

Schnittke's Concerto Grosso No. 1

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Alfred Schnittke's Concerto Grosso No. 1 (1977), composed at the height of his "polystylistic" period, is filled with diverse musical materials. The 28-minute piece is divided into six movements combining different musical genres, styles, and sonorities. As musicologist Maria Bergamo describes, "The musical ideas, the themes and motives of the work are linked in all six movements, gaining new interpretations and aspects by varied treatment and paraphrases." [1] For this Amazing Moment in Timbre, I will describe the interaction of timbres in the second movement, the Toccata, focusing on two main timbral features: sound mass and textural integrations.

As soon as the Toccata begins, we hear a fast baroque piece played by two solo violins. But as the music progresses, the atmosphere changes discreetly to become a kind of sound mass. The entries of the twelve other violins are gradual and almost unnoticeable, so it is hard to know how many violins there are. The texture becomes so dense and complex that we hear just one single musical entity, with a sonic result comparable to a swarm of bees. All of the violins play the same melodic pattern, but their entries are separated by one eighth note, creating a kind of heterophony reminiscent of Ligeti's micropolyphony. A main compositional strategy of the piece is the alternation between basic musical ideas and their transformations modified to an unexpected extent, creating two contrasting worlds. This is exactly what happens in this excerpt, passing from a baroque duo to an elaborated sound-mass. (Excerpt 5:03 to 5:26)

Later in the piece, at two measures before rehearsal mark 3, the two soli violins playing descending and ascending arpeggios in sixteenth notes are in the musical foreground, alternating with a sound mass in the tutti strings. The harpsichord plays descending arpeggios in eighth notes matching selected pitches of the soli violins. This creates a textural integration in which the harpsichord augments the violin duo's timbre. We could also consider this a timbral augmentation. [2] The harpsichord merges with the violins and highlights their sound with a slight touch of a different timbre and resonance. This instrument has a unique timbre that can be considered harsh and nasal, but that can also embody a magical and sparkling effect. In this excerpt, it adds a fairylike character to the timbre of the violins. The ringing plucked notes of the harpsichord also add a degree of resonance and sustain to the violins' sound. (Excerpt from 5:29-5:51)

These timbral features of sound mass and textural integration reappear frequently and alternate throughout the rest of the Toccata. There is also frequent interweaving of contrasting worlds, with tonal passages followed by microtonal or polytonal musical answers and transformations. The other movements of this work abound with interesting timbral features, including additional sound-mass textures and the integration of an amplified prepared piano.

1

The image displays a musical score for Violins I and II. At the top, a box containing the number '1' indicates the start of a section. The score is organized into two systems. The first system, labeled 'VI. I', contains two solo parts (VI. 1^o and VI. 2^o) and six staves (1-6). The second system, labeled 'VI. II', also contains two solo parts and six staves (1-6). The solo parts feature complex rhythmic patterns with slurs and dynamic markings of *p*. The six staves in each system play a similar rhythmic pattern starting with a *pp* dynamic marking. The notation includes various note values, rests, and articulation marks.

Audio: <https://tinyurl.com/2xzdmdb>

The image displays a page of a musical score. At the top, it is labeled "VI. 1^o solo" and "VI. 2^o solo" for the first two staves, both marked with a forte (*f*) dynamic. A circled number "3" is positioned above the first staff. Below these is the "Cemb" (Cymbal) part, also marked *f*. The middle section contains two systems of six staves each, labeled "VI. I" and "VI. II", representing the first and second violins. These parts are marked with a pianissimo (*pp*) dynamic. At the bottom, there are staves for "Vle. 3" (Viola 3), "Vle. 4" (Viola 4), and "Vc." (Violoncello), with two staves for each instrument.

Audio: <https://tinyurl.com/y36pxvjb>

Works Cited

[1] Maria Bergamo, Preface to score of Alfred Schnittke's Concerto Grosso No.1. Vienna: Universal Edition, 1977.

[2] Moe Touizrar and Stephen McAdams. "Perceptual aspects of the orchestration in The Angel of Death by Roger Reynolds: Timbre and auditory grouping." In Philippe Lalitte (ed.), *Analyse musicale et perception. Actes des Journées d'Analyse Musicale 2016*, Editions universitaires de Dijon, 2020.