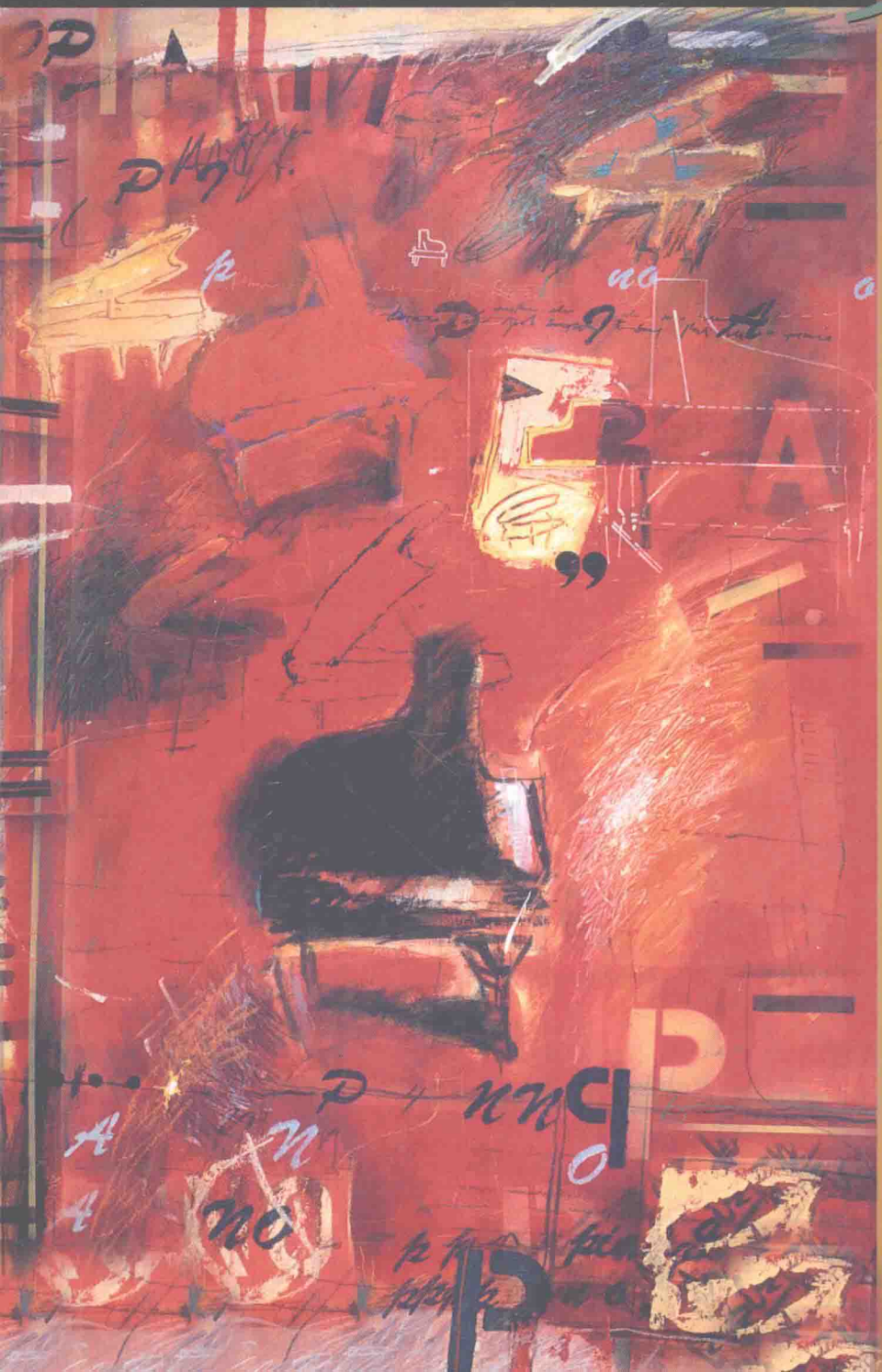
JOSEPH KERMAN

CONCERTO CONVERSATIONS



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Getting Started

1

"Concerto Conversations": that is one of those *double entendre* titles. I chose it because, first of all, so many of the concertos I love the most depend on musical conversation—or, better, because they make so much out of musical conversation. As will become evident. There was also another reason, and that was to dampen expectations which may well be raised by the majesty of the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures. Weighty things have been said under the aegis of this Chair, but anyone who may be looking for the present incumbent systematically to theorize the concerto, or illuminate its history, or develop a new aesthetic of the concerto will, I am afraid, be disappointed. My inclinations and my capabilities do not lie that way. These lectures will be more like conversations, sharing some of my observations about concertos, notions and intimations, enthusiasms and, I hope, insights.

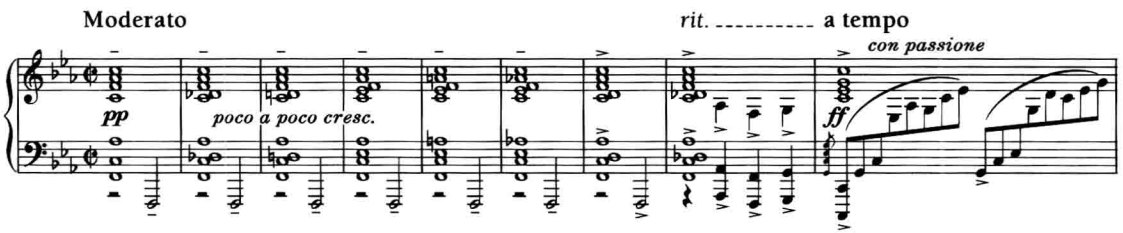
As for the title "Getting Started," that emerged from a conversation with a friend who is a composer. Composers must inspire gratitude, respect, also some apprehension. In *Through the Looking Glass,* Tweedledee tells Alice, when she hears the Red King snoring, that he is dreaming about her, and that if he were to wake up she would "go out—bang!—just like a candle." Well, a musicologist is an Alice in some composer's dream. Therefore when I asked my friend if he would

tell me about his experiences with a concerto he had recently written, I was far from just making conversation. I was attending to his every word. His brow furrowed. "The first problem," he confided, "is how to start the sucker." So if that is the first problem for the composer, I thought, it should be the first topic for our conversations.

