The Late-Romantic Piano Concerto Finale: A Stylistic and Structural Analysis

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Although the concerto has remained one of the most popular genres, it has received somewhat less attention from scholars than other types of instrumental works, including the symphony, sonata, and string quartet. The present study attempts to fill several significant gaps in the scholarly literature on the concerto and to lay a firm foundation for future investigations of this genre.

The present project was undertaken in two stages. First, a catalogue of late-romantic piano concertos was compiled to determine the breadth of the repertory. Altogether, 494 works titled “concerto” and dating from between 1850-1920 were identified. Information on these concertos (keys, dates of composition, etc.) is presented in Appendix A. Further research revealed that a surprisingly large portion of the repertory (20%) had been recorded. A discography, including both commercial phonodiscs and recordings in private archives, is presented in Appendix B.

The second stage of research, constituting the main body of text, focused on the finales of approximately 150 late-romantic piano concertos. The last movements of these works were emphasized for several reasons: 1) finales have tended to be neglected in the scholarly literature; 2) these movements are often the most problematical for their composers and the most fascinating to study; and 3) they tend to reflect new trends and changes in tastes more rapidly than other movements. The eight chapters of this study are organized into two groups. Chapters 1 and 2 provide a general framework for a discussion of finales: considered are changes in the conception of the last movement during the Classic and Romantic periods, and the problems that these conclusions have posed to many composers. Chapters 3-8, in contrast, focus more specifically on the finales of late-romantic piano concertos. These chapters highlight the following aspects: (3) melody, (4) rhythm, (5) harmony, (6) texture and dynamics, (7) instrumentation, orchestration, and piano writing, and (8) structure. Chapter 8 features, as a supplement, measure-by-measure analyses of ninety-four finales, including those of “warhorses” such as Tchaikovsky’s Op. 23, and of many other works (e.g. Beach’s Op. 45) that would make a welcomed addition to the “standard repertory.”

In many ways, late-romantic concertos reflect important trends in nineteenth-century music. One finds, for example, ample evidence of the growing interest in nationalistic and exotic musical styles, and the new concern with unifying large-scale structures via
cyclicism, and of shifting the climax of multimovement cycles from the first or second movement to nearer the end. Many late-romantic concertos also reflect the society for which they were conceived. In a sense, Saint-Saëns’s Second Concerto captures the frivolity of the Second Empire, just as Busoni’s Op. 39 mirrors the Wilhelmian giganticism evident in contemporaneous architecture. Furthermore, the great variety in late-romantic finales reflects the diversity of the age while the problem of the finale symbolizes the striving for the unattainable so prominent in Romantic thought and art.