

# A New Aesthetic Ideas and the “Memory of Genre” in the 20th and 21st Century Polish Instrumental Concertos<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The instrumental concerto is still one of the most popular and most frequently chosen forms of musical expression by composers. Many factors influence its non-stop importance in musical life. One of them is the "openness" of the genre to new artistic ideas and means of musical expression. The process of adapting new aesthetic ideas was particularly intense in the second half of the 20th century, affecting the character of the composed works, their various shapes and functions entrusted to the performers of the solo parts. This phenomenon occurred in the works of composers representing various stylistic trends and aesthetic attitudes. Among the instrumental concertos inspired by the ideas of the second European musical avant-garde and various trends in postmodern art, concertos by Polish composers constitute a significant group. The analysis of these works shows the directions of evolution of the musical genre, its "reaction" to new techniques of sound production, their adaptation for artistic purposes.

*key words:* contemporary Polish music, instrumental concerto, the genre constants

## The transformation of an instrumental concerto

The instrumental concerto, as a music genre with a tradition stretching back over 300 years to the 17th century, is still one of the most popular and most frequently chosen forms of musical expression by composers. Many factors influence its non-stop importance in musical life. One of them is the "openness" of the genre to new artistic ideas and means of musical expression. As a genre of instrumental music, it is closely bound up with the evolution of musical language, its changing styles and aesthetics (Kerman 1999). This process has also continued into the 21st century.

The process of adapting new aesthetic ideas was particularly intense in the second half of the 20th century, affecting the character of the composed works, their various shapes and functions entrusted to the performers of the solo parts. This phenomenon occurred in the works of composers representing various stylistic trends and aesthetic attitudes. Among the instrumental concertos inspired by the ideas of the second European musical avant-garde and various trends in postmodern art, concertos by Polish composers constitute a significant group. In their works, transformations of the organizing principles

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<sup>1</sup> The Paper summarizes author's research on the contemporary instrumental concerto, which was presented in the book *The Contemporary Polish Concerto: Transformations of the Genre* (1998) and in the article *Beyond the Genre Paradigm. Transgressive Forms of Artistic Expression in 20th Century Instrumental Concertos by Polish Composers* (2022).

of the instrumental concerto, focused like in a lens. The analysis of these works shows the directions of evolution of the musical genre, its "reaction" to new techniques of sound production, their adaptation for artistic purposes.

### **The "genre constants"**

If we wish to talk about the new aesthetic ideas that have influenced the shape of contemporary concertos, we must first define the categorical features of this musical genre. Each genre is defined by its features, i.e. "genre constants". In dictionaries genre constants are defined as "certain constant features that occur in successive realizations of the genre" (Wyrwas, Sujkowska-Sobisz 2009). This is compatible with the definition of the genre proposed by the eminent literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who defines a genre as "permanent and typical ways of constructing a whole" (Bakhtin 1986: 73). Bakhtin also introduced the term "genre memory", which directs our attention to the genre features of a work, the tradition of which that work continues.

Genre is recognizable in musical works by the presence of the categorical features which tend to define it. However, isolating them requires adopting a number of preliminary methodological assumptions. If we were to consider that sphere of artistic creativity, in which the genre of the concerto has its material basis, we must also establish the body of work being analyzed.

Artistic practice points to the classical period, when the rules of the construction of the concerto as a genre of instrumental music were made more concrete. This model determined the categorical features of the concerto until the beginning of the 20th century, i.e. until its various reinterpretations appeared after the World War I. These were influenced by new artistic ideas as well as by the departure from the normative principles of major-minor tonality. Therefore, for further findings, we can assume approximately a period of 150 years, i.e. from around 1770 to around 1920, when the classical model as a set of compositional standards, found its numerous artistic concretizations. The genre constant, drawn from such a large collection of works, includes the following categorical features:

- 1) an instrumental medium through which the content of the work is conveyed. These are the sounds of acoustic instruments;
- 2) the solo-tutti sound opposition, which shapes the musical narrative;
- 3) the concerto technique specifying the principles of cooperation between the instrumental parts with separate sonic identities. It establishes the functions of the soloist and orchestra in conducting the musical narrative;
- 4) instrumental virtuosity, which constitutes an important attribute of the soloist's part;
- 5) the cyclical nature of the form, which since the period of classicism has been determined by the dramaturgy of the sonata cycle and the rules of the sonata form determining the course of the first part of the concerto;
- 6) the generic categorization of the concerto as one of the grand instrumental forms.

