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Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis : eine Veröffentlichung der Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, Lehr- und Forschungsinstitut für Alte Musik an der Musik-Akademie der Stadt Basel**

Band (Jahr): **34 (2010)**

PDF erstellt am: **24.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-868909

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IMPROVISATION, ELABORATION, COMPOSITION. REINTERPRETING THE CLASSICAL CONCERTO THROUGH THE ROMANTIC CADENZA[1]

Angela Mace Christian

„Jedes vollkommene Werk ist die Totenmaske seiner Intuition.“ – Walter Benjamin

[„Every perfect work is the death mask of its intuition.“]

As Richard Kramer rephrased it in his monograph, *Unfinished Music*, „all works, whether measurably perfect or not, partake of this axiomatic truth: that in their completion, they die.“[2] Thus, Benjamin's image of the ‚death mask‘ equates to our modern tendency to view works as ‚finished‘, and the compositional text as ‚sacred‘. In the early 19th century, however, this concept was much less prevalent; 18th-century piano concertos in particular represented for most performers anything but a finished, ‚vollkommenes Werk‘. Rather, the concerto, and especially the cadenza, was a place to display personality and talent, a canvas with only a few guidelines to direct the creativity of the artist.

The point at which these concepts began to change takes us back to a selection of performers and composers who received Ludwig van Beethoven's concertos in a variety of ways ranging from elaboration to composition. We shall focus here on Beethoven's piano concertos in C major, Op. 15, and G major, Op. 58 within the context of prevailing performance practice and critical reception.

I.

In an age when the performer-composer was the norm, and improvisation was an essential element of the concert program, the concept of playing a work note-for-note as the composer had written it was completely foreign, in great contrast to our current horror of the occasional wrong note or memory slip. Thus, the practice of ‚revising‘ or ‚elaborating‘ piano concertos was common in the early 19th century as virtuosos attempted to update 18th-century works to appeal to the increasingly extravagant tastes of their audiences. Some of these revisions included elaboration of simple restatements of themes, ornamentation, doublings at the octave, and filled-out textures to utilise the growing compass and power of the piano. Some were more successful than others, and in particular the debate over ‚authenticity‘ in performing Mozart's piano concertos raged hotly through the first two decades of the 19th century.

[1] This article is an alternate version of the study published as „Improvisation, Elaboration, Composition. The Mendelssohns and the Classical Cadenza“, in: Nicole Grimes and Angela R. Mace (eds.), *Mendelssohn Perspectives*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012, which does not extend to the consideration of cadenzas by composers other than the Mendelssohns.

[2] Richard Kramer, *Unfinished Music*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, vii.

Some Mozart devotees, like Philipp Karl Hoffmann, attempted to remedy the situation; in 1801 and 1803 Hoffmann published elaborations of six slow movements from Mozart's concertos as well as cadenzas for the same works. The embellishments of the slow movements are in some places quite attractive (consisting mostly of runs, arpeggios, and trills that fill in wide leaps or fill out long note durations), but the cadenzas are clearly formulaic and generally at least twice as long as a typical Mozart cadenza.[3] Even Mozart was known to extemporize embellishments for his own concertos, however, so the issue was not that an ‚authentic' – or ‚good' – performance could not be embellished; the problem arose when the task fell to hands less talented than Mozart's.

The situation with cadenzas was potentially much worse. If we may judge from contemporary reviews, many performers in the late 18th and early 19th centuries improvised cadenzas in a style that offended the artistic sensibilities of those musicians educated in the guidelines set forth by such authorities as Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (*Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen,* 1753 and 1762), Johann Joachim Quantz (*Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen,* 1752), and Daniel Gottlob Türk (*Klavierschule,* 1789). Türk, in particular, did not attempt to conceal his distaste for badly improvised cadenzas, as this passage from his *Klavierschule* demonstrates:

> It is not seldom that a concerto or the like seems to be played merely because of its cadenzas. The performer goes to excess not only with regard to the suitable length of the composition, but moreover even incorporates all sorts of ideas that do not have the least relationship to what has gone before in the composition. The result is that the good impression that might have been made on the listener is for the most part cadenzaed away [*wegkadenziert*].[4]

