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Giovanni Punto (1746-1803) Cor basse célèbre

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4. Ludwig van Beethoven and the Cor Basse

With the almost complete loss of a richly varied musical articulation on the horn, the emerged dominance of the valve horn with its homogeneous sound over the complete register and regardless the key of the score, and with the neglect of the art of extemporaneous ornamentation, much diversity and variation disappeared from the performance styles of horn players. The same applies to the differences in timbre between cor alto and cor basse, with their specialist mouthpieces.

When composing chamber music pieces with two horns, like the Sextet for two horns and strings op. 81b, and his Octet for wind ensemble op. 103, Beethoven clearly had a true cor alto and a true cor basse player in mind, uniquely and effectively using both genres in a way that emphasized their technical and timbral differences. In his chamber music with a single horn, -the Quintet for winds and piano op. 16, the Sonata for piano and horn op. 17, and the Septet op. 20- the horn parts are undoubtedly written for a cor basse player.

I argue that Beethoven knew very well what timbre to expect when he composed specific solo passages for low horn, also in several of his orchestral works.

4.1 Solos for Low Horn in Orchestral Works

In the vast majority of the orchestral scores from the classical period it appears that composers did not set out to highlight the different timbres of the cor alto and cor basse. Dauprat points out in his Method that although solos in the orchestra were normally written for the first horn, the second horn player also got his share.²²³ Morley-Pegge states that a cor basse player was often the principal in large orchestras and that the tone of the cor basse was generally preferred to that of the cor alto.²²⁴ Although Joseph Fröhlich praised Punto's silvery bright tone, he also raved about his varied tone color in the same article.²²⁵

²²³ Dauprat, 16

²²⁴ Morley-Pegge, R.: 'The Evolution of the Modern French Horn from 1750 to the Present Day', in: *Proceedings of the Musical Association, 69th Session, 1942-3*; 41

²²⁵ Fröhlich, J.: 'Horn', in: *Encyclopädie Der Wissenschaften Und Künste (1834), Zweite Section 11*. Graz, 1969; 7

Most interesting is what the Almanach Dauphin 1785 writes as a caption for Punto's portrait:

Ce virtuose a trouvé l'art de vaincre toutes les difficultés de cet instrument et d'en adoucir les sons.²²⁶

(This virtuoso has succeeded in vanquishing every difficulty of the horn and in softening its sounds.)

Strong evidence of expected sound differences between cor alto and cor basse I found in a number of orchestral works by Beethoven, an extremely innovative composer who was always keen to discuss instrumental possibilities with players.²²⁷ This is what the American librarian and journalist Alexander Wheelock Thayer (1817-1897) wrote in regard to the meeting of Punto and Beethoven at the time of the composition of his opus 17:

Beethoven's delight in any one whose skill afforded him new experience of the powers and possible effects of any orchestral instrument is known to the reader.²²⁸

Beethoven composed notable examples of timbre distinctions between high and low horn in his Piano Concerto no. 5, his seventh, eighth, and ninth symphonies, in the Overture to Fidelio, and in the first Leonore Overture. In all these cases he trusted the second horn player to perform both short and long solos, something he never confided to any other second wind players in his orchestral works. By the time Beethoven wrote the longest and most important of these solos, the illustrious lines for fourth horn²²⁹ in his ninth symphony, he was completely deaf. His inner ear must have remembered the typical mellow sounds of the cor basse.

²²⁶ *Tablettes de Renommée des Musiciens (Almanach Dauphin)*. Paris, 1785, quoted in: Morley-Pegge, *The French Horn*, 174

²²⁷ Lawson, C.: 'Beethoven and the Development of Wind Instruments', in: *Performing Beethoven*, ed. Robin Stowell. Cambridge, 2005; 80

²²⁸ Thayer, A. W., Edited, revised and amended from the original English manuscript and the German editions of Hermann Deiters and Hugo Riemann, concluded, and all the documents newly translated: *The Life of Ludwig van Beethoven, Volume 1*. New York, 1921; 267

²²⁹ The fourth horn in fact is the second horn player of the two horns in Eb.

4.2 Piano Concerto no. 5

393 **Allegro**

Clarinet in B $\flat$

Bassoons

Horns in E $\flat$

398

Figure 4.1
Beethoven, Piano Concerto no. 5, op. 73 (1809-1811) first movement, Allegro, bars 393-402

In the first movement of Beethoven's fifth Piano Concerto the low horn must risk performing a leap of an octave and a half to perform two bars of solo in a register that the high horn could easily cover (figure 4.1). The danger of cracking the first f' after such an awkward leap was taken into account by Beethoven as a necessary risk to achieve his wish for the typical velvety sound of the cor basse. The low horn is playing in dialogue with the clarinets, whilst the conclusion of the passage is for both clarinets and the cor basse in bars 401-402.



Figure 4.2

Beethoven, Piano Concerto no. 5, op. 73 (1809-1811) third movement, Rondo Allegro, bars 304-308. Horn in Eb

A striking moment in the third movement of the same piece occurs in bars 305-306, figure 4.2. The piano and orchestra fall silent, and the floor is given to a lone solo for the low horn, playing a downward scale starting on one of the highest notes of the range, and answered one bar later and one tone higher by the first oboe, first clarinet and first bassoon in unison.