Who, then, starts a concerto? The composer: or if that answer is too pat, the commissioning agency or patron. But who starts it when it's actually played and heard, at a concert?

My first concerto was when I was thirteen years old; we had seats, I remember, all the way up in the gods at the Albert Hall. Two men walked out onto the stage, and one of them I can still see, looking down from the heights: a very big man, with a very special gait. The other man is smaller, has a little beard, and carries a baton. Applause, a pause. The first man sits down at the piano and the other takes his place in front of the orchestra. Which one is going to play first?

You would not believe me if I said I remember asking myself that question: you would not believe me, and you would be right. But I do remember, will never forget, what happened next:



The music examples in this book—the rest of them are placed at the back—sometimes show the exact music referred to, as here, and sometimes provide merely cues or outlines for longer sections. Extended examples in music

notation are provided mainly for Lecture 6. At the lectures themselves, of course, sound recordings were used—and whenever practicable, videos, in this case a performance by Andrei Gavrilov with the New York Philharmonic under Vladimir Ashkenazy, filmed in Moscow.

To make my point I could have played a record made by Rachmaninoff himself, not so very long after he played in that memorable concert. I always preferred to use videos, however, as a way of bringing home the fact that concertos are viewed, *witnessed as well as heard. Concertos not only bring dissimilar musical forces into play, they also enact scenes of human activity. Men and women and groups are brought into conjunction, cooperation, confrontation. Hence the common tendency to personify the solo and the orchestra in concertos—as conversationalists, as debaters, as antagonists, as Orpheus and the Furies.*

