a transition, and the exposition usually ends with a mini-coda called a codetta. In Classical movements the exposition is sometimes repeated.

- **Development**: where some of the material from the exposition is developed. This can be done in a number of ways and usually involves forays into other keys.

- **Recapitulation**: where the two themes of the exposition are presented again, making a neat sandwich of the development section. However, this time, both are in the tonic key.

- **Coda**: a meatier version of the codetta heard in the exposition section, used to bring the movement to a well-signposted end.
Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 23

Let’s look at sonata form at work in the first movement of Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 23 in A, K488.

EXPOSITION

- **First subject** from the beginning to 0.56, played by the orchestra in A major.
- **Second subject** from 0.56 to 1.25, played first by the strings and then with added woodwind. This is also in the tonic key of A major, for reasons that will become clear shortly.
- **Orchestral codetta** from 1.25 to 2.03 takes us briefly through the tonic and relative minors before a series of cadential passages prepares the way for the entry of the solo piano.
- **First subject** from 2.04 until 2.33. The piano enters with the first subject, making this a **double exposition** – a modification that Mozart used in the majority of his concertos. The soloist decorates the theme with scales and broken chords.
- **Transition** from 2.33 until 3.05 where first the orchestra and then both orchestra and piano take us through a modulation into the dominant, ending with a long **dominant pedal**. This paves the way for the...
- **Second subject**, this time in its expected dominant key of E major. This runs from 3.05 until 3.36 and is led by the soloist before the orchestra takes over the theme.
- **Codetta** from 3.36 sees the expected touches of tonic and relative minor (this time of E major). However, an extended passage from 4.31 sees a brand **new theme** played by the strings in E major in a departure by Mozart from the norm (though there are precedents in Mozart and other Classical composers for introducing a new theme at the end of the exposition). The piano develops this theme with some lovely **two-part counterpoint**.

DEVELOPMENT

Mozart takes us almost by stealth into the development section at 4.56 as the wind take over this new theme. It becomes clear that this new theme will be the focus of the development, in an unusual move by Mozart. This kind of innovation within the safety of Classical sonata form was typical of both Mozart and Beethoven, and paved the way for the more flexible style of the Romantic period. The soloist and orchestra engage in dialogue through a variety of related keys with a number of **cycle of 5th progressions** and pedal notes.

RECAPITULATION

It’s almost a relief when the **first subject** returns in the tonic key at 6.14, following on from some extended **dominant preparation**, mainly from the piano. As expected, this return to the main thematic material is characterised by variation and decoration, especially in the solo part.

At 6.43 the **transition** begins, but the tonality is manipulated so that the **second subject** is introduced by the piano at 7.12 in the tonic key this time, as would be expected.

CODA

This lengthy section begins with the now-familiar **tonic minor** section at 7.42, complete with the return of the new theme, also in the tonic. After some cadential figures and a repeat of this theme, the orchestra comes to rest on the **second inversion** of the dominant chord. This is the standard spot in the movement for the **cadenza** at 9.25 – a chance for the soloist to improvise alone on the thematic material heard so far and show their technical skill with some **virtuosic** runs. Written cadenzas by Mozart exist for most of his concertos, but Mozart himself would probably have improvised them at his own performances. Modern pianists have a wide choice of cadenzas by a variety of composers to choose from, and many continue the tradition of improvising their own. Finally, a long **trill** from the piano allows the orchestra back in at 10.44, and the movement is brought to an end rather subtly.
Grieg’s Piano Concerto in A minor

The structure of the first movement [Grieg’s Piano Concerto in A minor] echoes that of the Mozart in that the sonata form model provides a loose framework around which the composer works. But the emphasis is now even more on lyrical melody and sparkling solo passages, with the orchestra more noticeably in an accompanying role and the piano even more to the fore.

**INTRODUCTION**

Immediately different to the Mozart, the first movement of the Grieg Concerto begins with an introductory cadenza for the piano (0.05), heralded by the infamous timpani roll and orchestral A minor chord. This short cadenza is impressive and striking, announcing the soloist’s presence in declamatory fashion and pausing on the dominant chord for the start of the exposition.

**EXPOSITION**

While Mozart’s approach to the double exposition was to present most of the material in the orchestra before the soloist repeated it, Grieg has the orchestra play the first subject (led by the woodwind at 0.31), and then immediately gets the piano to take it over, with the strings in both cases given at first a chordal accompaniment. At 1.35 the tempo increases and the piano leads with a new theme, also in A minor.