The above-mentioned categorical features of the concerto constituted an artistic convention from which composers gradually began to depart in the 20th century. The stage of moving towards transgressive forms could be referred to as the stage of reinterpreting the classical pattern. The transformations which the concerto underwent in those works did not then interfere as deeply with the classical paradigm of the genre as it happened under the influence of the aesthetic ideas of the second musical avant-garde of the 20th century.

This phenomenon was already noticeable in music in the 19th century, when, due to new aesthetic ideas, the center of gravity began to shift from the genre to an individually composed form of a musical work. Composers, striving to assign their unique sound and structural forms to their works, often synthesized the features of various genres and models of forms in a single piece. One nineteenth-century example of a new concept in the formation of a musical course is Franz Liszt's *Piano Concerto No. 2 in A major*, which premiered in 1857. Its one-movement structure shows connections both with the classical sonata form and the sonata cycle. This approach to shaping the form of a concerto inspired composers in the next century to create similar formal syntheses. However, the absence of the structural principles of a classical concerto, or an overly simple treatment thereof, despite the formation of a musical narrative by the soloist and orchestra, more often than not inclined nineteenth-century composers to adopt a different genre classification of their work. One example is César Franck's *Symphonic Variations for piano and orchestra* (1885). Neither did many composers in the first half of the 20th century label their works as concertos, because the musical form did not respect the rules of the sonata form. Let us consider here Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini for piano and orchestra* (1934). In this work, which is a genre-formal hybrid, we recognize the genre and formal features of an instrumental concerto, rhapsody, variations, and a sonata cycle.

### **New Aesthetic Ideas and Means of Expression in the 20th and 21st Century**

#### **Instrumental Concertos**

As I mentioned at the beginning of my paper, composers began to make use of transgressive gestures in their works after having assimilated the aesthetic ideas of the second musical avant-garde. The search for new forms of artistic expression encompassed all the specific categorical features of the classical concerto model, e.g., an instrumental medium, the solo-tutti sound opposition, the concerto technique, instrumental virtuosity, the cyclic nature of the form, and generic categorization of the concerto. Such initiatives were anticipated by the changes in the area of musical language, especially its tonality and harmony, which occurred in neoclassical concertos.

We may ask: what was the purpose of introducing new means of expression, and what sense did they acquire in contemporary concertos? To answer this question, we should turn our attention to changes in tonality, harmony and form. The new sound techniques around which the syntactic structure of 20th and 21st century music was organized required new concepts of form as well as the idea of cooperation between the soloist and the orchestra. The existing structures of communication, such as the sonata form, the rondo, and the fugue, often turned out to be inadequate for the needs of the new language of music. The new logic of musical discourse was determined by the functions and relations between the soloist and the orchestra.

## Contemporary virtuosity

The new aesthetic ideas shaping many musical works in the second half of the 20th century, and at the beginning of the 21 century, were above all visible in the sonic sphere of the concerto. This reflected the search for new means of expression at the time. For composers representing sonoristic aesthetics, the concerto was a musical genre that allowed them to be highly inventive in this respect, which resulted in many innovative elements. The basic medium, which until that point consisted in acoustic instruments, began to be enriched with new sounds generated with electroacoustic devices, electronically modified natural sounds, and sounds obtained by means of new articulation techniques. Thanks to such broadening of the concerto's sonic spectrum the basic solo-tutti opposition turned, for example, into an opposition between a solo acoustic instrument and a magnetic tape.

We can now repeat the question: what is the artistic sense of introducing various unconventional playing techniques and set new performance tasks for soloists in concertos? They are certainly a testimony of contemporary virtuosity. But does this exhaust the sense of entrusting soloists with such unconventional tasks? It seems that the analysis helps to explain these non-standard concepts of shaping the soloist's part. Here is an example – *Chamber Piano Concerto for piano/s and ensemble* by Agata Zubel.

*Chamber Piano Concerto* was composed in 2018 for Südwestrundfunk. The premiere took place during the Donaueschingen Musiktage in October 2018. The soloist performs his or her part in this piece on two pianos. One piano operates with a natural sound. The second piano is specially prepared – the preparation requires the use of clothes peg, eraser, screw, muted. The sounds produced from this instrument can be described as artificial. In order to balance the sound quality and volume, both pianos should be amplified.

