Outline the form and features of a typical classical concerto first movement

Caroline Bruce

A typical concerto first movement would be written in sonata form, for a soloist and orchestral accompaniment. Sonata form is composed of three sections in an A BA sequence – Exposition, Development and Recapitulation. Often a sonata form movement would use a codetta (or coda) to finish it off, and would sometimes include a cadenza.

A concerto exposition is written to be repeated – but unlike a symphony sonata, where the exposition is simply repeated, in a concerto, the first time through is only the orchestra playing, and the second time through the soloist joins in and elaborates.. The soloist will repeat themes that the orchestra have played in his or her expos ition, but will also use new themes, just as the orchestra will use some themes that the soloist doesn't imitate. These themes are called ritornello. In this way, the soloist and the orchestra will work together, using antiphony and imitation to create a successful atmosphere for the piece.
The exposition will usually be composed of a first group (in the tonic key) and a second key (in the dominant, if major, or the relative major if in a minor key to start).
The orchestral exposition would give the outline or the skeleton of the themes and the piece, and then when repeated by the soloist, they would change keys and give the full version with all the themes (minus the ritornello).

The development section commonly starts with material that directly relates t o the end of the exposition section, in order to make the move between the two sections smooth and joined, and you would rarely find a deliberate break or rest between the two. This section usually develops and explores themes form the exposition in a numb er of ways, e.g. sequential repetition, elaboration, ornamentation, fugato or elongation and often moves through a number of keys, unlike the exposition that usually transitions only once. Another common technique is to start the development in the relativ e (or parallel) minor of the exposition (An exposition in C major would render a development section in A minor, etc). Further on in the development, there is often a build up of themes and ideas and then their break down, usually named the fragmentation. Overall, the harmony in the development is chromatic compared to the exposition. Simple chromatic chords in the exposition would here be expanded to temporarily prolonged chords.

The recapitulation restates the themes of the exposition, usually in the sa me order, but usually all in the same key, the tonic. This section fuses both the soloist exposition and the orchestral exposition, often using all the themes. Although there is fusion, the ritornello still occurs, and there is still soloist elaboration of some orchestral themes (through antiphony and imitation). The themes in the recapitulation section are often altered in some way, sometimes through truncation, or sometimes they are elaborated or lengthened. Another common technique is to expand the final cadence.

The cadenza is the part of a concerto where the soloist is unaccompanied and shows off his or her skills on the chosen instrument of the concerto. In early sonatas, this cadenza would be improvised or elaborated on the themes of the exposition, without score. As the classical era progressed, however, the cadenza started to become scored, and just played from the music by the soloist. The cadenza was often written by the composer himself, but was also sometimes written by other composers. This section would always end with a trill, so as to tell the orchestra when to come back in with accompaniment.

The coda would begin when the recapitulation has ended. In early sonata forms, there would be a series of codettas, but later on this section became larger, usually quite lengthy and similar to the development section. The coda always has a very strong perfect or plagal cadence at the end, finishing the movement (or piece) off.