DVOŘÁK'S CELLO CONCERTO IN B MINOR: FIRST MOVEMENT

ROBERT COHEN explains why it's essential to keep a steady tempo throughout the whole of the opening section of the first movement

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I have always thought of the Dvořák Cello Concerto as the king of cello concertos. With its magnificent proportions, grandeur and power, wide emotional spectrum, technical demands and, above all, its musical directness, few other concertos can hold the rapt attention of the audience (and the performer) so consistently and so deeply from beginning to end. No wonder it is the most recorded and performed cello concerto in the repertoire. It is also the concerto that all student cellists aspire to playing, sensing that if they can reach the heights it demands, they will have conquered the greatest mountain of all. This was certainly how I felt as a young cellist, working my way through the concertos of Boccherini and Haydn – and even those by Schumann and Shostakovich.

It seems extraordinary that shortly before writing this work, Dvořák had considered the cello completely insufficient as a concerto instrument. His cellist friend Hanuš Wihan and others had been requesting him to write a cello concerto for some time, but Dvořák had always refused. Inspiration finally came when he heard one of Victor Herbert's cello concertos. The rest is history.

The premiere was given in London in 1896 by the English cellist Leo Stern. Brahms famously said of the work: 'Had I known that one could write a cello concerto like this, I would have written one long ago!' I only wish that he had.

FIRST PRINCIPLES

Before I start discussing the specifics of the concerto, I would like to explain a few of my fundamental principles, in order that we embark on this 'class' in a similar frame of mind.

I believe that one must study a composition with the goal in mind of playing a performance at all times. Even if there is no actual performance to look forward to, being creative, analysing, learning, discovering, mastering and finding one's own beliefs in the music's message – these must all be focused on the moment when we finally communicate those beliefs. The moment of communication, the sharing of the music, is the one that tests how genuinely we feel about the music and whether our interpretation is convincing. It is also the moment in which the relevance and gravity of the composition can be most acutely appreciated. So practising with the sensation of performing each note and each phrase, even if you are slowly working out technically how to play a passage, creates an energy and an awareness of what you produce that is stimulating, productive and fulfilling.

This brings me to my principle of a positive approach. With every action and every thought throughout the journey of studying, one can be constantly achieving and creating. If you stumble over a technical passage, do not drag yourself down by repeating that passage over and over again in the hope of playing it better. Stop and look for the exact point at which the difficulty lies, consider what would be a good strong physical and musical feeling at that point and how you will get there from the moment before, and apply that in actuality.

I could sum up this positive approach in my idealistic manner: play everything perfectly! Think what you should do correctly first, and then do it. Do not play anything wrong. Avoid accidents that you will then spend time correcting. I appreciate that this is a tall order, but consider that your hands only do what your brain tells them to do. It therefore makes sense to know what they should do in advance. We often expect our hands to find the solutions on their own, and think that playing correctly is as much a result of accident as of design. However, these happy accidents are extremely hard to repeat reliably and it is far better to know consciously how to play correctly and to be able to draw on that knowledge when required.

Most passionately of all, I believe that the actual sound of the music is the channel through which its language, content and emotion are communicated. It is sound that can affect us all so profoundly, primitively, in the same way as a scream of terror is frightening and a slow heartbeat is calming. Music is a form of ordered noise that we create and transmit via our instrument. It is therefore paramount that we always listen intently to the sound we make and the way the sound interacts with silence. We must always remember that we relate the music to the listener through sound, as we would if we were reading the words in a poem.

[1] First movement, bars 87–109

Quasi improvisando
f risoluto
pesante
cresc.
(rit.)

FIRST MOVEMENT

The opening orchestral tutti is one of the longest in the repertoire. When you sit waiting to play on the stage right in front of the orchestra, it is a wondrous and inspiring experience to feel the power of the music and hear all the themes played on the many different instruments. However, it's nearly four minutes of sitting quietly, and if you find it important to warm up before you play, this four minutes can really cool you down. In order to avoid starting off on the wrong foot and getting any nasty surprises, it's worth practising sitting still for four minutes before starting to play.

Since you are going to be playing for a 'high-octane' 40 minutes, it's essential to be economical with your energy, and to keep focused and relaxed at all times. Do not get too excited by the 'drum-roll' tremolando of the orchestral strings before you enter and end up overplaying the forte dynamic – you will not be able to match the power of the orchestra that preceded you. Play with a dramatic and intense sound, bowing close to the bridge and using a fast and compact vibrato, allowing yourself the dynamic space to play fortissimo from the fifth bar. Although it is marked quasi improvisando, keep a basic tempo inside you. It is the strong rhythmic impulse that provides strength. Work in two-bar phrases and breathe between them. For you and the listener, to hear music of this intensity without clear pauses to take breath and revitalise your energy is draining rather than invigorating. In fact, the audience will breathe with you and thereby join the adrenaline rush.