This is the transition and, as in the Mozart, it heralds a modulation – not to the dominant, but to the relative major for the second subject at 2.14. This C major theme is led at first by the cellos, and is slow and lyrical. Again, the piano quickly takes it over and extends it, building up to climactic section at 3.38 where the orchestra plays a new theme, based on the second subject and forming the codetta.

**DEVELOPMENT**

The music again calms at 4.11 and the development begins, based on the first subject theme and taking us from E minor through F minor (4.29) to F sharp minor (4.49). The piano part becomes more and more showy with broken chords and triplet runs as the dynamics increase and the texture becomes fuller. We hear fragments of the first subject repeated in various keys (4.52-5.05) and a climax at 5.07 with full orchestra and piano alternating, still with first subject material. The rhythm of the first subject theme permeates the music and sets us up nicely for the recapitulation.

**RECAPITULATION**

This returns us to the calm of the original, A minor first subject (5.25) and, in a similar way to the Mozart, the transition passage (5.56) occurs but keeps the key firmly in the tonic. Since the second subject is a major-key theme, we hear it now in the tonic major (6.36), again led by the cellos. Just as in the exposition, first the orchestra and then the piano state the themes, and the music builds up to a climax at the end of this section with an increasingly virtuosic piano part.

A striking interrupted cadence takes us into a restatement of the first subject theme by the orchestra over a diminished chord. Just as in the Mozart, the orchestra is preparing the way for a piano cadenza, but the cadenza itself appears sooner than in its Classical predecessor, since the ‘showy’ role of the soloist is, as has been the case throughout the movement, one of the driving forces of the music.

The orchestra rests on a first-inversion subdominant chord (8.13) rather than the familiar second inversion tonic, and the piano takes the spotlight. This cadenza was written by Grieg and the expectation to improvise something different has gone – this lengthy section (nearly three minutes) takes more opportunities to develop the first-subject theme amid many showy runs and arpeggios.

The dominant preparation that we had at the end of the Mozart cadenza is also present in the Grieg, and the orchestra returns subtly with a small fragment of the first subject material over a dominant pedal (11.01).

**CODA**

The coda section begins with a new theme at a faster tempo (11.18), in similar fashion to the new material that Mozart introduced in his exposition codetta. The piano takes over, and we quickly hear the music of the introduction (11.30), this time supported by the full orchestra fortissimo.
ROMANTIC CHARACTERISTICS IN THE GRIEG PIANO CONCERTO

- Grieg has clearly adopted a more flexible approach to the sonata form structure, but he still owes much to the model that Mozart developed and made so important. In Grieg’s Concerto, the first-subject theme appears a lot more often, often in fragmented form, and the other themes contrast quite vividly.
- Melodies in both Mozart’s and Grieg’s concertos are evenly phrased, though there is much more decoration and variation in the piano versions of Grieg’s melodies, such as in the second subject of the Grieg at 2.35.
- The orchestra in Grieg’s Concerto is bigger, with the addition of more wind and brass instruments and a larger, fuller-sounding string section. Also, it is more common for wind instruments and lower strings (such as the cellos) to have melodies, unlike the first violin-dominated Mozart orchestra.
- Contrasts are particularly vivid in the Grieg, which is a key feature of the Romantic style in general. While Mozart’s contrasts are usually subtle, Grieg uses the full range of dynamics and tempo in this movement to take the audience on a rollercoaster ride of varying moods. On top of this, there is more tendency for the pianist and conductor to add their own tempo fluctuations, known as rubato.
- Both concertos have technically challenging piano parts, but the Grieg is far more obviously virtuosic. The piano part is full of arpeggios, runs and ‘small notes’ that serve to decorate and impress at the same time. Grieg also uses a much larger range of pitch, tone and dynamic in his piano writing. While Classical composers such as Mozart wrote for a wooden-framed, five-octave piano that had limitations of tone and dynamic range, the 19th-century piano was iron-framed, capable of a wider range of tone, and spanned more than seven octaves by the time of Grieg.
- Grieg uses a lot of chromatic harmony and sudden, sometimes unrelated modulations to add tension and mood to his music in true Romantic style. There is a lot more dissonance and surprise in this Concerto than in the Mozart, though we should acknowledge that it was Mozart and then Beethoven who gave subsequent composers the licence to be this harmonically interesting.

