

# Stylistic and interpretative perspectives on the first movement of Robert Schumann's Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 54

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**Abstract:** *This article proposes an analytical view of the main interpretative points of the first movement of Robert Schumann's Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 54. It also discusses a brief presentation of the possible influences of a compositional nature, reinterpreted according to one's own style and artistic message. The paper analyses aspects of an interpretative nature, which the soloist encounters in the process of translating the score, starting from the construction of the thematic material, organizing and realizing the sound colour palette in relation to the continuity or complementarity with the orchestral apparatus, tempo correlations and agogics.*

**Key-words:** *Musical romanticism; piano concerto; cultural context; structure; key interpretative points; tempo; agogics;*

## 1. Introduction

Through his compositional mastery, Beethoven shaped the dramatic course of the classical concerto, but also defined the premises for its evolution in Romanticism; his five Piano Concerti and the Violin Concerto became an inspiration for most Romantic composers. This fact is noticeable in the complexity of the tonal composition, form and harmony, but also in the integration of the solo cadences in the structure of the concerti (interrupting the actual form and introducing a moment that was usually left at the performer's discretion<sup>2</sup>, which differs from a simple *fioritura*<sup>3</sup>), in other words, limiting the soloist's right to improvise.

In the case of Schumann's Concerto, there are several connections with the fourth and fifth of Beethoven's Concerti, but also a certain influence of baroque elements used by Haydn in his works in Classicism; at the same time, the influence that Schumann's Concerto had upon Grieg's Concerto is also evident.

## 2. Objectives

Of the thematic structures of the first compositions of the early Romantic genre, several are especially valuable in virtue of their writing, rather than melodic, harmonic or rhythmic expressiveness. An impressive instrumental virtuosity is emphasized (necessary for the interpretation of the increased density of notes with small time values, a consequence of the improvement in pianists' technical abilities and in the mechanisms of the piano). Nevertheless, thematic complexity is often a result of the composer's choice, and may be characterised either through an abundance of new, contrasting themes, or through a special ability to transform thematic material.

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<sup>2</sup> As a self-contained structure within the sonata form in the first movement, it implies on one hand an interpretation free from the constraints of a certain tempo or agogic movement, and, on the other hand, a richer harmonic plane/landscape, perhaps consisting of multiple tonalities.

<sup>3</sup> The most complex of musical ornaments, alluding to a soloist's cadence in Classicism, characteristic of Baroque concerti (more precisely an harmonic fermata, an ornament of virtuosity for the solo instrument), but of a lower order of complexity in terms of theme and harmony compared to cadences from Classicism.

The present article proposes an inquiry into the sonorous qualities of a score which suffered multiple transformations since it was first published as a *Fantasie*, and subsequently as a *Concerto* in its final version, and aims to establish a relationship between the two perspectives of the genre: *fantasie* vs. *sonata*.

### 3. Schumann's Piano Concerto, Op. 54 – the particular dramaturgy of the first movement

The instrumental concerto genre of Schumann's period preserves the classical organizational structure, according to the principles of the genre and sonata forms. The *Concerto* we are concerned with, however, was composed over several years, in which Schumann proposed structures classified differently: on the one hand, the first movement, *Allegro affettuoso*, was initially imagined as a *Fantasie* for piano and orchestra (1841), later revised in 1843, to which the movements *Intermezzo: Andantino grazioso* and *Allegro vivace* were added in 1845.

In the first movement, classical concerti generally comprise of an orchestral exposition, followed by the main exposition, with the soloist. The orchestral exposition serves as an introduction and often presents some of the themes of the main exposition; it does not always establish a tonal contrast between the principal theme and the secondary theme. Beethoven, after the Third *Concerto* for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 37, brought the following innovations regarding the structure: in the Fourth *Piano Concerto*, Op. 58, the principal theme is introduced by the piano, in a calm tempo, with a meditative character, which suggests a slow moment and thus transforms the structure of the double Exposition and the role of the orchestral exposition as an introduction, especially since the orchestra takes on the theme from the piano and builds upon the main Exposition; the Fifth *Piano Concerto*, Op. 73 begins with a cadence, which later in the piece proves to be the first theme within the principal thematic group, which is presented again in the Re-exposition.