What that child heard and saw and responded to was in fact a rather sophisticated means for getting started, rather unusual for a concerto. The solo instrument plays what is palpably an introduction to something else coming in the orchestra. I still feel that the introduction to Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto (the conductor was Sir Henry Wood) is so impressive—nay, so shattering—that the obvious question "introduction to *what*?" hardly has time to register with an audience. The answer is a long melody played by the band, and I wish that this adult could feel entirely confident that the melody really holds up to its introduction. An individual is inherently more glamorous and attractive than a group, and given its head a solo instrument will tend to upstage an orchestra, like a child actor in the theater. Rachmaninoff avoids this, perhaps, by means of piano figuration during the orchestral melody that mostly churns away below, occasionally splashing over the top: a restless solo backdrop to the melody's morose orchestral sound and its almost surly affect. Rachmaninoff does the same thing near the beginning of his Third Piano Concerto.

Plate 1. Rachmaninoff, Piano Concerto No. 2: Andrei Gavrilov with Vladimir Ashkenazy and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

That anticlimax is a real danger in such situations is shown in what must be the longest of all solo introductions, by Camille Saint-Saëns in his Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor. The opening ploy here is a rambling improvisational solo toccata in the style of Bach (or Bach-Busoni, or Bach-Siloti); during this the whispered question "introduction to *what?*" gets louder and louder, becomes clamorous, and toward the end threatens to muffle the piano entirely. The epigrammatic orchestral outburst that follows is loud enough, but does it have the requisite power, dignity, and distinction? Perhaps it makes sense in terms of the rest of the piece—starting with the next and rather surprising order of business, a piano nocturne—but whether in itself it justifies the long introduction is a real question. **Example 2**

Anticlimax should not be an issue when a concerto introduction is played by the orchestra, introducing the solo. As a natural attention-grabber, a solo instrument thrives on promotion or boosts of any kind. The Chaikovsky[1] Violin Concerto begins with a quiet pair of orchestral phrases, bland and workaday in construction, harmony, rhythm, and all the rest. A drum roll, "action" music: this shoots up to a breathless fortissimo in just a few seconds and then subsides expectantly, just as quickly. Given the buildup it has received, the solo can now enter like a prima donna with a flourish, a pirouette, and a self-serving mini-cadenza before singing the aria that she was called in for in the first place, presumably. When the violin melody starts up, accompanied by pizzicato strings, like a big guitar, we feel we are right at home in the world of *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Luisa Miller.* **Example 3**

Making use of an introduction is, as I have already indicated, rather the exception as a launching-device. More common is the direct approach: bring the solo in right away with melody. The Schoenberg Piano Concerto is a beautiful example. Another is Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major. Shostakovich jump-starts both of his Cello Concertos in this manner.

Actually, it is more usual—more conventional—for the orchestra to acknowledge the solo by means of a discreet cough, before retiring to its stance as accompanist: as in the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto, or Bartók's Piano Concerto No. 3, or Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3. Or a cough and a sigh, as in Benjamin Britten's Violin Concerto, Opus 15, from 1939. Three coughs and three sighs, actually. **Example 4**

Presenting a tune up front to start a concerto is a sure way for the solo to make an impact, though obviously not the only way. The solo can establish itself more than adequately by simply laying down a special texture. The tune at the beginning of Ravel's Piano Concerto in G is in the piccolo, but the solo with its shimmering figuration could hardly ask for a more effective entrance. And the same can be said of the absolutely best-known of all concerto incipits, that of the Chaikovsky Piano Concerto. The piano chords that crash in after four bars may or may not constitute what is usually thought of as a texture, but they certainly introduce a marvelous sonority. One gets to the point where those invincible ringing chords block out, if they do not drown out, the great tune in the strings. In a stroke, Chaikovsky has given the piano an edge it will never lose throughout the whole of this relatively contentious composition. **Example 5** **Example 6**

Let me take a moment to make a number of small points about this familiar opening that I think may be instructive, though it's not certain they will all advance our conversation about getting started.