What is the aesthetic justification for composing the soloist's part from artificial and natural piano sounds? Should rival agents be seen as two separate forms of virtual subjectivity? If we adopt as the basis for the narrative analysis Robert S. Hatten's theory of virtual agency, then both solo parts can be interpreted as two different states of one and the same subjectivity. Such a situation occurs – as Hatten justifies – when “virtual actors become parts of a larger subjectivity, components of a consciousness that at times may, in the case of a conflictual issue, be of two minds” (Hatten 2018: 23).

The sense of the musical discourse that emerges from the use of two types of piano sound – the prepared and natural sounds, is justified by the artistic tasks entrusted to the pianist. As a soloist performing his part on two pianos, he creates two intertwining narrative plots. Their sonic separateness (natural sounds and artificially generated sounds) shows the traditional and modern, non-standard face of the piano and the play with the classical convention. It also reflects the duality of artistic subjectivity seeking a new musical sense for the interaction of sounds so distinct in terms of sound and aesthetics.

The introduction of new sound generators and new articulation techniques changed the character of instrumental virtuosity. Technical proficiency was no longer the only requirement expected from the soloist. The ability to create new sounds with techniques that only a dozen years earlier had never

been used but now turned out to be indispensable. Playing the reeds of wind instruments and mouthpieces of brass instruments, extracting sound from a prepared piano, the soundboard of stringed instruments and other such acoustic effects – all these techniques significantly expanded the range of what are now considered artistically valuable sounds. Extensive lists of explanatory performance notes placed before a piece facilitated the reading of scores containing graphic symbols of new sound effects. One such example is the list of 29 performance markings prepared by Witold Szalonek for the *Concertino for flute and chamber orchestra* (1982).

A soloist capable of producing new sounds had to be blessed with great imagination and color sensitivity, and, additionally, was also expected to be able to improvise his or her part with the use of an entire repertoire of new performance techniques. In those works, in which there was a significant degree of indeterminism, the soloist became one of the concerto's co-authors. The sonic form of the work, the dramaturgy of tension, and the musical expression depended on his inventiveness and the ability to express the suggestions contained in the graphic scores accompanying the music. As a consequence, the new sonic form, to a much greater extent than in works recorded with the use of traditional musical notation, became an exponent of the creative abilities of the interpreter, like in Bogusław Schaeffer's *Violin Concerto No. 1* (1961-63) (see example 1).

19

Fl 1 2 3 4  
Ob 1 2 3 4  
Cl 1 2 3 4  
Fg 1 2 3 4  
Sxf 1 2 3 4  
Cor 1 2 3 4  
Tr 1 2 3 4  
Trn 1 2 3 4  
Batt 1 2 3 4  
C 5 6 7 8  
M 5 6 7 8  
V 5 6 7 8  
Vlno solo  
Cmb 1 2  
Cel 3 4  
Pf I 5 6  
Pf II 7 8  
Vlni II 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8  
Vlni II 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8  
Vlni III 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8  
Vle 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8  
Vc 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8  
Cb 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89

64 66 60

10<sup>5</sup>

Example No. 1: Bogusław Schaeffer, *Violin Concerto No.1*, first movement I, no 5; score p. 19, reprint permission by Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, Krakow 1965.

Another example of entrusting new tasks to a soloist is *Piano Concerto No. 3 "Fragments of Memory"* by Zygmunt Krauze. The piece was commissioned by, among others, the International Festival of Contemporary Music "Warsaw Autumn". In 2019, the concerto had its premiere at this festival. The composer himself performed the solo part of the piece. In Zygmunt Krauze's *Piano Concerto*, the pianist not only performs his narrative plot. In two segments of the work, he is also entrusted with an additional task. As a performer-agent, he simultaneously utters the verbal text. This simultaneously realized narrative thread is formed by a sequence of words such as: "Now", "Coming", "Once", "Always", "For Sure", "Right away", "How many times", "How long", "How far", "Memory". The use of a verbal text broadens the traditional genre boundaries of the instrumental concerto in this work.

This, in turn, changed the rules of concerto technique and the principles on which the classical concerto was based. For example, the idea behind Bogusław Schaeffer's *Concerto for Tape* (1969) was "to demonstrate the efficiency of the [...] material used, i.e. the 20 sound objects obtained by electronic transformations of various sound sources" (Schaeffer 1969: 95-96).