In the case of Schumann, a similarity with regard to the beginning of the first movement can be observed: an explosive solo moment, (a source of inspiration for Grieg's *Piano Concerto*), followed by the presentation of a theme, which is not *Allegro*, nor does it have the specific expressive characteristics a principal theme (force, pithiness); rather, it is meditative, static, thus resulting in an inversion of the thematic roles from a dramaturgic perspective. It should be noted that the orchestral exposition is missing, which may be explained by the fact that the first version was published as a *Fantasie*. It is worth noting that in approximately the same period Mendelssohn began composing a now famous *Violin Concerto*, also lacking an orchestral exposition. The influence between the two works also has other interesting aspects. The whole atmosphere outlines the features of the two iconic Schumannian characters: *Florestan* (through the impetuosity of the beginning) and *Eusebius* (through the expressive melody and its introverted character).

The orchestral presentation of the principal theme (very short – eight measures) is followed by a new piano presentation. We are thus talking about a theme structured as a double period, featuring a possible *soggetto cavato*<sup>4</sup>, since in the German system the first four notes of the theme (CHAA) may be taken to represent the Italian version of the name Clara, i.e. CHiArA. Then follows an especially interesting, sinuous and precipitate theme, much more suitable as a principal theme, but which turns out to be the first theme of the transition, since it features many modulations<sup>5</sup>. The principal theme returns, transposed to C major, at the beginning of the secondary thematic group (it is important to note that it begins in the second inversion, 6/4). This is reminiscent of the Baroque mono-thematic approach, a

<sup>4</sup> Term coined by music theorist Zarlino in his work "*Le institutioni harmoniche*" to denote musical cryptograms, i.e. the sequential arrangement of musical notes to represent words, e.g. B – A – C – H.

<sup>5</sup> A minor – G major – C major – F major – D minor – C major.

particularity also found in piano sonatas by Joseph Haydn (where the first of the themes of the secondary thematic group is in fact the principal theme transposed to a new tonal centre, possibly with a changed mode), which Schumann will also use in the last part of the Second Sonata for the Young, Op. 118.

The secondary thematic group also presents themes with an apparently different profile, due to the contrast of character with the principal theme, which essentially represent developments of the initial thematic cell. The orchestra holds the melodic line in the beginning of TII2, accompanied by the piano's descending arpeggios, which start from a melodic profile in a gradual chromatic ascension in rhythmic triolet formulas. The tempo increases, supported by the agogic indication (*Animato*) and the dense writing with many rhythmic values per unit of time. TII3 features the solo piano with a variation of TII2, bringing together the rhythmic profile proposed by the orchestra and that of the triolet formulas, culminating with the *tutti* before the Development section.

Of great interpretative interest, the first section of the development, *Andante espressivo*, proposes the radical modification of the initial tempo (*Allegro*), the change in pulse from binary to ternary (thematic change of variational nature – of character) and of the associated metre, as well as of the tonality, but especially of the tonal centre, leads to a particularization of the whole interpretation, of the soloist's state, in which he must slow down the tempo, without losing the spectators' interest. At the same time, compared to C major, the conclusion of the Exposition, the new tonality, A flat major, is at a distance of four descending fifths, a relation of a significantly depressive nature. The initial motif of the principal theme emerges from the expressive dialogue between the piano and the wind instruments, on a harmonic support unfolding over several registers of the piano. Thus, aspects of the fantasie genre (as a stand-alone piece) are highlighted, in which the first movement was initially composed. A possible connection could be made with the paradoxical debut of the soloist in Mozart's Fifth Violin Concerto, in which a thematic episode, *Adagio*, appears on the violin solo, between the orchestral exposition and the main Exposition, both in *Allegro aperto*. Being in a completely different temporal reality, this episode interrupts the cursivity of the *Allegro*, without apparent reason, in a fashion similar to this unusual insertion in the first movement of Schumann's Concerto.

The fantasie aspect (of the first movement) is concerned with a multitude of tempos and agogic movements, which suggests freer interpretations in terms of speed and tonality given the multitude of modulations and relationships between otherwise distant tonalities. However, a fantasie usually involves a multi-themed construction, and in the present case, the various themes are in fact related, deriving from the first cell of the principal theme – a mono-thematic structure, which is not characteristic of fantasies.

We shall now turn to the correspondence of the tempos between the principal thematic segments of the first movement, according to metronome readings obtained from the inspection of three influential interpretations (detailed below in Table 1). The order proposed reflects the chronology of the recordings. Subtle differences in metronome readings may arise, owing to the microagogic diversity specific to each performer.

