

Dynamics of Vivaldi:
Recorder Concerto in C Major, RV 443

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The Italian composer, Antonio Vivaldi, is one of the most prolific composers of the concerto during the baroque time period.¹ Though he is mostly known for his four movement violin concerto, “Four Seasons,” he has also written numerous concertos for many other instruments besides his specialties, the violin and the viola. After his death in 1741 his music went unplayed and seemingly disappeared from the performance world until the twentieth century when his music was revived and studied.² Today, playing Vivaldi’s music requires a knowledge of ‘Vivaldian’ performance practices and baroque dynamics due to the lack of notation. This paper will focus on Vivaldi’s lack of dynamic markings and how to incorporate the appropriate baroque dynamics, like terraced, lozenge, and phrase arching dynamics, into his “Recorder Concerto in C major, RV 443,” written between 1728 to 1729.

The most well-known dynamic technique of the baroque time period is terraced dynamics. As the baroque period is well known for its dramatic and exaggerated flamboyancy, the dramatic difference between piano and forte dynamics with no inbetween is quite fitting. However, its usage is more likely due to the large incorporation of the harpsichord into most music of this time period. The harpsichord had only two dynamics - a soft piano and a loud forte - with no inbetween and it usually aided in the basso continuo.³ Because of this, composers had to work around this problem, particularly by increasing the instrumentation for louder parts and decreasing the instrumentation for quieter parts. While the baroque recorder has more dynamic range, especially in terms of crescendos and decrescendos, the lower notes often have difficult

¹ Steven Zohn, “The Baroque Concerto in Theory and Practice,” *The Journal of Musicology* 26, no.4 (2009): 337.

² Miles Dayton Fish, “Discovering the Rediscovery of Antonio Vivaldi,” *The Choral Journal* 55, no.10 (2015): 20.

³ George A. Kochevitsky, “Performing Bach’s Keyboard Music: Dynamic A Postscript”. *Bach* 7, no. 1 (1976): 3.

time speaking.⁴ This is similar to most instruments, even on more modern acoustic instruments where the higher register seems to be louder and cut through sound more. This also contributes to why many composers, like Vivaldi, used terraced dynamics - because many instruments of that time period work best with that dynamic usage.

However, that reasoning is not agreed upon by all scholars equally. Most do agree that terraced dynamics were common practice in the baroque era, but with disagreements as to why they became common practice. In Nuemann's book, *Performance Practices of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, he states that, "the polyphonic textures of the middle and late Baroque were neither receptive to, nor in need of, long-breathed swellings and taperings."⁵ Neumann seemed to believe that the music simply did not allow for anything but terraced dynamics. This correlates strongly with the reasoning stated previously in the context of the harpsichord and other instruments that have a limited ability to participate in crescendos and decrescendos.⁶ Dorottya Fabian seemed to agree with the use of terraced dynamics but for different reasons than Nuemann. In Fabian's book, *Analysis of Performance Features*, he mentions that terraced dynamics were likely observed by many as to create a sense of "uniformity of interpretation."⁷ Terraced dynamics likely were used because of both how the music was written and because it was the style of the day. Just as there is an "in" sound in today's music, there was an "in" sound of the baroque period which Vivaldi would have been subject to.

The following shows an example of terraced dynamics in measures thirteen through twenty of the first movement where the ensemble shifts from loud to soft by means of cutting out

⁴Christopher Ball, "Renaissance and Baroque Recorders: Choosing an Instrument" *Early Music* 3, no. 1 (1975): 11.

⁵Fredrick Neumann, *Performance Practices of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Schirmer Reference, 1993), 162.

⁶George A. Kochevitsky, "Performing Bach's Keyboard Music: Dynamic A Postscript". *Bach* 7, no. 1 (1976): 3.

⁷Dorottya Fabian, *Analysis of Performance Features*, 1st ed. (Open Book Publishers, 2015), 193.

the other players in order for the recorder to be heard. The recorder would continue to play at a forte volume whereas the rest of the ensemble would drop to a piano volume at measure nineteen as they begin playing the downbeats.

The image displays a musical score excerpt for Vivaldi's Recorder Concerto RV 443, covering measures 13 through 17. The score is written for five instruments: Recorder (treble clef), Violin I (treble clef), Violin II (treble clef), Bassoon (bass clef), and Bass Continuo (bass clef). The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 4/4. The excerpt illustrates a dynamic shift where the recorder plays forte while the ensemble plays piano.

Another example of terraced dynamics in Vivaldi's Recorder Concerto RV 443 is shown in the excerpt below. The last ten measures of the third movement shown below is when the recorder finished it's last solo passage and the ensemble all joins back in again to play the A section theme of the third movement. In measures sixty-nine and seventy the basso continuo plays at a soft piano underneath the recorder. Immediately, everyone re-enters in measure seventy-three at a full forte. The ensemble finishes the piece with no fluctuation in dynamic, finishing the piece at the forte dynamic.

69

Musical score for measures 69-70. The score is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It features a piano accompaniment with a steady eighth-note bass line in the left hand and a more complex eighth-note pattern in the right hand. The melody in the upper staff begins with a quarter rest followed by a series of eighth notes, ending with a trill (tr) on the final note.

71

Musical score for measures 71-72. The piano accompaniment continues with eighth-note patterns. The melody in the upper staff consists of quarter notes with trills (tr) on the first and third notes of each measure.

73

Musical score for measures 73-74. The piano accompaniment features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes. The melody in the upper staff includes trills (tr) on the first notes of the first two measures.

75

Musical score for measures 75-78. The piano accompaniment continues with eighth-note patterns. The melody in the upper staff consists of eighth notes, ending with a quarter rest in the final measure.

