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The Interpretation of the Bach Vivaldi Concertos
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The Interpretation of the Bach-Vivaldi Concertos

by Lorenzo Ghielmi – Translated by Robert Michaels (Lugano Cathedral, Switzerland)



The Concertos that Johann Sebastian Bach transcribed for organ have been the object of numerous musicological studies. Their progressive re-discovery gave us a basis, at the beginning of this century, for a new appreciation of Vivaldi's music as well as a chronological orientation for Bach's own compositions.

Among the numerous articles and publications, the contributions of Hans-Joachim Schulze¹ are particularly important, as they seem to have resolved definitively most of the major musicological problems: that the Concertos were transcribed at Weimar in the years 1713-14; that it was Prince Ernst of Weimar-Saxony, younger brother of the reigning Prince, who was the reason why these works were written, having brought the Vivaldi compositions back with him from a visit to Amsterdam and introduced them to the orchestra at the court in Weimar; that the same Prince Ernst probably commissioned J S Bach and J G Walther for the organ transcriptions.²

This article, rather than offering the reader new musicological data, investigates more thoroughly what is already known, so as to research various indications regarding the performance and interpretation of these works.

The fundamental question that the organist should ask when meeting these concerto transcriptions, is whether or not it is important to compare them with the versions for strings, as the variety of dynamics, the speed and the richness of the resources of the violin seem to demand too much of the organist. The temptation is to see this music at the organ as a sort of "transcription made-easy": slowing down the allegros, leaving out the dynamic changes and the variety in the bowing.

Knowing how Bach wrote these concertos in direct comparison with the instrumental performances of the court orchestra, however, brings me personally to refute this idea of a version willingly "humiliated" for the organ, and to accept rather the difficult challenge – is it not true that various pages of these concertos have, in fact, a character of challenge? For example, bar 86 in the third movement of the *Concerto in A minor* comes to mind, where the organist is playing the second violin part with his right hand, the first violin with his left, with his right foot the ripieno violins and with his other foot the bass part, thus transforming himself into a sort of "one-man-orchestra" (ex.1).

happens in the vision of the contrast between light and darkness, thus is [the act of] hearing enraptured in admiration. [From the preface to: *Ausserlesener mit Ernst- und Lust-gemengter Instrumental-Music Erste Versammlung*, Passau, 1701.]

Thus wrote Johann Mattheson in *Das neueroffene Orchestre*, 1713:

Concertos, in the wide sense of the term, are musical meetings and *collegia musica*, but in the strict sense the word is often used to signify chamber music for voices and instruments and in an even more specific sense, pieces for strings composed in such a way that each part from time to time predominates over rivals – one might say – the other parts. The term also covers those pieces in which only the top part predominates and in which, among the various violins, one, known as the *Violino concertino*, stands out from the others because it is played with particular rapidity.

The German merchant Johann Friederich Armand von Uffenbach thus noted in his diary, during a visit in 1715 to the S. Angelo Theatre in Venice:

Towards the end Vivaldi played a solo – splendid – and followed it with a cadenza (Phantasie), which absolutely astonished me he took his fingers almost up to the bridge of his instrument, so that there was almost no more room for his bow, and this on all the strings with imitations and at an incredible speed.

Reading this last citation, how can one not consider the great cadenzas in the *Concerto in C major*, BWV 594? Note that, in the last movement, the grand solo in bar 180 mainly in demi-semiquavers – is written *alla breve*.

Even though certain passages on the violin are actually easier to play rapidly, rather than slowly, on the organ, "much more quickness and liveliness", the "particular rapidity" and the "incredible speed" do, in fact, make this music difficult: but in my opinion, this is true virtuoso music. In fact it was probably not by chance that the Bach autograph of the *D minor Concerto* was to remain in the possession of Wilhelm Friedmann Bach, the only true organ-virtuoso among Bach's sons (and for whom the *Trio Sonatas* were written). Again, it was Wilhelm Friedmann Bach who made out a copy of the *Concerto in C major*.³

In the *Trio Sonatas* the analogy with instrumental trios constitutes a vital key to interpretation, as well as being a sort of virtuoso challenge for the organist, who is asked to "play for three people"; in my opinion the Concertos should also be played in this way: as technically demanding music – the organist must know how to play as fast as a violinist!