### **New forms of concertos**

New compositional devices required the use of new forms in concertos. These included, among other things, highly condensed "aphoristic" forms embedded in the musical content, their duration oscillating around 10 minutes. They have come to represent an alternative form of an instrumental concerto. The aphoristic character of this composition, in contrast to the extensive narratives of 19th-century concertos, as well as the new syntax and architecture, and the reevaluation of the functions performed by the various elements of a musical work, all serve as evidence of transgressive actions in the categorical features of the genre. One such piece is Henryk Mikołaj Górecki's *Concerto for Harpsichord and String Orchestra* Op. 40 (1980). It consists of two parts, which last in total about 8 minutes. Thanks to this type of composition, the condensation of musical content has become one of the alternative methods of shaping musical narrative in contemporary instrumental concertos. Its antithetic form is represented by concertos that retain an extensive, multi-phase structure, as exemplified by the pieces written by Krzysztof Penderecki and Witold Lutosławski.

The rules of construction of the classical concerto were rejected in their entirety in the works of composers who embraced the artistic ideas of the avant-garde. Each composer introduced their own formal ideas, as a consequence of which the list of new compositional devices is long. They can be grouped into 3 categories, which I define as:

- new forms featuring elements of the classical order (e.g. Krzysztof Penderecki's and Henryk Mikołaj Górecki's concertos),
- forms determined by new sound techniques (e.g. Kazimierz Serocki's concertos),
- forms based on new principles of construction (e.g. Witold Lutosławski's concertos).

Any echoes of the form and cycle of the sonata to be found in contemporary concertos are only traces of the past that have been recalled for specific purposes. The concertos in which they are performed I classify into two categories:

- forms imitating old construction models (e.g. Kazimierz Sikorski's concertos),
- forms that reinterpret the classical model (e.g. Grażyna Bacewicz's concertos).

The principle of the cyclical form has also undergone various transformations in contemporary concertos. Two examples of piano concertos that I mentioned earlier, Agata Zubel's *Piano Concerto* and Zygmunt Krauze's *Piano Concerto No. 3*, are one-movement pieces. In the form of both concertos, we can distinguish several phases of separate sounds. However, we cannot “cut out” these isolated fragments and listen to them as separate pieces<sup>2</sup>. If we did this, the part that had been ‘cut out’ would be incomplete, as if interrupted in its narrative.

The idea of a cyclical form can also assume another dimension as envisaged in Witold Lutosławski's notion of two-stage form. Its first, introductory phase consists of several episodes or separate parts. With regard to the classical cyclic system, the equivalent of the first phase of this binary structure are the 2 or 3 movements of the cycle that precede the final movement. The second phase, which according to the composer is “very substantial in thought and consistent in development” (Nikolska 1994: 96), is a more expanded form and conforms to a strict structure. This movement is the final (longest) phase of the concerto. For example, the main movement of Lutosławski's *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* (1988) is the final chaconna, whose structural rigor, accumulation of piano elements, volume of sound and dynamic movement make it the final stage in the development of the musical narrative.

### **The functions of the soloist and the orchestra**

The dramatic effect of the concertos, which were performed according to new formal rules, resulted from the functions assigned to the soloist and the orchestra. The idea of competition between these two *dramatis personae* made it possible to understand, for example, the new function of the soloist's cadence in a concerto. One example of the above is *Concerto alla cadenza per flauto a becco e orchestra* (1974) by Kazimierz Serocki, a piece described by the composer as “a kind of great soloist cadenza for flutes and orchestra”. Its multi-phase musical structure is made up of a sequence of 8 episodes and solo cadences framed by an introduction and a coda. The soloist plays five types of flute (soprano, alto, tenor, bass, and great bass). The catalogue of new means of articulation includes 65 ways of performing the flute part and the orchestral voices sung in various instrumental combinations, which creates a musical narrative of varied color.

The solo cadence performs another function in Witold Lutosławski's *Concerto for Cello and Orchestra*<sup>3</sup>, which is a one-movement piece. The sequence of musical events making up the plot of the concerto unfolds in 4 stages. The first stage can be described as the soloist's monologue. The intervention of the trumpets, which brutally interrupt the soloist's musical statement, opens the second stage of the narrative. From this moment, musical tension begins to grow, which will culminate in the last stage of the struggle between the cello and the orchestra. In the quoted fragment of the *Concerto* the trumpets disrupt the cello's monologue for the first time. The clarity of the musical gesture heralds the emerging conflict, that will intensify in the next phases of the piece.