KEY LEARNING TARGETS

A look at the OCR specification identifies a number of key learning targets for this area of study, and within the context of the Romantic Concerto it is important to ask questions with your students, some of which are listed below. The questions can be addressed by listening to extracts from any or all of the following suggested concertos (though you may also have favourites of your own):

- Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 5 (Emperor)
- Mendelssohn: Violin Concerto in E minor
- Schumann: Piano Concerto in A minor
- Bruch: Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor
- Brahms: Violin Concerto in D
- Brahms: Double Concerto in A minor for violin and cello
- Dvořák: Cello Concerto in B minor
- Tchaikovsky: Piano Concerto No. 1 in B flat minor
- Tchaikovsky: Violin Concerto in D
- Rachmaninov: Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor
Questions to ask as you listen to extracts from these or other concertos:

- Listen to a range of concerto extracts from the list above. What are their key features?
- How would you describe the role of the soloist, and that of the orchestra? How do they interact?
- How has the orchestra changed or developed? What instruments make up the orchestra, and what role do each of these instruments have?
- What can you find out about the development of instruments used for solo parts in these concertos, such as the piano, violin and cello? What other instruments had concertos written for them in the 19th century, and how did these instruments develop? Can you find any trumpet, horn or wind concertos?
- How many movements do these concertos have? How long are they? How complicated are their structures? Go back and look at the comparison between Mozart and Grieg to help you here.
- How have the parts written for soloists become more virtuosic during the Romantic period? Why have they? What examples of virtuosity can you find in your listening?
- What characteristics of Romantic music can you find in other concertos that you are listening to? Go back and look at the example from the Grieg concerto to help you here.
- Why did composers write concertos? What can you find out about the soloists of the time, and their dealings with composers? Did any other composers write concertos for themselves to perform? Who else commissioned them? What were audiences’ attitudes to concertos? What reviews or critiques of well-known concertos can you find?
- What sort of conditions were composers writing in? What was going on culturally in the cities where they worked? Were there concert halls? How had these venues developed compared to the Baroque and Classical periods? What was going on at the time that these concertos were written – for example, during Beethoven’s Emperor Concerto? What influenced Dvořák when he was writing his Cello Concerto? What happened to Rachmaninov that might have affected his composition work?

Let's end by considering briefly how some of the questions above might be addressed. The concerto I have picked for this short overview is Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor, but you and your students could do a similar exercise with any other 19th-century concerto.
BRUCH: VIOLIN CONCERTO NO. 1 IN G MINOR

What was the context of this concerto?

This Concerto was started in 1864, and during its first months of writing, Max Bruch took up his first conducting post in Koblenz. Though he ended up writing three violin concertos and a popular Scottish Fantasy, at this point he had never written a concerto before and it took him a fair while to complete it – its first performance was given in 1868 by the famous 19th-century violinist Joseph Joachim, to whom the work was dedicated. Bruch took much advice from Joachim and other violinists and conductors during the writing of the Concerto, and probably his biggest regret was that once he had finished it, he sold it to a publisher rather than retaining any chance of earning royalties from what became one of the most popular violin concertos in the repertoire. Bruch also wrote an often-performed piece for cello and orchestra called Kol nidrei.

What features of the solo and orchestral writing can be found in this concerto?

Bruch was not really an innovator, but he was known best for his ability to write beautiful melodies, and this Concerto uses an orchestra that is not much bigger than that used by Mozart in many of his concertos, except that it has four horns rather than Mozart’s two. The violin gets the bulk of the themes, and it is particularly noticeable in the second movement that the orchestra is subservient to the violin, despite having a continually moving and interesting role.

What is interesting about the structure of this concerto?

There are some notable adaptations to the overall structure. While the concerto is in the expected three movements, all three are in modified sonata form and are designed to be played without a break – Bruch even calls the first movement ‘Vorspiel’, meaning ‘Prelude’, as if it is a kind of overture to the second movement. There is also no actual cadenza in this work, which really stands out as odd in an age of virtuosity.

What else makes this concerto ‘Romantic’ in style?

These are some of the key Romantic features that can be found in this Concerto:

- There are modifications applied to an otherwise standard structure, such as the linked movements, the dispensation of an orchestral exposition and the lack of cadenza.
- The solo part is virtuosic and includes a lot of flourishes and scale or arpeggio patterns.
- There is a big emphasis on lyricism and melody.
- The harmony includes a lot of chromaticism and there are appoggiaturas and suspensions that do much to increase the sense of tension and emotion.
- The full tessitura (note range) of the solo violin is used.
- There are many opportunities taken for creating drama within the music.
- Much of the development is of short melodic cells or motives.
- Melodies are quite long, and often their phrasing is irregular.