Example 1



Performance Tempi

Regarding the tempi at which the Italian concertos were played, we have an interesting testimony from Georg Muffat:

In deciding the pulse one has to imitate the Italians to the maximum, who, in the Adagio, Grave and Largo go far more slowly than we normally do, and at such signs seem barely to be able to move on, whereas in the Allegro, Vivace, Presto etc. they play everything with much more quickness and liveliness. And from a precise observance of the opposition of slowness to quickness; of force to tenderness; and of the fullness of the Concerto grosso to the delicacy of the Concertino, as

Dynamics and registration

The Frenchman, Charles De Brosses, wrote thus of Vivaldi in 1739:

They have a system of accompaniment that we do not know, but which would be simple to introduce in our performances, and which shows off their music to great advantage; it is the art of augmenting or diminishing the sound, which I could define as the art of nuance and shading. This technique is practised both gradually and brusquely. As well as Forte and Piano, Fortissimo and Pianissimo, they also have a more or less emphatic Mezzo-piano and Mezzo-forte.

The numerous dynamic indications that we encounter in Vivaldi's scores seem to be forgotten in the transcriptions for keyboard: which stops should be employed on the organ? Should the organist employ stop changes?

Observing most performances of these works today, most artists seem to choose – for the fast movements – the following solutions: 1) Organo pleno, contrasting the Great mixture with that of the Positive (Ch.), without pedal reeds and with no stop changes; 2) a “more violinistic” registration, that does not involve the use of mixtures; 3) the use of all the various “colouring” possibilities of the organ, thus including flute and reed stops, mixed according to the logic of surprise and personal pleasure, with the intention of “competing with the variety of string instruments”.

Which of these interpretations comes nearest to Bach's own intentions?

The *Concerto in D minor*, BWV 596, is the only concerto of which we possess the autograph: this manuscript is particularly precious for the presence of indications for registration. The violins are imitated with the clear and discreet sound of the Principal, (or, to be precise, of the Octave 4 played an octave lower); for the cello part (Bar 21) Bach uses the Principal 8 and Octave 4 and does not hesitate to introduce a 32ft in the pedal. The contrast between soli and tutti is achieved by the introduction of the “Pleno” in the *Grave*.

One could propose that Bach noted these registrations because of their peculiarity, omitting them in the other concertos, where the music did not necessitate “unusual” registration. This hypothesis is not valid for the following reasons: i) if the autograph had been lost, we would know this concerto only through a manuscript copy (conserved in the Berlin library MS

number P. 289), that did not give stop indications; thus even a “particular” registration was not always indicated; ii) the *Concerto in C major* clearly needs a “particular” registration based on 4ft for the Rückpositiv,⁴ but in none of the surviving manuscripts are there indications of registration: the composers of the past were very parsimonious in their stop indications, even though this certainly did not mean monotony in their registration.

The use of *Organo Pleno* for the tutti, and the *Principale* or *Ottava* for the soli, gives a great contrast, parallel to the aesthetics of the string concerto. Bach, however, does not rigidly respect the division between the keyboards: i.e. tutti=Gt., soli=Rückpositiv; and for this reason in the *Concerto in A minor* and the *Concerto in C Major*, if one opts for the “great differentiation” as one's starting point, it becomes necessary to have some stop changes during the performance.

It can happen, in fact, that in the course of one movement, one can find contrasting musical situations: for example in the last movement of the *Concerto in A minor*. At bar 86 the Great clearly has to prevail over the accompaniment on the Positive (see example 1), whereas in the passages at b.75 and b.118, the two manuals must have identical registration in order to perform the clever solution with which Bach redistributes Vivaldi's string writing on the keyboard (see exs. 2 & 2a). If the Great were louder, unmusical accents on up-beats would occur – therefore this could not be a valid option – the only possibility is to effect a change of stops!