1. Chaikovsky found the chords (they are D-flat triads) in the midst of Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 2 in A major, at an important forceful passage marked Allegro deciso. The chords sweep up more brilliantly, twice as many in each bar. Where Liszt is ecstatic, or frenetic, depending on your point of view, Chaikovsky is majestic, spacing out the chords to let them ring better, and exploiting the instrument's range more powerfully.

2. Although that ringing piano sonority would have been impossible without the technology of Messrs. Steinway & Sons in the 1850s, it also owes a lot to a harmonic ploy by the composer that is as simple as it is potent. Starting out stressfully in a minor key, Chaikovsky dispels the cloud with a quick modulation moving to a bright new major key exactly when the piano enters.

3. The model for this complex was Liszt's other concerto, No. 1 in E-flat, where again the solo enters after an orchestral outburst that modulates at once to a new key. Liszt's piano does not accept this key; on the contrary, it switches back to the original key, the opposite of Chaikovsky's procedure. Instead of assenting, the solo here demurs, and when the modulation takes place it is to a new key mutually agreed upon (see Track 8, 0:23).

4. Those marvelous piano chords were a later revision. Originally Chaikovsky wrote them all rolled, or arpeggiated (the arpeggios are easily viewed in the Dover edition—which astonishingly gives no indication that they represent a discarded early version). Bless him for changing it.

5. Returning to the issue of anticlimax already raised in connection with Saint-Saëns and Rachmaninoff: especially after the revision, the sequel represents, in my apprehension, a letdown. When the tune is over and the piano replays it, with the chords transferred to pizzicato strings, the chords lack the éclat of the piano chords, obviously, and the twitchy *acciaccatura* rhythms in the piano more or less concede that fat piano chords are no match for a string orchestra when it comes to projecting effusive melody. The piano cuts its losses, fails to finish the tune, and drifts into a rather petulant cadenza instead.

In order to carry this passage off pianists often have recourse to heavy over-articulation, with a consequent loss of dignity that is regrettable, and probably irreversible. Tovey could have had this very place in mind

when he inveighed against "the ordinary tendency [in piano concertos] to exploit the instrument in voluminous harmony which emulates the orchestra without achieving any character of its own."[2]

All the music mentioned up to this point has come from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Composers in this era, the greatest era of the concerto, found endless other ways of getting started, as one hardly needs to say. Saint-Saëns, for example, a composer who would try anything, wrote ten concertos and several concerto-like shorter compositions, and not many of them introduce the solo instrument in the same way. Most orthodox is his Cello Concerto in A minor, one of his best works; this begins with a rhapsodic solo melody à la Mendelssohn, after a tiny orchestral preface that is less like a discreet cough than a starting gun. (The treatment of the tutti in the continuation smooths over a dull spot in the Mendelssohn, if one may say so without sacrilege.) Of the five piano concertos by Saint-Saëns, No. 2 has a long *solo* introduction to an *orchestral* theme, as already noted, whereas No. 3 has a long *orchestral* introduction to a *solo* theme, the introduction overlaid with a mysterious texture of piano arpeggios. No. 1 starts with a lengthy dialogue between piano and French horns *alla caccia* that is calculated to make Brahmsians cringe, and not only Brahmsians.

And Saint-Saëns' Piano Concerto No. 4 in C minor starts with a full-fledged orchestral melody—not with an orchestral introduction, like the Chaikovsky Violin Concerto and his own previous piano concerto, but with orchestral exposition of functional musical material. "Functional" is the key term here. The motifs of Chaikovsky's introduction drop out of the piece after they have done their advance work for the solo. Saint-Saëns' orchestral melody plays a major role in each of the work's two composite movements, generating formal variations in the first movement and serving as a sort of trio in the second.

Orchestral exposition of functional musical material: actually this is not all that common in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century concerto launchings, though every music lover will think of his or her favorites: Piano Concerto No. 1 by Edward MacDowell, No. 2 by Liszt, No. 3 by Prokofiev. I am disinclined to count the last two concertos discussed above in this category, as exposition of functional material by the orchestra. In Liszt No. 1, first of all, exposition is shared in the deepest sense between orchestra and solo; this a dialogue opening, a type that I shall return to in a later lecture. And the Chaikovsky is about piano sonority, not string melody. After the opening tune is heard two and a half times it disappears, notoriously, forever.