I chose this fragment of the *Concerto* to draw attention to the dramatic meaning of the first stage (part) of the work. From the point of view of the classical concerto model, the first part of the piece conveys the cadence of the soloist. In this *Concerto*, however, it is not only the stage for the solo

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<sup>2</sup> We can, however, listen to one part of, for example, a classical concerto, and we would not experience such an impression, because each part of a classical concerto constitutes a dramaturgically closed whole.

<sup>3</sup> *Cello concerto* was composed in 1970 and performed for the first time in London in the same year.



performance of the cellist. Here, its dramatic function is more important. Without this cadence, the dramatic trajectory of the piece would assume a different form and meaning.

The *Concerto for Cello and Orchestra* was dedicated to the first performer of the solo part, the outstanding cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, who was forced to emigrate by the Soviet regime. This Russian dissident interpreted the musical plot of the *Concerto* as the conflict of the individual with the oppressive Soviet apparatus. Witold Lutosławski's biographer Charles Bodman Rae proposed a more general interpretation of this musical discourse. In his opinion this great drama can be seen and understood abstractly in purely musical terms (Rae 1994: 153). Both interpretations are in harmony with a narrative interpretation of the dramatic trajectory of the piece, as the conflict between the two rival entities which has a tragic result. According to the archetypal narrative trajectories of Byron Almén the oppressive order defeats the heroic transgression (Almén 2008).

### **Reception of new forms and means of music**

The responses of music critics to the above-mentioned transgressive initiatives highlighted the depth of the changes that took place in the works being created, and the need to define the artistic phenomena they were observing. Among the many reviews describing the reactions of critics after listening to avant-garde concertos, I would like to quote two statements regarding the concertos of Krzysztof Penderecki. In 1967, in his "Warsaw Autumn" report, Polish critic and composer Zygmunt Mycielski described his impressions after listening to Krzysztof Penderecki's *Capriccio for Violin and Orchestra* as follows:

It was as if [the composer] was saying, “I’ll show you a concerto!” It is technique taken to the extremes, with all the absurdity of the technique exposed. Indeed, there is something absurd about the pianists, violinists, and singers all trying to climb to the top. The coloratura and the tempo, precision and efficiency – where does it all lead? What this is this all about? (Mycielski 1968: 8-9)

The German critic Wolfram Schwinger described Krzysztof Penderecki's *Capriccio for Violin and Orchestra* as an “anti-concerto”. In this way, he emphasized the transgressive nature of the piece (Schwinger 1979).

### **Genre Memory. Cognitivist interpretation of transgressive processes**

If we look at the stylistic changes introduced in contemporary concertos from the opposite perspective, we can consider to what extent the concertos inspired by new aesthetic ideas respected the constants of the genre. I will try to present this issue using the cognitive model of phenomena categorization. The basis of this model is the prototype, or ‘typical paradigmatic case’, which is the point of reference for the remaining elements of the set. As the nucleus of a given category, it is the one that is most expressive from the cognitive point of view, and is present in the largest number of objects of a given set (Lakoff, Johnson 1980). The representative nature of the elements of the category under study depends on the degree of similarity to the prototype. The boundary moment of a given set, i.e. the moment of transgression, is taken to be the situations when “identified objects require a transformation greater than allowed” (Trzebiński 1981: 57). If we apply the cognitive model to explain the changes observed in an instrumental concerto in the 20th century, this process can be presented in the form of the following charts.

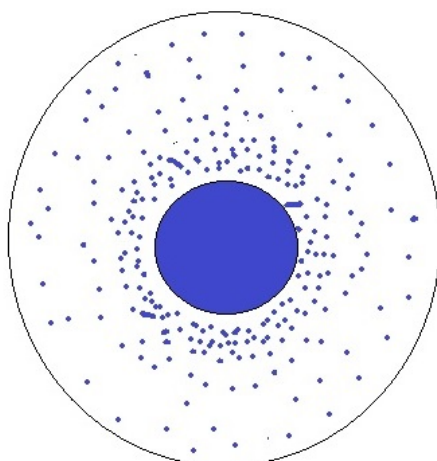


Chart 1. Placing of the 20th- and 21st-century concertos within the cognitive model of the genre