4.3 Symphony no. 7

Allegretto

114

Flutes

Oboes

Clarinets in A

Bassoons

Horns in E

p

II.

Figure 4.3

Beethoven, Symphony no. 7, (1811-1812) op. 92, second movement, Allegretto, bars 114-122, wind parts only

In Beethoven's seventh symphony we see the same jump from c' to f'' in the low horn part, this time as an exact imitation of the solo of the first clarinet two bars earlier. (Figure 4.3) Again, there is no practical reason why the high horn player could not play this solo line. Also in this example there is a connection between the low horn and the first clarinet, playing a dialogue.

4.4 Symphony no. 8

Tempo di Menuetto

Clarinets in Bb

Horns in F

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

Contrabass

Figure 4.4

Beethoven, Symphony no. 8, op. 93 (1812-1813) third movement, Tempo di Menuetto, bars 52-56

The third movement, *Tempo di Menuetto*, of Beethoven's eighth symphony, contains another convincing example of an expected difference in timbre between cor alto and cor basse, and again there is a connection between cor basse and clarinet. See figure 4.4. In the bar after the second ending of the trio, a sequence starts between horn one and horn two, the latter in unison with the first clarinet. For both first and second horn players it would have been much more comfortable if the specialist for high notes, the first horn, performed all four bars with the same motif. It can only be the wish for and the expectation of a darker sound from the cor basse to blend with the Bb clarinet that urged Beethoven to compose the passage like this.

4.5 Overture to Fidelio

The image shows a musical score for two instruments: Clarinets in A and Horns in E. The tempo is marked 'Allegro'. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The score begins at bar 49. The Clarinet part is mostly silent, with a few notes appearing later. The Horn part features a solo for the second horn, marked 'II. Solo' and 'p' (piano). The solo line is a descending scale-like passage that ends with a leap down to the second harmonic. The score continues to bar 54, where the Clarinet part begins to play, imitating the Horn's solo. The score ends with 'etc.' indicating further music.

Figure 4.5
Beethoven, Overture to Fidelio, op. 72, (1814) Allegro, bars 49-59, clarinet and horn parts only

The exposed solo for second horn in the Overture to Fidelio, figure 4.5, is a typical cor basse line, with the end going down in leaps to the second harmonic. The first three and a half bars, though, could easily be covered by the first horn, the cor alto. Starting in bar 53, the first clarinet imitates the cor basse.

4.6 Leonore Overture no. 1

181 **Adagio ma non troppo**

Clarinet in B $\flat$

Horns 3 and 4 in E $\flat$

185

188

Horn II Solo

Figure 4.6
Beethoven, Leonore Overture no. 1 op. 138, (1807) Adagio ma non troppo, bars 181-190
horn 3 and 4 and clarinet parts only

In his first Leonore Overture, Beethoven also writes a solo for low horn, figure 4.6, this time in the fourth horn part, in unison with the first clarinet, with no other apparent reason than a preference for the color of the cor basse, playing in a relatively high register, to mix with that of the clarinet.

4.7 Symphony no. 9

The image displays a musical score for Horn 4 in Eb, spanning measures 82 to 98. The tempo is marked 'Adagio'. The score is written in a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats (Bb and Eb). Measure 82 begins with a piano (*pp*) and dolce marking. The melody starts on a low note and moves stepwise upwards. Measures 88 and 93 show more complex rhythmic patterns with slurs. Measure 96 is marked 'Solo' and features a rapid ascending scale, with a crescendo (*cresc.*) marking below the staff. The score concludes in measure 98 with a sustained note.

Figure 4.7

Beethoven, Symphony no. 9, (1823-1824); third movement, Adagio molto e cantabile: horn in Eb, bars 82-98

In this last and famous example from Symphony no. 9, figure 4.7, the high horn does not appear at all. Although some modern editions indicate that the first horn should take over the solo at the beginning of bar 90, right where the G-clef reappears, Beethoven deliberately composed this long solo for the lowest horn of the orchestra. In his score he explicitly wrote “*sempre corno secondo*”, meaning the second horn of the pair of Eb horns. If one of the horn players had a velvety sound—even more so after playing two extensive movements in Bb-basso, the longest and darkest of the horn crooks—then it was the cor basse player who performed this lowest part. This celebrated solo for low horn shows Beethoven’s profound understanding of the instrument’s potential and his manner of utilizing the cor basse to its utmost capacity. After exploring the deepest abysses of the horn range in bar 89, the cor basse player climbs triumphantly to the highest peaks of his peculiar instrument, culminating in one of the ultimate demonstrations of hand stopping technique in bar 96, a written scale of Ab, before being joined by other mellow wind instruments—the first bassoon, first clarinet, and first flute—in bar 97.

The material of this long solo bears some similarities with the Adagio near the end of the *Seule et Vraie Méthode*, figure 4.8.²³⁰



Figure 4.8
Seule et Vraie Méthode, Page 83

The genius composer Beethoven knew what tonal color to expect when writing for cor alto or for cor basse. Period horn players can only do justice to the intention of the composer by using mouthpieces of appropriate dimensions.

²³⁰ Hampel/Punto, 88