Türk goes on to detail what a good cadenza should include; among other attributes, a cadenza should not be too long (Türk considers ‚several minutes' excessive), should be in a mood appropriate for the concerto, should not merely offer a technical showcase, and should not modulate to any key the composer did not use in the concerto. He emphasizes further that a cadenza should be composed of themes from the concerto, presenting something approaching a ‚summary' of the concerto. Türk points out that a cadenza thus properly constructed could not be reused in another concerto, which suggests

[3] Philipp Karl Hoffmann, *Cadenzas to Mozart's Piano Concertos and Elaborations of their Slow Movements,* ed. by A. Hyatt King, New York: Peters, 1959. The six concertos are KV 467, 482, 488, 491, 503, and 595.

[4] Daniel Gottlob Türk, *School of Clavier Playing,* trans. by Raymond H. Haggh, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982, 298. Daniel Gottlob Türk, Klavierschule, ed. by Erwin R. Jacobi, Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1962, 309. „Denn nicht selten scheint es, ein Konzert u. [dgl.] werde blos der Kadenzen wegen gespielt. – Der Ausführer schweift dabey nicht nur in Absicht auf die zweckmäßige Länge aus, sondern bringt noch überdies allerley Gedanken darin an, die auf das vorhergegangene Tonstück nicht die geringste Beziehung haben, so daß dadurch der gute Eindruck, welchen das Tonstück vielleicht auf den Zuhörer gemacht hatte, größtentheils wieder **wegkadenziert** wird." [emphasis original].

that performers were recycling cadenzas in the manner of the ‚suit-case' aria. Even though the cadenza might (advisedly) be prepared beforehand and even set on the piano during performance, Türk urges the performer to create the impression that the cadenza has been improvised on the spot.[5]

Performers in the early 19th century, however, apparently continued to ignore the old-fashioned warnings of the 18th-century writers. In his 1805 essay „Ueber Kadenzen" („About Cadenzas") in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, Friedrich Guthmann noted that „the minds of the audience have enough to do at most long concerts; they don't need to be even more wearied by the cadenza or even completely distracted and alienated from the orderly progress of the entire piece."[6] Guthmann was particularly distressed by a showy, thoughtless cadenza, which he likened to „no more than a festive cloth, a little piece of tinsel, dangling from a light garment."[7]

II.

Not everyone, however, remained insensitive to the classical text. One early example of a compositional approach to the cadenza can be found in the papers of Fanny Mendelssohn. As a teenager, her repertoire included already concertos by Johann Sebastian Bach and Johann Nepomuk Hummel, the double piano concertos written by and performed with her brother Felix Mendelssohn, Beethoven's ‚Emperor' Concerto, and Beethoven's Concerto in C major, Op. 15. Nestled in a manuscript containing lieder and other smaller pieces from the early 1820s is a cadenza for Beethoven's concerto in C major, which Fanny apparently drafted for a performance of the concerto in April 1823.[8]

Fanny styled her cadenza in the late 18th-century tradition of Mozart, appropriate for this early Beethoven work (composed 1795, revised 1800, published 1801). The Mozartian style of Fanny's cadenza is evident in the emphasis on the prolongation of the cadential six-four chord, the brevity of the cadenza, and its tendency to merge spontaneous, improvisational gestures with themes and motives found in the concerto. It is as if Fanny combined improvisation and composition, so that, as Christoph Wolff has observed of Mozart's own cadenzas, the cadenza is „gradually [...] removed from genuine improvisation and, instead", becomes „much closer to compositional elaboration."[9] Thus, this concept of compositional elaboration – not far removed from Türk's concept of

[5] Türk, *School of Clavier Playing* (see note 4), 297–309.

[6] Friedrich Guthmann, „Ueber Kadenzen", in: *AmZ* 7/41 (July 10th, 1805): col. 650. „Die Seele des Zuhörers hat bey den meist langen Konzerten ohnehin genug zu thun, sie braucht nicht erst durch die Kadenz noch ermüdert oder doch zerstreut und vom regelmässigen Gange des ganzen Stücks abgezogen zu werden."

