



Vivaldi: Concerto in D minor, Op. 3 No. 11 (for component 3: Appraising)

Background information and performance circumstances

Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741) was a leading Italian composer of the **Baroque** period. He was a contemporary of the great German-born composers J.S. Bach and Handel. Vivaldi was a **virtuoso** violinist and he would have been the soloist in many of the first performances of his works. He was born in Venice and spent most of his working life there. He wrote church music and more than 40 operas, though he is best known today for his music for string orchestra, including his *Four Seasons* set of concertos for solo violin and orchestra.

In 1703 Vivaldi was appointed as violinist at the Ospedale della Pietà, an orphanage in Venice. He eventually became the musical director and worked there on and off for over 30 years. He developed a renowned orchestra for the orphaned girls. It is thought that the orchestra performed in an inner courtyard upstairs behind screens, while the audience of well-to-do Venetians listened below.

His first two published sets of instrumental music were trio sonatas (works for two violins and continuo). His opus 3 set of 12 concertos, published in Amsterdam in 1711, established his reputation across Europe. Bach arranged several of the concertos, some for harpsichord and orchestra and others for solo organ.

The opus 3 set was given the name *L'Estro Armonico (Harmonic Inspiration)*. Earlier sets of concertos, such as those of the great Italian master Corelli, had all been for the standard **concerto grosso** format of a trio sonata group with string orchestra and continuo. This new set helped establish the new idea of the solo violin concerto, but it was also experimental in its instrumentation in other ways. One of the finest is the concerto in B minor for four violins, cello and strings. There are also concertos for two violins and strings, as well as the combination used in concerto no. 11 (see below).

Instrumentation

The Concerto in D minor Op. 3 No. 11 is written for a standard **trio sonata group** (two violins and cello), string orchestra and continuo. The **continuo** was the standard accompaniment in Baroque music. The actual instrumentation wasn't fixed. The cello was always part of it and there was a double bass in the orchestra. There would also have been one or more chordal

instruments such as a harpsichord, organ or lute. In general the organ would be used more for church concertos, though there was no hard and fast rule. In this Vivaldi concerto there could be two harpsichords, one for the solo (**concertino**) group and one for the **ripieno** (orchestral string group). Often the same player would be used for both. All the continuo players played from a bass line. The keyboard player or lutenist improvised chords based on the **figured bass** line. The figures were a shorthand system guiding the player as to which chords to use (see notes on harmony).

Some features of the instrumentation include:

- The cello part has **virtuoso** solo music, frequently breaking away from the continuo line (as in the end of the first section).
- Unusually the two solo violins play **unaccompanied** at the beginning of the piece.
- The **adagio** of the second movement is for tutti (all the players).
- The *adagio* is marked **spiccato**. This technique involves bouncing the bow off the string. It would only work for the quavers, not for the long notes, which would have been bowed normally. Not all orchestras use this technique in modern performances of this work.
- There is a **ritornello**-type instrumentation in the fugal section in the second movement. **Tutti** passages where the soloists **double** the orchestra parts alternate with passages for the three soloists and continuo.
- The solo sections in the central third movement leave out the solo cello entirely, and there is no continuo music. The bass line is played by a viola (this happens in the episodes of the last movement as well). Only the first solo violin has an important part in the *siciliano*.

Structure

In some ways the structure is old-fashioned compared to that of some of the other concertos of the set. Like the concerto movements of the earlier composer Corelli, the first movement of this concerto is broken up into short sections.

First mvt.	Introductory section for two unaccompanied solo violins, featuring canon (close imitation) and tonic pedals . This leads to an ending featuring solo cello and continuo, with descending and ascending sequences (bars 20–27).
Second mvt.	<p>Section 1 (bars 1–3)</p> <p>This tutti section lasts only three bars and consists entirely of chords.</p> <p>Section 2 (bars 4–73)</p>

	<p>This is fugal in character. The subject (bars 4–8) is played in the basso continuo part. There is a distinctive circle of fifths (bars 5–7). The answer in the violas (bars 8–12) is at the fifth above and is a real answer, that is, the intervals of the subject are retained. There is a countersubject in the basses (from bar 9). It features a sequence. The subject then returns in the second violins (bar 12). There is a second countersubject (a descending scale passage in sequence in the basses) (bar 13). This is followed by the answer (bar 16) in the first violins, making a four-part polyphonic texture.</p> <p>After a perfect cadence in the tonic key of D minor there is an episode for the three soloists with continuo accompaniment. There is a modulation to the dominant key of A minor (bar 31) for the next tutti passage, which quickly moves back to the tonic key. The descending semiquaver scales now become ascending scales (bar 37).</p> <p>The music modulates to G minor (subdominant) for the second solo episode beginning at bar 48.</p> <p>The final tutti begins at bar 56 in the tonic key. After two bars a long dominant pedal begins in the basses. This is marked tasto solo (i.e. the continuo player doesn't play chords – just the bass line).</p> <p>Rarely for this piece, this section has some dynamic marks with piano echo markings. Four bars from the end there is a short tonic pedal, leading to a tutti perfect cadence in the tonic key.</p>
Third mvt.	<p>The slow movement is in slow siciliano rhythm. The siciliano is a dance in compound time. Here Vivaldi uses compound quadruple metre (12/8). There are four dotted crotchet beats to the bar.</p> <p>It begins with a tutti passage with the theme in the first violins, with the violas playing in sixths below. The rest of the instruments play simple accompaniment figures. The key is the tonic key of D minor.</p>

