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Organ as Orchestra, Piano Concerto as Chamber Music: Findings

Among the research questions we pose in this project, and some of our initial findings, are the following:

1) Does a solo piano concerto become chamber music when the orchestra part is transcribed for the organ? If so, how?

As only two players are involved, a solo concerto does become 'chamber music' in the most basic meaning of this term, and therefore resembles those concertos - including Mozart's Piano Concertos K413, K414, and K415 as well as numerous early 19th-century virtuoso concertos - with optional orchestral wind parts, all of which can be played as piano quintets. The lack of a conductor also plays a role in transforming this kind of performance into chamber music, and one can compare our practice with the tradition of having the soloist conduct the orchestra from the keyboard, where the orchestral players take their cues (mostly) from the soloist. The same holds to a certain degree when the organ replaces the orchestra: depending on the musical context, the pianist or the organist takes on the function of the conductor, making this kind of performance akin to chamber music, where the musical context determines which instrument will lead in a given passage.

However, the virtuosity and prominence of the solo part in a piano concerto and the relative subservience of the strings conflict with what would generally be thought of as the essential equality of parts and the intimate nature of chamber music as generally conceived. In a large space as opposed to a 'chamber', the use of the organ, whose volume can be equal to that of the orchestra, retains something of the public nature of the genre, as it does in the 'symphonic' organ repertoire of the late 19th century. This has been the case with our performance of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, which took place in a large church with a versatile 'romantic' organ. By contrast, the performance of Mozart's Piano Concertos K413 and K466 was given in a small church using an organ with very limited tonal resources: in these circumstances the process and the result were much more akin to chamber music.

2) What strategies are used when transcribing the orchestral part of a solo concerto for organ? What principles does the organist need to observe?

In the case of a work for small orchestra (4- or 5 - part string texture with a few wind parts) there are few problems, and indeed they are usually much more easily accommodated than in a piano transcription: 16 foot pedal tone along with 8 foot replicates the double bass and cello line in written unison, leaving the manuals to provide the other three lines; the occasional wind solo can usually be produced on a different manual. The lack of a reed stop (to replicate the two horns in K 413) on the small organ used for the performance of the Mozart Concerti was a grave

disadvantage, but they are in any case sacrificed in the strings-only format. In K466, however, more of the subtlety of Mozart's scoring for wind had to be given up.

The more complex orchestration of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto created different kinds of transcription problems, but performing it on a large organ provided opportunities for differentiation of tone colours, though the complete range of orchestral combinations in a tutti cannot often be articulated: though a solo trumpet part might be played solo on an appropriate stop, all other simultaneous parts must simply be as tutti (as the player has only two hands). However, in the 2nd movement of the Second Piano Concerto, from fig. 27 till the end, it was possible to reproduce the triplets of the flute and clarinet parts while playing the other orchestral parts with the left hand and feet. It meant, however, that it was not possible to make the the violin line stand out in a higher register than the other parts.

3) Does a pianist approach a concerto differently in terms of expressive timing and dynamics when the orchestra is replaced by an organ?

The fact that the organ and the piano are necessarily placed physically apart in the concert venue creates problems of co-ordination and synchronization, and the pianist is not as free in her timing as she would normally be when playing in collaboration with a conductor. This becomes more acute in the Romantic repertoire, where rubato is an integral part of the musical language, and the personal expressive timing a basic requirement of its performance. In playing with an organ, the details of timing, therefore, need to be worked out in advance, and there is little room for the pianist to exercise improvisatory freedom in this respect. With regard to dynamics, the organ can be overpowering, and depending on the venue and the repertoire, the pianist needs to make adjustments not to remain too much in the background. To a certain extent, this can also be the case when playing with an orchestra, but in the context of an orchestra the problem arises mostly from a lack of full and rounded tone by the pianist rather than the inevitable power of the organ as an instrument in loud passages. A pianist with a full, rounded tone would not experience many problems in this respect when performing a solo concerto with organ accompaniment.

4) What are some of the problems in relation to ensemble balance and coordination posed by the combination of piano and organ? What kinds of solutions can be offered?

Physical separation is almost inevitable with this type of performance and poses two kinds of problems: 1) Acoustical problems arising from the fact that it is not always easy to hear the other performer, particularly for the organist to hear the piano when the solo part has an accompaniment-like texture; and 2) Visual problems of communication and co-ordination, arising from the obvious difficulty or impossibility of eye-contact (the latter would not be so great if an organ with a moveable detached console were used, and pianist and organist were thus side by side. So far we have used only organs with consoles facing directly into the instrument). These kinds of problems can be largely solved with the aid of electronic technology; with a two-way video link the visual problems greatly disappear. In a large building with wide physical separation and some acoustic blurring (as was the case in our performance of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto), an audio link is also necessary, at least for the organist; this may be by means of headphones, or, more conveniently, by a small loudspeaker placed behind the player. (Organists are used to looking into video screens and listening to a loudspeaker, for this is the means commonly adopted today in cathedrals and large churches to coordinate the organ with the

choir.) Balance was difficult to judge by the organist in parts of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, particularly those where the orchestra plays fortissimo; reaction from members of the audience suggested that it varied according to where they were sitting - those near enough to watch the pianist at close quarters occasionally found the organ too loud.

5) What kinds of collaborative processes can be observed in the practice of piano-organ music?

Interpretative details were worked out collaboratively in rehearsal, as with chamber music and as in preliminary discussions between conductor and soloist for a conventional concerto performance with orchestra. In this type of performance, the pianist is still the soloist, but the organist is the orchestra as well as its 'conductor' occasionally, though not conducting the soloist when the piano is accompanying in the orchestral tutti; this remains a chamber music type of coordination, via the video link. Certain passages in Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto with rapid dialogue in quick tempo proved difficult to coordinate where the presence of a conductor would have solved many problems.