[7] Ibid., „Nicht selten waren Kadenzen weiter nichts, als ein bunter Lappen, ein Stückchen Flittergold, an ein einfaches Gewand gehängt."

[8] D-B, MA Ms. 33, 4–5.

[9] Christoph Wolff, „Cadenzas and Styles of Improvisation in Mozart's Piano Concertos", in: R. Larry Todd and Peter Williams (eds.), *Perspectives on Mozart Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 235.

the concerto summary – forms the basis for Fanny's approach to the cadenza. We shall consider a few salient examples from the cadenza here to explore what this idea of compositional elaboration means in practice.

First, Fanny takes the descending scale motive and extends it from six notes to nine (Exx. 1a and 1b).

Ex. 1a: Beethoven, Concerto in C major, Mvt. I, bars 414–416

Ex. 1b: Fanny Mendelssohn, Cadenza Section 1

Then, from Beethoven we have:

Ex. 2a: Beethoven, Concerto in C major, Mvt. I, bars 432–440

Fanny compresses Beethoven's eight bars to six bars:

Ex. 2b: Fanny Mendelssohn, Cadenza, Section 3

And finally, Fanny betrays her concurrent involvement with Beethoven's ‚Emperor' concerto by including a distinctive rising scale motive:

Ex. 3a: Beethoven, ‚Emperor' concerto, Mvt. I, bar 371

Ex. 3b: Fanny Mendelssohn, cadenza for C major concerto

Beyond the thematic references, one may also notice the episodic nature of Fanny's cadenza, each section delineated by a cadential six-four chord. This sectional organization raises the possibility that this cadenza may not represent what Fanny actually played, but that these composed sections are merely planned thematic transitions between sections of more extensive improvisation. If this is so, it would have dramatic implications for Fanny's performing activities as a young, female prodigy, in a society in which female pianists did not generally improvise their own cadenzas.

Fanny's engagement with Beethoven's concerto in G major is somewhat different. She did not, as far as we know, compose a cadenza for Beethoven's

G major concerto, but instead, by 1825, she had copied one of Beethoven's own cadenzas into her full score of the G major concerto. This is significant because Beethoven's cadenzas, committed to paper in 1809 for Archduke Rudolph of Austria, were not published until 1864 when the Beethoven Gesamtausgabe appeared. How Fanny came into possession of this original Beethoven cadenza nearly forty years before its publication is as yet unknown, but any of the frequent international guests in the Mendelssohn home could have transmitted a copy of the manuscript.

Fanny's copy differs only in a very few small particulars from the version printed in the Beethoven complete edition and other modern editions, demonstrating that she had in her possession an extremely reliable source. Although not Beethoven's longest cadenza, it is quite eccentric, and is rarely played today. On the autograph, Beethoven scrawled „Cadenza (ma senza cadére)" or „Cadenza (but without falling)", offering a challenge to the intrepid performer – or, perhaps, offering a clue that this cadenza was never intended for performance, existing rather as a didactic exercise or a joke for the Archduke Rudolph.

We might assume that since Fanny had this cadenza in her possession, her brother Felix may have performed the G major concerto with this cadenza – which he apparently performed often enough to name his *cheval de bataille* in 1842.[10] There is no evidence that he did, but rather maintained the tradition of improvising cadenzas. We might expect Felix to have worked out and reused cadenzas, and he very well may have relied on some sort of formula, but in one instance, at least, his irrepressible creativity and tendency to self-revision was apparent: while rehearsing for a concert with the Philharmonic Society in London, June 24th, 1844, Mendelssohn treated the musicians in the orchestra to *four* different cadenzas for Beethoven's Concerto in G major – one for each rehearsal, and yet another during the performance itself.[11] Felix does seem to have preferred cadenzas stylistically consistent with the concertos he performed, and indeed was praised for his artistic sensitivity, as this review from the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* of his performance of a Mozart concerto in 1832 demonstrates:

> Herr Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy performed the exquisite concerto with much taste and thorough skill [...]. The cadenza, added at the end of the first movement and the performer's own creation, was founded on some motives of the movement totally in the spirit and style of this masterful composition.[12]

[10] Letter of Felix to Lea Mendelssohn, December 11th, 1842. Paul Mendelssohn Bartholdy, *Letters* (1868), 285.