First Movement <i>Allegro affettuoso</i> (84 ♩) <sup>6</sup>	LIPATTI KARAJAN <sup>7</sup>	BARENBOIM CELIBIDACHE <sup>8</sup>	BUNIATISHVILI MEHTA <sup>9</sup>
<b>EXPOSITION</b> • <b>Introduction (measure 1)</b>	64 ♩, with subsequent acceleration	76 ♩ the energy of the introduction will leave a mark on the cursivity of the beginning of principal theme played by the orchestra	96 ♩ (precise pulse)
• <b>Principal theme</b> orchestra (m. 4)  piano (m. 12)	60 ♩, with a slight deceleration  56 ♩, with a slight deceleration at the beginning and picking up subsequently	56 ♩; pulse will stabilise at 50 ♩  50 ♩ the piano will keep the pattern proposed by the orchestra, with a slight deceleration towards the end	40 ♩, with a slight deceleration  34 ♩ – to highlight the <i>soggetto cavato</i> , then the tempo undergoes a rubato, with multiple accelerations and decelerations
• <b>Transition (m. 19)</b>	starts with 60 ♩, then accelerates until 70 ♩; the pulse is slowed down more than initially to introduce TIII	60 ♩, with agogic fluctuations until 68 ♩	starts with 54 ♩; the contrasting nuances are highlighted also though an agogic fluctuation
• <b>Secondary thematic group</b> TIII (m. 60)	50 ♩, and then it starts to decelerate	starts with 42 ♩, rather more impetuous than bright; the pulse slows down towards the end, allowing for the entrance of TII2 played by the orchestra	initial beat 34 ♩; maintains the agogics proposed by the principal theme
TII2 (m. 68) <i>Animato</i>	the orchestra starts with a faster pulse: 88 ♩, with frequent agogic fluctuations (until 94 ♩)	82 ♩, with a deceleration once the piano intervenes (to approximately 72 ♩) and the pulse picks up once again to 82 ♩	98 ♩, almost three times as fast, with small fluctuations
TII2var. (m. 96)	94 ♩, with a deceleration	maintains the agogic configuration	106 ♩
TII3 (m. 113) <i>a tempo, animato</i>	piano proposes a pulse of 94 ♩, accelerating (to 108 ♩) towards the <i>tutti</i> of the Exposition's end, 104 ♩, with deceleration towards the beginning of the first section of the development	starts in a rubato in a slower tempo, 64 ♩, and becomes more animated with the orchestra's intervention, 92 ♩, acceleration continually (102 ♩) until the <i>tutti</i> , from which the orchestral ensemble decelerates, slowing down as the theme unfolds (94 ♩ – 90 ♩), anticipating the first segment of the development	a sudden deceleration is highlighted then a return to 106 ♩ and an acceleration to 112 ♩
<b>DEVELOPMENT</b> • <b>Segment 1 (m. 157)</b> <i>Andante espressivo</i> (72 ♩.) (developing the principal theme)	in the beginning the piano proposes the pulse 36 ♩., in a ternary metre; orchestra intervenes with a clarinet solo at 40 ♩. and in general this pattern is maintained, whereby the piano slows down the pulse and the orchestra picks it up again through its cursivity; the differing metronome readings mentioned are not perceived <i>per se</i> , rather the contrasting cantabile nature of the dialogue partners; towards the end of this segment, the ensemble accelerates in preparation for augmented variation of the introductory gesture	proposes a pulse of 32 ♩. in the beginning; clarinet enters 34 ♩. with a slight acceleration to 36 ♩.; a second intervention of the piano, 36 ♩. – 38 ♩., pulse stable around 38 ♩., maintained throughout the subsequent instrumental dialogue, with slight agogic fluctuations	starts with 36 ♩. with the intervention of the piano, then the dialogue unfolds in a rubato, cantabile manner, with many changes in tempo; from the first intervention of the clarinet the pulse is 38 ♩., then a second intervention of the piano reaches 40 ♩.; the next intervention of the orchestra and the third of the piano 42 ♩., then 44 ♩. for the orchestra, for a slight deceleration to subsequently re-establish the balance of a less precipitate pulse, 40 ♩., in preparation for the segment in which the introductory gesture is developed

<sup>6</sup> The beat indicated in this column represent the notation from the score, edition published by Breitkopf & Härtel: Leipzig, 1883, edited by Clara Schumann.

<sup>7</sup> Dinu Lipatti, piano // Herbert von Karajan, conductor – Philharmonia Orchestra – studio recording, 1948.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Barenboim, piano // Sergiu Celibidache, conductor – Munich Philharmonic Orchestra – live recording, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> Khatia Buniatishvili, piano // Zubin Mehta, conductor – Israel Philharmonic Orchestra – live recording, 2017.