But one also thinks of Brahms: the Violin Concerto, the First Piano Concerto. Brahms, of course, does count; and of course Brahms was reviving the eighteenth-century concerto ritornello. So his concertos start with very substantial expository statements by the orchestra. Of all his many classicizing projects, this was perhaps the most extreme and the most obdurate; and the ritornello was not the only peculiarity of the early concerto that Brahms went back to, as we shall see. We need to have a look at opening orchestral ritornellos in early concertos, models for Brahms in the most general sense, and especially at solo entries in those concertos.

Coming to the ritornello historically backwards in this way may have the effect of defamiliarizing something that musicians probably take too much for granted. Coldly considered, from a naive standpoint, if such a thing can be posited for a moment, the ritornello convention seems rather odd, and in its later manifestations even counterintuitive. In an age of instant gratification, it seems odd to leave the greatest plum, the solo instrument, waiting in the wings, stewing while the orchestra struts.

Still, the concerto in the eighteenth century certainly appears much more stable and unproblematic than in later times. The problems and the options that have been mooted in connection with nineteenth-century concertos, the uncertainties, the discretions and the indiscretions, the excitements and the dangers: all recede if they do not simply vanish. Vivaldi's brow never furrowed when he stared at that big white first page, with its staves preruled by a special five-nibbed pen, called a rastrum, by one of the musical girls at the Ospedale della Pietà in Venice. Vivaldi could compose an opera in five days. Vivaldi boasted that he could think up music faster than he could write it down. No doubt Mozart took longer, had to think harder. Yet Mozart as a concerto composer was closer to Vivaldi than to Saint-Saëns, and one reason is that for him, as for Vivaldi, the premise for getting started was a ritornello. The ritornello held fast to its function all through the global change in style and mood that occurred between the early and the late eighteenth century, through everything that separates Baroque music from Classical.

That function was never one of introduction. Neither the Classical nor the Baroque ritornello, for all their differences in style and form, sounds like a nineteenth-century orchestral introduction whipping up enthusiasm for the entrance of the solo instrument (as in the Chaikovsky Violin Concerto). While the ritornello unquestionably prepares the way for the solo, it does this by means of indispensable expository work of its own. It has further work to do on the architecture of the movement that it initiates; the word "ritornello," from *ritorno,* responds to the ritornello's basic agency in the form—to provide punctuation and closure. The ritornello or part of it needs to return at various points of the movement and at the end. This is true of Vivaldi and also of Mozart; it is still true with some modifications of Beethoven; and it is true again of Brahms.

As far as getting started is concerned, both at the actual start of the piece and also at the important, indeed crucial point where the orchestra stops and the solo enters, Vivaldi had no discernible problem. He had a highly efficient template for ritornellos and solo sections (which is not to say that Vivaldi holds scrupulously to these templates. If you write 900 concerto movements, template or not you will still produce a great number of exceptional pieces—and sure enough, there they are in your CD collection). The ritornello of a serious Baroque concerto is described in great detail—indeed, prescribed—in a much-cited treatise by Johann Joachim Quantz, one of many northerners, Bach being the most illustrious, who picked up on Vivaldi's practice (and also his facility: Quantz wrote over 300 concertos for flute). A concerto requires, says Quantz, "a magnificent ritornello at the beginning, which should be more harmonic than melodic, more serious than humorous, and relieved by unisons . . . There should be a pleasing and intelligible melody . . . the harmony changing, not with the eighth or quarter bars, but with half or full bars."[3] (Employing a slow harmonic rhythm, in today's language.) After which the solo enters with minimal accompaniment, displaying various facets of its capability and virtuosity.