It is important to not take terraced dynamics to the extreme, especially in the case of Vivaldi's Recorder Concerto where he has not marked how to incorporate any dynamics. In Donnington's article, "Lozenge Dynamics," he calls out that in "pursuit of authenticity" many have made a "blanket restriction" which begins to have an inauthentic sound. He believes terraced dynamics have a place and "remains a useful conception" but should not be overdone.⁸ He seems to be in favor of lozenge dynamics, which is a style that includes starting soft, growing louder, and then decrescendo back into the soft dynamic on long notes.⁹ This is seemingly the most modern take on dynamics. Swelling on a sustained note is a common practice of today that shows a sense of musicality and adds interest to a note that otherwise could become rather monotonous.

The best example of this can be seen in movement two, measure six through thirteen. In these measures, shown below, the recorder is playing a beautiful melody overtop of the viola and violins long held notes with the basso continuo keeping a pulse underneath. In these measures the viola and violins should use lozenge dynamics to add swells and interest to their drawn out notes. This creates a layer of interest and movement underneath the already moving soloist line.

⁸ Robert Donington, "Lozenge Dynamics" *The Musical Times* 122, no. 1661 (1981): 444.

⁹ Donington, "Lozenge Dynamics" 444.

The image shows a musical score excerpt for two measures, 8 and 9. The music is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The top staff is the recorder part, which plays a fast sixteenth-note scale. The bottom three staves represent the ensemble accompaniment, consisting of a violin, a viola, and a cello/bass. The ensemble plays sustained notes that change every two measures. In measure 8, the ensemble notes are G4, B3, and D3. In measure 9, they are A4, C4, and E3. The recorder part in measure 8 starts on G4 and ascends to G5, while in measure 9 it descends from G5 back to G4.

Another example of lozenge dynamics begins at measure 136 of movement one. Shown in the excerpt below we can see where using lozenge dynamics would seemingly be appropriate. As the recorder continues to play fast sixteenth notes up and down the scale the accompanying ensemble starts playing long sustained notes. The ensemble and soloist would start soft and then grow louder as the recorder reaches its highest notes in measure 139. The ensemble would then begin a decrescendo to measure 141 where the viola ends its sustained note. At this point the accompanying ensemble could give a slight crescendo into the half cadence at measure 142 and begin its forte in measure 143 where the return to a more strict take on terraced dynamics would replace the use of lozenge dynamics. This would work perfectly here, however, phrase arching would be the better option.

136

139

142

As mentioned previously, the lower notes of the recorder are the weakest, thus creating a natural dynamic difference between high register and low register notes.¹⁰ This lends itself well to the baroque style of phrase-arching. This technique focuses primarily on phrasing and the use of dynamics to showcase the ebb and flow of the music. Phrase arching, as Fabian Dorottya puts it, is when “a performer plays louder and faster as they progress towards the middle of the phrase

¹⁰ Christopher Ball, “Renaissance and Baroque Recorders: Choosing an Instrument” *Early Music* 3, no. 1 (1975): 11.

and then softer and slower as they conclude it.”¹¹ This technique not only involves the usage of crescendos and decrescendos but also the fluctuation of time. Though the time is shifting, all players must continue to play in time. This seems very similar to lozenge dynamics, however, there are times when they should not be used interchangeably.

In the example above, we can apply this technique of phrase arching with the dynamics primarily being led by the viola and violins as they hold the sustained notes. The recorder would follow the dynamics, but be in control of pushing the tempo. Again, at measure 139, the ensemble would reach its peak volume and then decrescendo as they slow down, this time with the violins controlling the ritard into measure 141 where the ensemble would crescendo and accelerando again into the next measure at the half cadence. Like mentioned before, there should be a return to forte with terraced dynamics at measure 143 where the whole ensemble begins again playing the first movement A section theme. Phrase arching would suit this section best over lozenge dynamics, which still would be appropriate for this section, because the phrase arching creates much more anticipation and a lead into the half cadence at measure 143. Half cadences often carry a lot of tension, and in this case, the half cadence has a very strong pull back into the theme. Lozenge dynamics, though very similar to phrase arching in its fluctuation from soft to loud to soft again, is much better for swelling that occurs in the middle of sections that occur underneath the soloist or as a whole ensemble that provide interest to sustained notes.

Another example of phrase arching can be seen in the excerpt taken from movement one shown below when the recorder is playing arpeggios up and down. The lowest notes will naturally sound quieter, while the notes at the top of each arpeggio will sound higher. Considering each chord a phrase shows two beat phrase arching in the recorder's part. As the recorder speeds up, the most important thing is to land back on the down beat of each measure.

¹¹ Dorottya Fabian, *Analysis of Performance Features*, 1st ed. (Open Book Publishers, 2015), 193.

This would mean that as the recorder is approaching the highest notes at the top of an arpeggio at the end of each measure, the soloist will give a slight pause on the top note so as to give a consistent and clear down beat to be played with the viola and for the violins to enter on the ‘and’ of beat one.

The image shows two systems of musical notation. The first system, starting at measure 58, shows a recorder part with a repeating arpeggiated figure. The soloist part (violin) has quarter notes with a slight pause on the top note at the end of each measure. The viola part also has quarter notes. The bass line is mostly rests. The second system, starting at measure 61, shows a similar pattern but with a key signature change to F# major (one sharp) and a change in the recorder part's arpeggiated figure.

An interpretive eye and a knowledge of baroque dynamics is important to playing Vivaldi's music that are unmarked with dynamics. Terraced dynamics, though referenced commonly and most often by scholars and baroque theorists, should not be the only dynamic tactic used. Vivaldi, and many other composers of the baroque used other dynamics practices like phrase arching and lozenge dynamics. It is important to apply these ideas to baroque music in order to play them century accurate that will create a musical experience close to what would have been experienced and intended by Vivaldi during his lifetime.

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