	<p>After a perfect cadence (bar 3), the solo first violin continues with the theme, with slow <i>pianissimo</i> continuous quaver accompaniment in the rest of the violins, while the violas play the quaver bass line. There is no continuo.</p> <p>There are some unexpected chromatic harmonies and a short modulation to the remote key of F minor (mediant minor) (bar 9).</p> <p>The movement ends with a short (three and a half bar) tutti, back in D minor.</p>
<p>Fourth mvt.</p>	<p>The music of the fourth movement begins in the same way as the first – two solo unaccompanied violins in playful imitation. They rise in sequence, then fall together in thirds over a chromatically descending bass. Vivaldi continues to unify the structure of the concerto by resuming with a semiquaver cello solo as he did in the first movement. Again there is a circle of 5ths (bars 7–10). Isolated tutti chords accompany the solo cello.</p> <p>A brief tutti with chromatically descending bass (this time with repeated semiquavers) links to an episode for the three solo instruments (bar 14). The violins play in thirds.</p> <p>The first solo violin then takes over the continuous semiquaver idea, accompanied by the isolated tutti chords (bar 23), again over a circle of fifths. After a brief imitative passage for the two solo violins, there is a passage for solo violin with simple <i>pianissimo</i> continuous quaver accompaniment in the violin and viola parts – the same texture as in the third movement. The music moves to G minor (subdominant) and then returns to the tonic.</p> <p>At the next tutti (bar 43) there is brief imitation passed down through the parts and a perfect cadence in A minor (dominant). Solo and tutti sections alternate before an extended virtuosic first violin solo.</p> <p>A six-bar tutti closes the movement, using the familiar chromatically descending bass figure.</p>

Tonality

- The key is **D minor** and most of the music remains in the **tonic** key.
- The music **modulates** briefly to **closely related keys** such as **G minor (subdominant)** and **A minor (dominant)**.
- There are also occasional passages in more **remote keys**, such as **F minor** in the third movement.
- The music uses what is called **functional tonality** (where key relationships are built on a carefully controlled process of using related keys).

Harmony

- The music uses conventional **tonal harmonies**.
- The continuo chords use the standard Baroque shorthand **figured bass** system. No figure under a bass note indicated a root position chord. A figure '6' was short for 6_3 – a first inversion chord (technically a sixth and a third above the bass – though various doublings and octave transpositions were common), etc.
- **Seventh chords** are very common, especially in passages where there are circles of fifths (e.g. from the second bar of the fugue). The three-bar *adagio* in the second movement contains almost entirely seventh chords, all in **root position**. Most of the music in this *adagio* fits a **circle of fifths**. The bass moves in fifths downwards (E–A–D–G–C), before ending on the **dominant seventh** (A7) of the tonic key.
- There are occasional **seventh chords in first inversion**. These are marked 6_5 as at the end of the fugal movement. Also in third inversion, marked 4_2 .
- There are a few **diminished seventh chords**, as in the second bar of the third movement.
- **Suspensions** are common. There is a **chain of suspensions** in the final tutti passage of the finale. This passage is also an example of **chromaticism**, with a **chromatically descending bass line**.
- There is a long **dominant pedal** and shorter **tonic pedal** at the end of the fugue.
- There are **some secondary seventh chords**, such as the third last chord of the piece, which is a secondary seventh in first inversion with a third (ii7b)
- An example of II7b with the sharpened third can be found at the third chord from the end of the second movement (II7 \sharp b).
- The music is shaped by perfect cadences, such as the last two bars of the work.

Melody

- The opening of the concerto is based on **broken chords** (you could also use the term **triadic**) and **descending scales**.
- Many of the elaborate melody lines are **decorations** of scalar ideas (e.g. bar 16 in the first violin, where the scale A–G–F–E–D–C \sharp) is decorated with a series of **changing notes** (notes moving away then down by a third).

- **Sequence** is found everywhere in Vivaldi. It's one of the defining characteristics of his music. There's a **descending sequence** at the beginning of the first cello solo in the concerto (bars 20–25).
- There is a combination of **conjunct** (stepwise) music at the beginning of the fugue, followed by a series of **disjunct** leaps outlining the circle of fifths.
- There are **rising scales** in the bass line at bar 37 of the second movement
- The solo violin part in the third movement is mainly **conjunct** with some occasional **large leaps**, including **sevenths** (bar 4) and **diminished fifths** (bars 5–6). There are a number of **chromatic notes** in the melody here.

Texture

- The concerto begins with **two-part** writing for the two solo violins. They are **unaccompanied** and contain a continuous **tonic pedal** D, shared between the instruments. They play in two-part **canon** (exact **imitation**), first at a distance of a crotchet and later at the distance of a bar (bar 6).
- The central solo section of the middle movement shows standard **melody and accompaniment** texture. This type of texture is also often known as 'homophonic' texture (see below).
- **Homophonic** and homorhythmic (chordal) writing is found in, for instance, the *adagio* section of the second movement, where all instruments play (**tutti**).
- The **fugue** section at the end of the first movement, like all fugues, demonstrates **polyphonic** texture – several separate melodic lines simultaneously (you could use the term **contrapuntal** instead).
- It starts with a **subject** in the basses. Then the violas have the **imitation**, called the **answer**, while the cellos continue with the first of two **countersubjects**. When subject and answer have entered twice each, we have a **four-part** texture.
- The solo violins sometimes play in **thirds** in the fourth movement (bars 14–19).

Rhythm and metre

- A typical Vivaldi feature is the use of **continuous quavers** (as at the beginning) or **continuous semiquavers** in many of the solo passages, such as the first cello solo (bars 19–27).
- The first movement is in **simple triple time** (3/4).
- The second movement is in common time.
- There is occasional **syncopation** (e.g. at the end of the subject, just before the answer enters in the fugue in bar 7 in the second movement).
- The third movement is in **compound quadruple time**. It uses the typical **dotted rhythm** of the **siciliano** dance.
- The finale is in **common time** and begins on the **anacrusis** (up-beat).