We do not possess an autograph of the *Concerto in A minor*, BWV 593, only one of the manuscript copies written out by J F Agricola, one of Bach's pupils. In this manuscript we find at b.51 and b.63 of the first movement and at bar 114 of the third movement, the inscription “Organo pleno” (see ex.3).

Example 2

Concerto in la minore BWV 593.
I movimento, battute 50-52.
Manoscritto di J. Fr. Agricola con
la dicitura "Organo pleno".



Example 3

In my opinion this indicates a stop change: an assistant either draws or cancels the Mixture according to the tutti or soli functions (for example: the Mixture is cancelled at bar 48 and drawn again at bar 51, as indicated by Agricola). Perhaps, going a little bit further, even the 16ft on the pedal could be cancelled in the passages where, in the orchestral version, the Double Bass does not play (e.g. bars 55 – 61; 71-78). Sceptics have little alternative but to meditate on the first movement of the Concerto in D minor, with its autograph indications of stop changes! With just a minimum of dynamic variety one can still compete with a string ensemble.

One should remember that the Organo Pleno normally included reeds in the pedal part. If one proposes to imitate the string orchestra by excluding the pedal reeds, one should remember that in the Italian orchestras it was not infrequent to find wind instruments doubling the bass section (the bassoon for Vivaldi, trombones for Torelli).

Variety of articulation

Already in 1624 Samuel Scheidt perceived in the *imitatio violinistica* the possibility of enriching and ornamenting organ performance: he suggested performing groups of notes legato, in the same way that the best string players occasionally used to play, as an ornament, several notes with one movement of the bow. Scheidt was the first composer to use the slur to express a variety of articulation on keyboard instruments in a printed publication.

In Bach's organ works the use of slurs is quite frequent, especially where the style of composition is in imitation of that for string instruments: the *Trio Sonatas*, the *Schübler Chorale Preludes*, and also in those works written in the Weimar period (for instance the chorale prelude in *Ich ruf zu dir* (BWV 639). In the Concertos BWV 592-596 there are indications of articulation: e.g., in the adagios and in the solo passages of the allegros.

In particular, we find the two dots at b.52 of the 1st movement of the *Concerto in A minor*⁵ (see ex. 4) interesting in this respect. Is this, perhaps, an indication of a particularly vivacious performance, that imitates the violins when the bow is allowed to leave the strings? This was, at the beginning of the 18th century, a relatively new technique, that was known as "spiccato".⁶

Vivaldi and Bach used the term *spiccato* for the slow movement of the *Concerto in D minor*. In my opinion it is the chords in the left hand that should be played "short", "spiccato": in this way the contrast is heightened between the melodiousness and freedom of the solo part and the strict rhythm of the accompaniment.

A careful examination of the originals for strings can suggest several ways of enriching the articulation. The examples which follow are to be seen as a stimulant in learning more about the difference between the organ and the violin (see example 5).

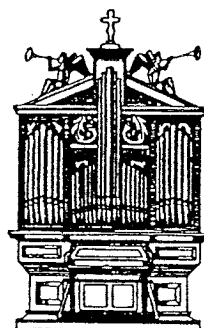
The Bach-Vivaldi Concertos are among the most difficult pages by Bach for the organ: this article is not meant to make the performance easier, but rather to make the organist clearer in mind about those difficulties. Last, but not least, is the fact that very few organs really do justice to this repertoire: if we wish to have a Ruckpositiv, a 32ft in the pedal and e¹ on the pedal (as

Bach asks for in these Concertos), we must observe that no historical organ has been conserved up to our times with these characteristics and that very few modern instruments are conceived with a sonority suitable for the music of the 18th century. Luckily, though, the music of Bach is far greater than our inabilities and far greater than any organ!

