

Stylistic considerations on Dimitri Shostakovich Second Concerto for Piano and Orchestra - Part 1

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Abstract: *Considering certain differences and developments compared to composer Dimitri Shostakovich's first piano concerto, we notice important changes in vision and an unexpected island of light, which define the Second Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, perhaps the composer's most optimistic and moderate in conflict and paroxysmal tension. The construction of the concerto largely follows the established tripartite traditions, but also proposes some surprising elements, metrically and in terms of form, which successfully configure the individualising component. The success of the work in the concert hall is ensured above all by the exceptional beauty of the second movement, framed by two substantial movements, however with less spectacular elements of language than one would expect in the historical context, but also specific to Shostakovich's creation.*

Key-words: *mid-XXth century; concerto for piano and orchestra; structure; key interpretative points*

1. Introduction

This paper constitutes a part of a larger study, which proposes, over several articles, the analysis of the component movements of Dimitri Shostakovich's Second Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, in relation to the structure and language of the First Concerto for Piano and Orchestra.

The two concerti for piano and orchestra were written considerably far apart from one another, the first in 1933 and the second in 1957, on the occasion of his son Maxim's birthday and the completion of his studies at the Moscow Conservatory.

2. Analysis of the first movement of the Second Concerto for Piano and Orchestra (1957)

The form of the first movement is that of a sonata², with a particular characteristic of tri-thematicism. The Exposition presents three main themes on three tonal centres, highlighting on the one hand the classical relationship: F major - tonic, C major - dominant, and on the other the tendency to individualise through innovation: D minor - relative key.

Exposition			
A	B	bridge	C
a1, a2		a1, a2	
F major	G major	F major, D-flat major, A major	D minor
Key point 1	Key point 3	Key point 5	Key point 6

Table 1. *Outline of the Exposition*

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² Dumitru Bughici. 1980. *Dicționar de forme și genuri muzicale*. București: Editura Muzicală, p. 310.

The first theme, A³, in F major, proposes two overlapping ideas, a1, with which the orchestra begins (first six bars), short, discontinuous, with elements of a march, reminiscent of the Seventh Symphony, nicknamed Leningrad, over which intervenes a lyrical, homogeneous theme, a2, from the entrance of the piano, key point 1⁴. Starting with key point 3, the second theme, B, in C major is introduced⁵. The character of this theme is much better defined, playful and energetic. The bridge starts at key point 5, uses the material of theme a1, then, from the fifth bar, that of theme a2, in a modulatory process of thematic reworking (F major, D flat major, A major). The third theme, C, in D minor, starts at key point 6 and is broad, lyrical and slightly dance-like, owing to the rhythmic qualities of the orchestral accompaniment.

Development						
D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	D6	D7
A	B	A	B		C	Soloist's cadenza
G major	E major	B flat major, F sharp major, E minor, A major, C major, E major	B flat major	D minor	D major	
Key point 10	Key point 11	Key point 12	Key point 16, bar 5	Key point 17	Key point 18	Key point 19

Table 2. *Outline of the Development*

The development (bars 10-19) proposes, within the first section, a four-bar segment of a rhythmic-harmonic nature, without notable thematic significance, but which has the role of preparing the reworked theme, a2, in G major (harmonic). The second section of the Development comes in from key point 11, with the rework of theme B in E major, with much chromaticism and a playful exchange between the orchestra and the piano, which modulates surprisingly into A flat major. The third section of the Development, from key point 12, proposes the preparation of a new thematic reworking in the style of a2, more ample, with an a thematic structure, in the spirit of the first section. This time the a thematic moment no longer has only four bars, but eight. Starting at key point 13, the theme reworked in the third section of the Development is presented, the a2 theme in B flat major, with modulation to F sharp major (mark 14), A major and C major (key point 15). On the model established by the symphony mentioned above, ostinato through the repetition of a cell, without being reworked in any way, becomes a rule in melodic-rhythmic-harmonic construction. In the symphony, the variation of a theme-model is strictly related to the timbre of the instruments that take it on, imagining rather the exacerbation of a tension, following the model proposed by Ravel in Boléro⁶, which reaches paroxysmal dimensions. From the fifth bar after key point 16, the fourth section of the Development brings back the material of theme B, in B flat major, similar to the second section (following the model of the first and third sections, which reworked theme A). A new segment, the fifth section of the Development, is introduced from key point 17 onwards to provide a

³ I opt for the notation A, B, C, to highlight the different constituent themes of the sections, or parts of the works analysed in this article.

⁴ In the detailed analysis of the two concerti, reference will be made to the key points as they appear in the scores studied, published by Boosey & Hawkes.

⁵ Under the conditions of a bi-thematic structure it could be considered the theme of the bridge, which is contradicted by its non-modulating aspect.

