

Concerto of the 17th century

Throughout the 17th century, the term “concerto” had several different meanings. At the beginning of the century, at mid-century, and by the third and fourth quarters of the century, the definition of concerto moved from a style to a genre, and eventually to the formal structure of certain works.

For the early 17th century, “concerto” was a term for a style that comprised contrasting characteristics: Gabrieli’s concerto motet *In Ecclesiis* and other vocal pieces. By about 1630, the instrumental portions of the sonata concertata became independent, having more or less the same characteristics as the Italian keyboard toccata and ensemble canzona: Marini’s sonata for violin and continuo, *La variata*. By the middle of the century, sonatas began to have fewer and increasingly longer sections. Its basic texture was that of a trio, comprising two soprano instruments and one bass instrument. There were two types of sonata in this period – sonata da chiesa and sonata da camera (church sonata and chamber sonata, respectively): Corelli’s sonata da camera and sonata da chiesa.

In Bologna at mid-century, there was a sonata con tromba tradition due to its trumpet guilds. The texture of a sonata con tromba consisted of a solo trumpet accompanied by strings. Torelli is one of the composers in this Bologna tradition. By 1700, the Bologna concerto tradition had been developed systematically. With a growing concern with form, Vivaldi began to structure concertos based on the refrain (tutti) and solo, and presented longer and systematic refrains. Vivaldi’s concertos have a clearer structure and a more predictable form: the ritornello form.

Bach added wind instruments to Vivaldi's concerto models. Bach adopted Vivaldi's concerto form, but soon changed it, adding different instrumentation and his own contrapuntal texture, as the Brandenburg concertos illustrate. He used the formal structure of the concerto in his Italian concerto also for keyboard.

After Torelli, the concerto contained not only emotional and sonic variety but also functional formal contrasts, unlike Corelli's tradition, in which solo parts were doubled merely to create a fuller texture. Vivaldi further developed Torelli's ideas, creating a concerto in which contrasts unfolded a fixed formal structure. The concerto "genre," which began with Vivaldi's fixed ritornello form, was firmly in place by Bach's generation. Thus the concerto style had by the end of the 17th century become a genre with a predictable structure, form and texture — a genre that continued to develop and change thereafter.