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<p>• Segment 2 (m. 186) <i>Tempo I. Allegro</i> (developing the introduction)</p> <p>• Segment 3 (m. 206) <i>Passionato</i> (developing the principal theme TII2)</p>	<p>92 ♩, a tempo more than twice as fast</p> <p>starts in 106 ♩, with a fluctuating pulse until 116 ♩ and a deceleration towards the beginning of the Re-exposition</p>	<p>76 ♩</p> <p>starts with 88 ♩; first phrase accelerates progressively towards the second phrase, 94 ♩, then the second towards the third 102 ♩, after which the pulse remains constant (with very small agogic fluctuations); deceleration towards the beginning of the Re-exposition</p>	<p>106 ♩</p> <p>starts with the same pulse of 106 ♩, but very quickly accelerates to 132 ♩, decelerating subsequently in preparation for the Re-exposition</p>
<p><b>RE-EXPOSITION</b> <i>Tempo I</i></p> <p>• Principal theme orchestra (m. 260)</p> <p>piano (m. 268)</p> <p>• Transition (m. 275)</p> <p>• Secondary thematic group TIII (m. 313)</p> <p>TII2 (m. 321) <i>Animato</i></p> <p>TII2 var. (m. 349)</p> <p>TII3 (m. 366) <i>a tempo, animato</i></p>	<p>56 ♩</p> <p>52 ♩ the pulse steadies out noticeably, both for the piano and the orchestra, also influencing the transition</p> <p>starts with 60 ♩, accelerating towards 64 ♩</p> <p>48 ♩; the initial agogics are maintained</p> <p>starts with 92 ♩, acceleration towards 102 ♩ and small agogic fluctuations</p> <p>100 ♩</p> <p>slower than in the first presentation, 76 ♩, but with an initial acceleration, until the intervention of the orchestra – 98 ♩, then faster towards the <i>tutti</i> before the instrumental cadence, 106 ♩; <i>tutti</i> proposes the pulse 100 ♩ accelerating towards the soloist's cadence – 110 ♩</p>	<p>approx. 52 ♩, with more agogic fluctuations than in the Exposition, and the deceleration proposed at the end</p> <p>46 ♩</p> <p>starts with 58 ♩; generally constant pulse with very small agogic fluctuations, towards 60 ♩</p> <p>44 ♩, with the massiveness initially proposed and a slight acceleration</p> <p>80 ♩ with agogic fluctuations (acceleration to 90 ♩, deceleration towards 78 ♩)</p> <p>72 ♩; intervention of the orchestra – 92 ♩ accelerating towards the <i>tutti</i> – 102 ♩; paradoxically, this time also, the orchestra, <i>tutti</i>, together with the piano, propose a slower tempo 92 ♩</p>	<p>proposes in the beginning a slower pulse, at 34 ♩</p> <p>follows the initial pattern, theme starts with 30 ♩, the cursivity of the discourse is regained through a rubato</p> <p>50 ♩, progressively coming back to the pulse of the presentation from the Exposition. This time, however, the decelerations are less emphasised, the acceleration being constant and uniform, towards 58 ♩</p> <p>starts with 36 ♩</p> <p>98 ♩ with constant acceleration to 108 ♩, which TII2 var. will take on directly</p> <p>108 ♩</p> <p>starts with the piano at 92 ♩ and builds the climax of a <i>tutti</i> at 118 ♩ before the instrumental cadence</p>
<p><b>CODA (m. 459)</b> <i>Allegro molto</i></p>	<p>starts in 88 ♩, accelerates towards the end (to 98 ♩), with slight agogic fluctuations</p>	<p>starts with 76 ♩ maintained until the end, with very small agogic fluctuations</p>	<p>starts in a rather steady tempo 78 ♩, comparing with the previous pulses building a massive final climax through sonority; agogic fluctuation steadies out towards the end at 88 ♩</p>

Table 1. Comparison of interpretations of the first movement of Schumann's Piano Concerto

Another feature inherited from Beethoven's Concerti is the inclusion of cadences, moments of virtuosity, directly by the composer. In this way, the soloist is left only with the possibility of interpreting music and cannot bring a personal input in terms of intervening in the structure of the work. Today, we often witness improvisations without any connection to the style of the composer, or the musical era during which the Concerto was composed, a reason why the performer finds himself on stage, soloist in front of the audience. Thus, the freedom to compose the cadences of concerti of the Classical period, such as those of Haydn or Mozart, constitutes a reverence of their music, of the gift of being part together with the conductor, the orchestra and the public in the unravelling of the musical event, as it was originally thought out. The idea of updating the compositional parameters with the clear mark of the compositional thinking of the soloist may prove redundant, in this case. Therefore the cadence is written into the score, following the example of Beethoven's Fifth Piano Concerto. It was for the first time this was done at the level of an entire instrumental cadence, which leaves no room for any possible improvisation for the soloist, in piano concerti.