⁶ Simon, Karlinsky. 2013. *Freedom from Violence and Lies, Essays on Russian Poetry and Music*, Boston: Academic Studies Press, p. 399.

dynamic ascension, in preparation for the climax. Throughout the entire concerto, certain influences and connections can be observed in the language of the music of Russian composers. In this section one can certainly notice a harmonic organization, with the precipitation of various thematic fragments, specific to Rachmaninov's creation. The whole accumulation of tension through rhythmic variation and sonorous volume finds its resolution at the key point 18, i.e., the climax of the Development and of the movement, the sixth section, with the reworking of the thematic material of theme C in D major. The solo instrumental cadenza, the seventh section of the Development, comes in from key point 19.

The last five bars of the cadenza are centred on C, forming the anacrusis section of the Reprise.

Reprise				
A	B	bridge	C (1 sub-motif)	Coda
a2		a1, B		a1
F major	F major	F major, A flat major	F major	F major
Key point 20	Key point 21	Key point 22	Key point 23, bar 5	Last 4 bars

Table 3. *Outline of the Reprise*

The Reprise, at key point 20, starts with theme a2 at the orchestra, in F major, accompanied by piano. From key point 21, the B theme is added, also in F major. The bridge, at key point 22, only uses theme a1, especially as the march-like character of this theme was missing at the beginning of the Reprise. From key point 23, the bridge also includes the rhythmic-melodic element characteristic of the B theme. From the fifth bar after key point 23, at the climax, the piano brings back the first cell of theme C, in F major. The coda, the last four bars, brings back the a1 theme material.

One may observe the compression of the Reprise in relation to the Exhibition, through the omission of certain thematic elements and minimally bringing back others, in the context in which they have been presented and reworked extensively previously.

A possible explanation for this concentrated Reprise may be the risk of tonal monotony caused by the return to the tonic of all the thematic elements (tonally differentiated in the Exposition).

From the point of view of rhythmic organization, it is important to mention the anacrusis formed by four sixteenths, which introduces the themes B, C and appears continuously. Thus, theme B is anacrusic, with the four sixteenths. Theme C also begins with an anacrusis consisting of a group of four sixteenths. From key point 5, the anacrusic formula of four sixteenths also appears in the bridge that reworks the material of theme A, becoming a reality to which, this theme also formally subscribes. Although at the beginning of first movement theme a1 begins apparently in a crusic, it is not completely so, its construction representing the anacrusis of theme a2. From bar 5 onwards the same motif is repeated (six times), giving way to the solo piano. As such, the first six bars, a1, represent the anacrusis for theme a2. Theme a2 itself starts with a crusic aspect, but in itself the first bar of theme a2 is clearly constructed as an anacrusis for F, the first beat of the second bar, perhaps not coincidentally also made up of four notes (with quarter notes). Taking up the slightly varied model, the next three beats of the second measure constitute the preparatory anacrusis for the first beat of the following measure, E flat.

The anacrusis can go beyond the metrical-rhythmic level of a beginning on an unaccented beat that prepares an accented beat, but it can also represent a piece of music that starts on an

accented beat and prepares a subsequent, more valuable musical event, becoming its anacrusis⁷. One can consider the whole of theme A, with its lyrical-dramatic beginning, as an anacrusis for theme B, which is more energetic, clearer, more charged and more suited to the specific character of the first movement of the concerto. Following the same line of reasoning, it can be said that the entire Exposition and most of the Development represent the anacrusis of the climax, i.e., the explosive, luminous reworking of theme C.

From the point of view of the language, tone-modal, a modal preference is evident, given by plagal relations, by the avoidance in certain moments of authentic clarifications, by harmonization in other moments only with major chords.

The tonal scheme proposes three tonalities in the Exposition, a single important one in the Reprise and an abundance of different tonalities in the Development - a classical-romantic approach, in the form of a tri-thematic sonata - considered to represent the sonata form specific to late Romanticism, from the Fourth Symphony composed by Bruckner⁸.

In terms of the tonal plane, the key of C major for theme B is a classical attribute, but the introduction of the relative minor, namely D minor, for theme C is an unusual choice. Also, between the keys of F major and D minor there is a relationship of a third, found in the Development, G major - E major and B flat major, also B flat major - F sharp major, A major - C major - E major, from third to third, B flat major - D minor, D major - F major. In the Reprise, the only tonal contrast which occurs only in the bridge between themes B and C is the tonality of A-flat major, also at the interval of a third (compared to F major). Thus, the classical tonal placement of theme B in the key of the dominant is followed by the adventure of the relative minor for the C theme, which involves the relationship of a third and which subsequently becomes a major relationship for the whole movement, an attribute generating modulations, so that in the Reprise the only alternative tonality to this continuous F major remains A flat major, also at the interval of a minor, ascending third. The tendency is to modulate in an ascending fashion compared to F major.

The complementary nature of the themes, the clarity, or on the contrary the harmonic complexity on short fragments (parallel harmonies typical of Debussy's creation, but of a modulatory complexity typical of Wagner's music, with abrupt tonal returns, typical of Prokofiev), create expressive tensions particularly attractive for the performing artist.