In the Classical concerto, the solo does not enter after the ritornello with virtuoso display. It generally plays the first theme from the beginning of the ritornello. One means by which the ritornello has prepared for the solo has been by rehearsing that theme; when the solo plays it we attend less to the melody, which we already know, than to the new sonority. In particular, we hear and gauge the solo entry in reference to the opening of the ritornello. This may be called a *reciprocal* entry, as opposed to a *polar* entry as in Vivaldi. There are some wonderful exceptions among Mozart's thirty-odd concertos . . . and the Sinfonia Concertante for Violin and Viola, K. 365, which Charles Rosen has written about so luminously[4] . . . but the reciprocal solo entry is Mozart's rule.

Polarity and reciprocity can be seen in general terms as concerto principles, an idea I will develop later. Writing large-scale, impressive works that he would play himself at his benefit concerts, or *Akademien*, Mozart devised ritornellos that are three or four times as long as Vivaldi's, with a great variety of themes. Most beautiful of all is the last of the series, No. 27 in B-flat, K. 595, of 1791. The beginning of the ritornello is extraordinary in this piece, and the solo entry ordinary: almost too ordinary, suspiciously so. At the beginning, the one-bar preface in the lower strings—that quietly pulsing tonic chord before the violins play the first theme—gives the theme an aura unlike that of any other concerto of the time (and quite unlike the G-minor Symphony, despite the similarity in technical terms). This concerto starts not with a discreet cough or a sigh, but with an almost submusical rustle (Example 7a). Mozart's effect of mediation between musical sound and the sonic void has been repeated in such familiar later works as the Sibelius Violin Concerto and the First Violin Concerto by Prokofiev (Track 9).

Example 7

But the piano entrance of the theme in K. 595, predictably reciprocal, lacks the one-bar preface, lacks the aura. Though it does have a few added ornaments, the total effect is—dare I say weak? You might prefer to say *weich*, and perhaps Mozart would too: my German dictionary translates *weich* as "soft, tender, smooth, mellow, delicate," and only secondarily as "effeminate, weak." Mozart, with a new harmonic detail, deliberately softens this solo entry, makes it more *weich*. Beautifully sensitive to the variation, the original pointed woodwind fanfare responds by withdrawing to the quiet strings (Example 7b).

Beethoven, I feel sure, would have said weak, *schwach*.

It is clear that from his earliest years (Beethoven wrote a piano concerto at age fourteen) this composer was uneasy with Classical concerto

form, and not without cause. Accounts of his problems and innovations in this area abound in the Beethoven literature. The *Beethoven Compendium* of 1991 tells it differently than *The Beethoven Companion* of 1971, Robert Simpson contradicts Donald Tovey, and I will spare you my own version of what is by now a classic tale in musicology. Among other things, Beethoven resisted the idea of having the solo enter playing the first theme more or less as the orchestra had played it originally. Simple reciprocity at this point was too tame for him, too Classical.

The solo should make more of an effect—especially in piano concertos, where Beethoven was doing the playing himself. In Piano Concertos Nos. 1, 2, and 4 and in the juvenile effort, the reciprocal solo entry is evaded. In the Fifth Concerto it is transformed, and in the Third it is transcended. Let us listen to this latter work more closely: Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Opus 37.

The C-minor Concerto opens with a quiet (but already tense) march-like theme that is later pressed into service as the ritornello's final cadential gesture. As such the theme is now presented fortissimo and in canon. Beethoven's original *cupo voce* becomes a rough, insistent shout [3.05]. Track 1

He had already done something of this kind in his First Piano Concerto, in C major, Opus 15; and back of this lies the popular Mozart concerto in the same key, No. 21, K. 467. With Mozart, revealingly, this forceful canonic statement at the end of the ritornello seems to warn the soloist off: after a show of spirit in a little cadenza, the piano gracefully falls back into a long trill, below which the theme appears once again, quietly, in the orchestra. In the ritornello of Beethoven's Third, the arrival of the theme in its new angry guise feels like a challenge to the soloist. For Beethoven does another unusual thing: he writes a very heavy stop with a fermata at the point of cadence. High