There are several points I would like to make about the first section (up to the p dolce e molto sotenuto in bar 138, 12 bars after figure 5). It seems that tradition (mostly influenced by recordings) has led many performers to use several different tempos within this section, with joins that bend to accommodate. As a 'non-traditionalist', I follow only what I believe Dvořák wrote, and he was certainly capable of putting in ralentando markings when he wanted them. When played with an unfaltering sense of direction, this whole section is not only far more exhilarating but also delivers us to the next section with a sweep that defies time. When music takes us away from our usual sense of time, it takes us to an elevated level of being. There is perhaps nothing better than this.

We must also consider the detail of the semiquavers in the first bar of the solo cello's line (bar 87). When played with more energy than the longer notes around them, they give us the flavour and articulation that defines Dvořák's Czech language. These short-note rhythms are the seed for the dotted rhythms in the following few bars, and also for the patterns of four semiquavers with staccato last notes starting in bar 95 (the 9th bar of the solo line). Keep in the flow; do not interpret the pesante in bar 98 as molto rallentando, or you will find the tempo taken up afterwards by the woodwind too slow. This will break the overall structure of the larger section and drag it all down.

With the cello left alone in bar 100, the crescendo should be used dramatically to give a sense of impatience and movement. Using the fundamental technique of slow bows for piano and fast for forte, start this bar moving the bow slowly and accelerate. You will get an excellent crescendo without effort. Dvořák is enjoying contrasting legato with staccato, and we should be expressing this clearly, from the woodwinds' staccatos in bar 99 followed by the solo cello's legato quavers, to the cello's *fp* crotchets juxtaposed with the spiccato semiquavers in the section starting at bar 110 (figure 4).

Here the two *fp* crotchets punctuate the expansiveness of the two-bar phrases, which are followed by phrases divided in half (one bar staccato, one legato). Dvořák is teasing us: it's almost as if the short notes are fast-running steps along an airport runway and the legato notes are attempts to glide up from the ground. We're constantly gathering more momentum and more strength in a desperate attempt to fly. Even when playing spiccato, you can use increasing length of bow to make the crescendos.

[2] First movement, bars 110-134

Don't forget to aim for the highest point of the section – the moment when the orchestra leaves you to soar to the heights of top G in bar 131 (5 bars after figure 5). In the excitement of the music, it's inevitable that we will want to build the volume almost continuously, but we must employ other techniques for generating power or we will have nothing left for the climax.

From bar 120 (11 after figure 4), articulate each pair of quavers; it is essential to give emphasis to every beat – here we want a feeling of feet pounding rather than long phrases. Articulation and clarity of sound here (use half bows only) enables us to create energy and to focus the sound without needing to be too loud. This articulation continues through the following two bars, where the short rest is like a quick pant, while creating space in the sound that will highlight the *ff* in the next passage.

This fortissimo passage still holds the pounding, even-beat feeling, but exhilaratingly crescendos with a double-speed rhythm of paired semiquavers. With the following high trill, use a heavy bow: it helps push the string close to the fingerboard, which in turn helps the left hand to trill faster. The contrast of the two left-hand fingers – one statically holding down the string while the other moves up and down quickly – creates quite an awkward tension in the hand. So using the bow to assist allows the left hand to stay more relaxed.

Now comes the critical moment when continuity is vital; if you bend time at the end of the trill bar to introduce the main theme, all your efforts to build to the climax will be lost. Drive on, and you will be able to recreate the grandeur of the main theme while generating the tension and power needed for take-off to the top G. You will not regret it.

For these four bars, you must concentrate the bow weight as close to the bridge as is possible. Don't forget that you are playing on virtually half of the string length, and to get a core sound, being close to the bridge and not deadening the vibration with too heavy a left hand will give you the penetration and resonance that this passage demands.

Having played the climax, keep a reasonable flow through the following 'floating down' phrases, so as to lead naturally and without distortion to the intermediate oboe solo bars. Also note that the ritardando is not written until one bar before the new p dolce theme. It is Dvořák's clear indication that we should not alter the tempo before this point. Let me assure you that with the tension built and held as I have described, everyone listening, including yourself, will feel almost overwhelmed by the extraordinary musical gesture of this now complete and uninterrupted chapter, ready now to move gently into the sublime cello iteration of the horn solo. ■