[11] William Rockstro, *Mendelssohn*, London: Sampson Law, 1884, 96–97.

[12] *AmZ* 34 (1832): col. 802: „Das treffliche Concert für das Pianoforte von Mozart in D moll trug Hr. Felix Mendelssohn Bartoldy mit vielem Geschmacke und solider Fertigkeit vor [...] Die am Schlusse des ersten Satzes hinzugefügte Cadenz, von eigener Erfindung, war auf einige Motive desselben ganz im Geiste und Style der meisterhaften Composition gegründet."

Not at all surprising for a musician with rigorous classical training and historicist tendencies like Felix Mendelssohn – and had his sister Fanny been able to perform her cadenza in public, it is likely she would have garnered a similar review. Thus the reception of the concerto text has turned in this narrative from what seems to in some cases have been a disregard for any thematic coherence, to a carefully considered compositional reception and elaboration of the themes and motives found in the concertos themselves, but still practiced within the flexible boundaries of improvisation.

III.

We will turn now to our final example of fully compositional reception of Beethoven's concerto in G major. There exist quite a number of cadenzas composed for Beethoven's Op. 58, from composers as diverse as Ignaz Moscheles, Camille Saint-Saëns, Ferruccio Busoni, Nikolaj Medtner, and Anton Rubienstein. Two are of particular interest to this study, by Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms.

Clara Schumann's is clearly romantic, but also fully recognizable as a cadenza written for Beethoven's Concerto in G major. The shift from Fanny's 18th-century style ‚Eingang' to a fully notated composition could not be more striking. This discussion affords us as well the comparison between two different women in two very different situations – Fanny, with no expectation of a public performance drafted a modest cadenza and tucked it away in a mixed manuscript. Clara Schumann, on the other hand, composed a virtuoso *tour de force* in 1846, and subsequently published her creation in 1870.

Johannes Brahms exhibits an approach rather more distantly removed from the Beethovenian mould. An introspective mood at the opening, thickly voiced chords, variation techniques familiar to our ears from his adaptations of Haydn and Händel, and even an evocation of the *b-a-c-h*-motive mark this cadenza as unmistakably Brahmsian, while remaining clearly tied to the themes in the concerto. Thus the romantic cadenza has moved from the ephemeral realm of the improvisation to the fully corporeal realm of the unique, original, and publishable composition.

Today, we hear almost exclusively the cadenzas provided by Beethoven himself. We are now tied to the idea of the sacred text based on the ‚Fassung letzter Hand' preserved in a critical complete edition, the static, perfect versions of works we hear on recordings, and thus expect to hear when we sit in the concert hall. This concept, however, would have been utterly foreign to and of course even impossible for most performers in Beethoven's own time. That Beethoven provided cadenzas for his concertos may indicate that he wished us to play them, of course, but one must not assume that is always the case. Certainly, Beethoven – or at least many of his contemporaries – would have appreciated a finely-crafted original cadenza.

The death mask, then, has been cast, but recent trends in the study of historical performance practice – which now venture beyond the 18th century to include such curiosities as the altered version of the *St. Matthew Passion*

that Felix Mendelssohn directed in 1829, for example – show that perhaps a return to a more relaxed approach to the score is at hand. Take, for example, Joshua Bell's recent recording of Mendelssohn's violin concerto with his own cadenza. Unorthodox, surely, and whether or not it is successful is open to debate, but it is a daring step in the direction of returning to the concept of the mutable, flexible, work, which allows greater creative latitude and returns the performing artist to the role of a composer engaged fully with the text, not just someone who is to deliver a performance of a perfect, complete, finished work. Perhaps we needn't write the obituary quite yet.