

## Introduction

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In a famous, oft-repeated British TV comedy sketch, first broadcast on 25 December 1971, the classic duo of Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise wreak havoc in a performance of the opening of Edvard Grieg's Piano Concerto in A minor, conducted by André Previn. Pianist Morecambe and his 'manager' Wise make a string of ridiculous demands: they want to perform what Morecambe calls a 'special arrangement' of the concerto with the orchestra playing the opening flourishes and the piano the main theme (Previn reluctantly agrees); they deem the new orchestral introduction 'too short' and suggest contacting Grieg to get him to lengthen it; and, after missing Previn's cue on account of a poor sight-line to the conductor, ask him either to wear high heels or to 'jump up in the air' in order to be visible. Finally entering at the appropriate moment at the third attempt, Morecambe delivers a grotesquely butchered version of the main theme. Reprimanded by Previn for 'playing all the wrong notes', Morecambe purses his lips, grabs his conductor by the lapels and, with the exquisite timing that made him one of Britain's greatest post-war comedians, delivered his *coup de grace*: 'I'm playing all the *right* notes, but not *necessarily* in the right order'.<sup>1</sup>

In some respects, Morecambe's comic character is an archetypal arrogant diva (with good, old-fashioned buffoonery thrown in). He is self-regarding and disdainful of the accompanying orchestra ('Is this the band? ... I've seen better bands on a cigar'), assumes the violins are to blame as Previn approaches him horrified at the distortion of the main theme, and is condescending towards the conductor, dismissing him with the claim that 'For another £4 we could have got [then UK Prime Minister and music aficionado] Edward Heath'. In other respects, however, his actions and behaviour can be taken to represent several of the different strains of criticism levelled specifically against the concerto during its protracted and controversial history. His disregard for the orchestra and blinkered self-interest encapsulate the consistently articulated critical view that concertos are primarily vehicles for compositional and soloistic self-promotion rather than for genuine audience edification. Just as Morecambe considers his orchestra more-or-less irrelevant to the musical experience at hand, so critics collectively condemn countless concerto composers for treating their accompanying orchestras in just this way. While Morecambe is no piano virtuoso (quite the contrary), he neatly sums up the troubled,

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ambiguous reaction to concerto virtuosity in the collective critical consciousness. After Previn performs the correct version of the piano's ostentatious opening salvo, Morecambe is visibly awestruck by the technical skill involved. Composing himself for a few seconds, he finally utters the single word 'Rubbish!' and heads off stage. In short, Morecambe's comedic alter ego is a symbolic critic of the very same genre in which he is an all-too-eager participant.

No musical genre has had a more chequered critical history than the concerto but has simultaneously retained as consistently prominent a place in the affections of the concert-going public. Historically speaking, concertos have had a more polarizing effect than any other kind of musical work. The inherent virtues of a wide range of concertos are now of course taken for granted – and such works are as firmly entrenched as their symphonic counterparts in both critical and performance canons – but established concertos even today inspire widely diverging responses. While most of an audience may swoon at, say, the flamboyant virtuosity of Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 3, self-professed *cognoscenti* often recoil at it. Nothing is more likely to fill a packed performance venue with a buzz of excitement than a concert featuring one of the nineteenth-century 'warhorse' concertos performed by a world-renowned soloist, for example, and nothing more likely to induce weary resignation among musical 'highbrows'. Indeed, the concerto remains an active battleground for musical tastes, continuing to use tensions inherent in polemical reactions to old and new works as fuel for the development of an art form that is as vibrant as ever 400 years or so into its history.

The vitality and longevity of the concerto must also be attributed to the genre's considerable ability both to encourage thinking about issues that reach beyond the narrow confines of the music itself and to engage directly with (and influence directly) prevailing performance trends. This volume therefore assumes a broad remit, including but not limiting itself to consideration of the concertos that have made – and continue to make – such important contributions to musical culture. Part I sets the concerto in its musical and non-musical contexts, surveying theories that surround perceived positive and negative features of the genre and exploring socio-musical factors that bear upon our perception of the concerto (and, indeed, music in general). Following detailed study of concerto repertoires in Part II, Part III turns to performance-related topics, examining qualities historically associated with the virtuoso, as well as performance practice trends in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as they relate to the genre, and the productive relationship the concerto has enjoyed with the recording industry. A picture emerges of a genre in a continual state of change, reinventing itself in the process of

growth and development and regularly challenging its performers and listeners to broaden the horizons of their musical experience. There is every reason to believe that concertos will be written for centuries to come as so many of the fundamental issues with which they engage – including the status of the ‘star’ performer and the understanding of how individuals and groups interact – have perennial social and musical relevance. By engaging in our own considerations of the genre – as composers, performers, scholars, critics, music-lovers and concert-goers – we contribute actively to the concerto’s colourful history and help to shape its future.