In the same period, according to the available documents, the Violin Concerto in E minor, op. 64, by Mendelssohn, started in 1838 and finished after several years, with the premiere in 1845, features a similar variant. At this time there is no clear evidence of the influence of one of the composers on the other, but due to the premiere of the Fantasia in 1841 it is more likely that Mendelssohn took the idea from Schumann. It was also Mendelssohn who gave up writing a proper cadence for his piano Concerti, bringing in only cadence-like moments in the structure of the themes. On the other hand, the cadence proposed by Schumann does not seem *prima facie* one of virtuosity, but rather one with a dramatic aspect. This is preceded by an unusual sudden drop on the dominant seventh chord of E flat major, a tonality which remains unconfirmed later in the piece. The dramatism is underpinned by an intense chromaticism of fragmented thematic cells and harmonic tensions often determined by enharmonic modulations; by phrases and motifs of an inquisitive nature, which do not find an answer, instead followed by new questions; by the articulation of phrases and the contrasting organization of the writing – either through a particularly sinuous melodic line, or hastily performed staccato chords, or a melody with accompaniment.

The coda develops the principal theme in a tempo with a faster pulse, closer to the usual character of an *Allegro*, in fact also a variation of character. The initial harmonic configuration for the piano supports the melodic plane of the orchestra consisting of variations of the first cell of the principal theme, after which the solo instrument and the orchestral apparatus form a dialogue in the construction of the last culmination, which will conclude the entire first movement.

#### 4. Material and Methods

The recordings presented were studied and compared to highlight the interpretations of the compositional particularities which result from the analysis of the work:

Dinu Lipatti, piano // Herbert von Karajan, conductor – Philharmonia Orchestra – studio recording, 1948

Daniel Barenboim, piano // Sergiu Celibidache, conductor – Munich Philharmonic Orchestra – live recording, Stadthalle Erlangen, 1991

Khatia Buniatishvili, piano // Zubin Mehta, conductor – Israel Philharmonic Orchestra – live recording, Tsinandali Festival, 2017

## 5. Results and Conclusions

The first movement retains the fantasie aspect through frequent modulations towards distant tonalities and changes in tempo and time signature (when the principal theme is not as fast as expected, but all the secondary themes intervene in the context of an acceleration, subsequently changing the tempo in *Andante espressivo*), but the form is that of a sonata. This fact allows the interpreter either to be located in a Classical context (not exactly correct in relation to the historical context and the particular construction), or to configure the preference for a certain agogic freedom. The way the mentioned performers seem to view it (Lipatti, Barenboim and Buniatishvili) is more of a fantasie due to the large fluctuations in the tempo.

In this regard, it should be mentioned that the indications from the score suggest that the tempo *Andante espressivo* is half that of *Allegro affettuoso*, but each of the three performers chooses tempos that are not in direct connection, some of them very far from the indications found in the score edited by Clara Schumann (ex: 36 ♩. – Lipatti, Buniatishvili, respectively 34 ♩. – Barenboim, for *Andante espressivo*; Buniatishvili – up to 132 ♩, for the third segment of Development, and 118 ♩, for TII3 from Re-exposition). Also, a macro analysis of the interpretation reveals 21 different tempos for Lipatti, 24 for Barenboim and 20 for Buniatishvili.

Differences in tempo are very significant at times and although they are largely balanced out when considered in the context of the first movement as a whole, the duration of the first movement of the three performances differs, by almost two minutes between Lipatti and Barenboim (Lipatti – 14'18", Barenboim – 16'07", Buniatishvili – 15'16").

Upon listening to first movement, despite the differences in tempo highlighted in the analysis, through the way Lipatti makes the transition from one tempo to another one perceives a natural unfolding of the music, such that fewer agogic changes seem to be noticed, whereas Buniatishvili ostentatiously highlights these through sudden changes of tempo and a series of agogic fluctuations within the same musical phrase.

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