References

- ¹ H J Schulze, J S Bach's Concerto-arrangements for Organ – Studies or commissioned Works?, See: *The Organ Yearbook* 3, 1972, pp. 4-13. H J Schulze, *Entstehung und Überlieferung der Konzert Transcriptionen für Orgel und Cembalo*, in: *Studien zur Bach-Überlieferung im 18 Jahrhundert*, ed. Peters, Leipzig-Dresden 1984.
- ² J G Walther, of whom there are conserved about 20 concertos "appropriati all'organo", writes in his autobiography that he actually wrote 78. Walther was the composition teacher of the Prince.
- ³ The manuscript is conserved at Leipzig in the University Library. Of all the concertos only of the *Concerto in D minor* do we have the autograph: of the others we only have manuscript copies. For those compositions that were not published, the manuscript copy was the normal way of diffusion of a work: it is thanks to the copyists that we know many of Bach's works for organ, where the autographs have been lost and that would have been otherwise unknown (eg the *Passacaglia*; the *Tocatta*, *Adagio & Fugue* and the celebrated *Tocatta & Fugue in D minor*).
- ⁴ With respect to the *Concerto in C major*, see the valuable article by L F Tagliavini, *Interpretatorische Probleme bei Johann Sebastian Bach Orgeltranscription des Grosso Mogul. Konzertes von Antonio Vivaldi in: Festschrift Michael Schneider zum 65en Geburtstag*, Kassel 1984.
- ⁵ The two dots (marcato markings) have been omitted in the *Neue Bach Ausgabe* – in the Peters edition they were shown as two vertical dashes.
- ⁶ With regard to *Spiccato*, Sebastien Brossard writes in his dictionary (1708): *Spiccato*, from the verb *spiccare*, means *separate or detached*. This adjective, often used as an adverb means that one must detach and separate well the sounds one from another; one uses it above all for the strings and it is more or less like the *staccato*.

(Signor Ghielmi's inspired playing can be heard on *ARS MUSICI*, AM 1176-2 and readers should note his superb performance of the Bach/Ernst Concerto in G major (BWV 592). It would be well worth noting that the reeds to which Signor Ghielmi refers in his article were very smooth and much quieter than their French counterparts. Schnitzer and his contemporaries achieved this smoothness by using lead-faced shallots, often leathered. This smoothness is very evident on Ahrend's organ in the Munich Museum on



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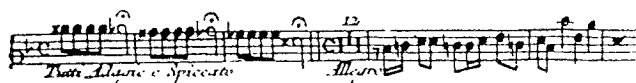
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Concerto in la minore BWV 593.
I Movimento, battute 49-52.
Manoscritto conservato a Berlino
(P 599). Si notino i punti di staccato
a battuta 52.



Example 4

Concerto in re minore. Parte del primo
violino, con l'ultima parte del Largo e
l'inizio dell'Allegro.
Si notino le numerose legature in
ambidue i movimenti.



Example 5

which Signor Ghielmi recorded the disc mentioned above. Readers are referred also to *The Organ Works of J S Bach (Volume 1)* by Peter Williams for more information about the problematic registrations of BWV596. The editors would like to thank Prof. Peter Williams, Thomas Trotter, David Sanger and Robert Michaels for help in preparing this article.

Lorenzo Ghielmi teaches at the Civica Scuola di Musica di Milano and at the Hochschule für Musik in Trossingen (Germany). He is also the organist on the Ahrend organ (1991) of the Basilica S Simpliciano in Milan. He combines his concert activities with a passion for musicological research: he has brought out

editions of music by Frescobaldi and composers from Milan and studies dealing with 16th- and 17th century organ building. He is regularly invited to sit on the juries of international organ competitions and to give lectures and masterclasses all over Europe, in Japan and in the States. His numerous recordings include the *Bach-Vivaldi Concertos* (CD Ars Musici 1179-2).

An article on Child Protection has been prepared by Barry Williams and is included as a special insert in this issue. Readers may like to photocopy it and give copies to employers and employees where appropriate.



JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

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Lorenzo Ghielmi

Über die Interpretation der Bach-Vivaldi-Konzerte

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