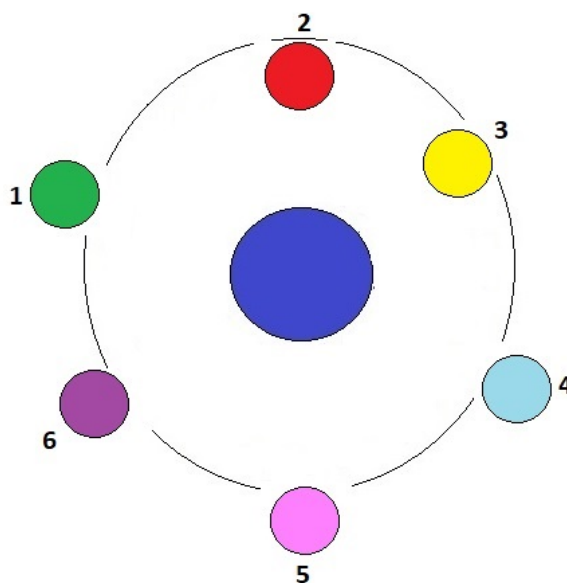


Chart 2. Categorical features of the instrumental concerto in relation to its prototype: 1) an instrumental medium, 2) the solo-tutti sound opposition, 3) the concerto technique, 4) instrumental virtuosity, 5) the cyclical nature of the form, 6) the generic categorization.

In the first chart, the representation of the prototype is the circle at the center of the circle. It includes those concertos that retain all the categorical features. Outside the circle, there are concertos that do not adhere to all the categorical features of the classical model. Their distance from the prototype is the greater, the fewer of its features they retain. The second chart shows the individual categorical features of the concerto in relation to the prototype nucleus. Where there have been transgressions,

icons depicting specific features of the species are placed outside the circle. The analysis of the concertos by 20th-century and 21st century composers with noticeable profound transformations of the classical model of the genre, indicates several characteristic phenomena.

- 1) Concertos in which the reinterpretation concerned only the form of the work, i.e. the concept of the cycle and the internal formation of its inner links, are located closest to the prototype nucleus. Other genre features, for instance, have been preserved, as can be seen, in neoclassical concertos.
- 2) The transgressive processes concerned almost all of the above-mentioned features, with the exception of the concerto technique and sound oppositions.
- 3) Transformations with different degrees of conversion, but not leading to a transgression, are the modifications that relate to the features placed inside the circle in the chart. They are connected to the concerto technique and sound oppositions.

With regard to the second of the categorical features mentioned, it should be explained that the oppositions no longer had to be implemented by instrumental parts contrasted in terms of scoring, i.e. solo-tutti. The essence was the autonomy of the instrumental parts that participated in building the musical narrative.

The classical model of the concerto, to which critics referred in the above-quoted reviews, was shunned by Krzysztof Penderecki in his concerto, in which he rejected the categorical features of the genre noted earlier – form, genre categorization, and above all instrumental virtuosity, which had such a significant impact on the character of these works. Therefore, the above-mentioned reviewers denied or questioned whether these compositions fell within the genre at all.

It should also be added that transgressing the rules of a classical concerto as a result of applying various sound or structural innovations was also reflected in the titles of the compositions. Many of the pieces composed at that time, despite the obvious genre connotations, had their own particular titles, such as: *Espressioni* (Tadeusz Baird), *Pianophonie* (Kazimierz Serocki), *Forte e Piano* (Kazimierz Serocki), *Dialogues* (Augustyn Bloch), *Chain* (Witold Lutosławski), and the like. The issue of genre affiliation was therefore ignored in them. However, there was a large group of concertos whose innovative sound and construction did not constitute an obstacle to their being classified within the genre, for example, the concertos of Bogusław Schaeffer, Tomasz Sikorski, Witold Szalonek and others.

### **Re-conceptualization of the genre**

One consequence of the changes the instrumental concerto underwent in the 20th century in the works of composers was the re-conceptualization of the genre. The classical paradigm has become

a historical concept, and the prototype nucleus of a contemporary concerto today consists of its two most primal features: the sound oppositions of the autonomous instrumental parts as well as the concerto technique that determines the individually accepted idea of their simultaneous competition and cooperation in a given work. These two genre constants connect modern concertos with their classical paradigm, they are a testimony to the "genre memory". The other categorical features do not have to belong to its genre constant any more. Their closeness or distance from the classical model is determined by the concept of the concerto adopted by the composer.

The durability of the changes introduced is confirmed by works created in our century, in which we find new realizations of this deeply traditional musical genre, as unconventional as those created in the second half of the 20th century. In our times, it is widely believed that the genre "developed as a pluralistic phenomenon" and "became a kind of field in which different points of view coexist" (Lobanova 2011: 183). Therefore, it is not surprising that in contemporary instrumental concertos "various ideas meet and compete for primacy" (Lobanova 2011: 183) in giving the work this unique sound shape and musical character.

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