3. Analysis of the first movement of the First Concerto for Piano and Orchestra (1933)

Compared to the first movement of the Second Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, the first movement of the First Concerto for Piano and Orchestra and Trumpet Solo begins with a Neapolitan sixth in the key of C minor.

The complementary rhythmic organization with dotted rhythm, the polyphony on two levels are elements similar to those of the Second Concerto. The introductory gesture is followed by an unaccompanied, chromatic, modal piano theme (less harmonically clear than the tonal precepts and unlike the theme of the Second Concerto), based on an opening that becomes the plane of the accompaniment, and an evocative, tense main melody, but in an obvious complementary relationship to the melody of the bass. It modulates to a perfect fifth, from C minor to G minor, evolving into a much more chromatic piece of music. Next comes the bridge, with thematic material similar to theme A, increasingly tense, with a developmental aspect specific to the bridge, very fragmented thematically and intensely modulating, but beginning on a C minor tonal centre and ending the whole modulatory process also in C minor.

⁷ Dumitru Bughici. 1980. *Dicționar de forme și genuri muzicale*. București: Editura Muzicală, p. 18.

⁸ I mention that it is also found in Brahms' first piano sonata, representing a Romantic attitude.

The melodic-harmonic structure of a motif preceding the B theme takes on the role of a bridge, modulating in E-flat major, in the classical spirit of modulation to the relative major. The specific melodic structure of theme B of the Second Concerto is obviously related to theme B in question, both following the arpeggio construction, with repeated notes and four sixteenth note formulas. This time the thematic material is organized as a secondary thematic group. The melange of themes is intense, unlike the unity of the three themes that make up the first movement of the Second Concerto.

In the Development, the behaviour of the melody beginning in E flat minor and ending in F minor is imitatively polyphonic, specific to Bach's creation, both in terms of intonational and rhythmic structure.

Looking at its expressiveness, the overall sentiment proposed in this first movement is rather one of irony, at times even sarcasm⁹, with tragic and comic overtones, in a less constant manner, in contrast to the expressively clear spaces of thematic unfolding of the first movement of the Second Concerto.

The reprise proposes theme A for the orchestra in the base tonality, and then the thematic material taken from the trumpet acts as a continuation of the Development. Later, in the Coda the piano brings back theme A, as if it were in fact the actual Reprise.

The compositional character in the first movement of the first concerto is typical of late Romanticism, with effusions that tend to dissolve the form. Two themes are presented, of which theme A proposes several ideas and is very unstable tonally. The bridge is also very modulating, with an unexpected return to the base tonality at the end, and then, with a scholastic modulation to E flat major, introduces theme B, also with more thematic ideas, in several tonalities. After a naturally modulating Development, the reprise of theme A comes in, with the orchestra, in the base tonality, and the B themes as a continuation of the modulating path of the Development. Finally, the A theme is returned to the piano in a slower tempo. Also noteworthy is the alternation of tempos throughout the movement: in the Exposition theme A, moderate tempo, theme B, fast tempo, Development, fast tempo, Reprise theme A for the orchestra, faster than in Exposition, Coda theme A, slower tempo.

Even if the tri-thematic structure is atypical for the sonata form, the second piano concerto nevertheless proposes a clearer thematic organization with few innovations when it comes to form.

4. Conclusions

Tone-modal language is characteristic of both concerti for piano and orchestra by Dimitri Shostakovich, the proportion of modal language increasing in the Second Concerto compared to the first, which is predominantly tonal, with an intensely chromatic tendency towards harmonic succession.

The first movement, which each of the two concerti features, configures two worlds related in musical language, but distinct in terms of expression and structure, in terms of the clarity of the thematic expositions, or the singability of the melodic lines.

Different temperaments –the first one is youthful, sarcastic, discontinuous in ideas, but also more diverse (more themes, bolder processing), with shocking changes of expression and mood, while the second one is more mature, with humour, with vague irony to communist ideology (the march character of the main theme and the second thematic idea), less dramatic and not at all modernist in attitude (a lesson learned from ideological mistakes - immediately

⁹ Richard Taruskin. 2009. *On Russian Music*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 304.

after the first concerto he felt he could disappear, facing the tense situation with *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* opera).

It maintains kinetic energy over wide spaces, reworking themes initially exposed very diatonically and calmly/warmly/lightly/quietly until they become dramatic.

There is a need in the concert programmes of performing institutions to expand the repertoire and to approach modern and contemporary works - both to educate the audience's taste and to diversify. In this context, Shostakovich's works always have the expressive force to impose themselves as novelty elements but also musical and dramaturgical consistency in concert programs, enjoying success. This is due to the composer's style, much more clearly outlined in the Second Concerto, which also considers the social and ideological conditions of the country in which he lives but is also aware of the need to have a common language with the audience (not modernism at any price). In addition, he is helped by a dramatic strength, a very convincing way of telling complex musical stories, better than anyone of his generation.

Less obvious in comparisons of the initial movements, but much more significant in the later movements, is the Second Concerto's dramaturgic and profound development of depth of artistic imagery, in the favour of maturity.

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