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## **Toward the Origins of the Concertmaster-Pianist's Profession: The Art of Maestro al Cembalo / К истокам профессии пианиста-концертмейстера: искусство maestro al cembalo**

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**Abstract:** The relevance of the research lies in the urgent need for modern musicology to reconstruct the profession of a concert pianist. The subject of the study is the art of maestro al cembalo. The object of the research is the work of maestro al cembalo and the features of his creative activity. The purpose of the research is to study the process of formation of the initial stage of the development of the profession of a concert pianist, which spanned the period from the late Renaissance to classicism. Research objectives: to highlight the main characteristics of joint performance using basso continuo; to provide information about the specific skills and knowledge that maestro al cembalo should have possessed; to show the importance of these musicians in the musical performances, as well as in the evolution of musical creativity; to present portraits of the most significant representatives of this profession. The author of the study focuses on the influence of the maestro al cembalo's art on the formation of European concertmaster schools. To disclose

the author's stated topic, the following methods are used: anthropological, hermeneutic, comparative-historical, theoretical, and analytical. A special contribution of the author is the search, analysis, and systematization of archival materials from Italian theaters and city archives, based on which information about the life, work, and specifics of the maestro al cembalo's creative and pedagogical work has been introduced into scientific circulation. The main conclusions of the study show that the most important principles of professional activity of a modern pianist-concertmaster of a musical theater were formed several centuries ago. The results obtained can be applied both in conducting courses on the theory and history of performing arts and in the practical activities of modern concert pianists. The study's conclusions allow us to form a clear picture of the initial stage of the formation of concertmaster art and trace its leading trends, which will be reflected in the subsequent development of this creative specialty.

**Keywords:**

history of performing arts, music education, archival information, keyboard instruments, pianist-concertmaster, concertmaster school, basso continuo, ensemble performance, maestro al cembalo, musical theatre

**Аннотация:** Актуальность исследования заключается в насущной необходимости для современного музыкознания реконструкции профессии пианиста-концертмейстера. Предметом исследования является искусство maestro al cembalo. Объект исследования – содержание специальности maestro al cembalo и особенности их творческой деятельности. Цель исследования заключается в представлении читателю процесса формирования начального этапа развития профессии пианиста-концертмейстера, охватившего период от позднего Возрождения до классицизма. Задачи исследования: осветить основные характеристики совместного исполнительства с использованием basso continuo; дать сведения о специфических умениях и знаниях, которыми должен был обладать maestro al cembalo; показать значимость этих музыкантов в работе над постановками музыкальных спектаклей, а также в процессе эволюции музыкального творчества; представить портреты наиболее значимых представителей этой профессии. Автором исследования делается особый акцент на влиянии искусства maestro al cembalo на формирование европейских концертмейстерских школ. С целью раскрытия заявленной темы автором, в качестве основных, использованы: антропологический, герменевтический, сравнительно-исторический, теоретико-аналитический методы. Особым вкладом автора является поиск, анализ и систематизация архивных фондов итальянских театров, а также городских архивов, на основе данных которых в научный оборот введены сведения о жизни, творчестве и специфике творческой и педагогической работы maestro al cembalo. Основные выводы исследования показывают, что важнейшие принципы профессиональной деятельности современного пианиста-концертмейстера музыкального театра были сформированы еще несколько столетий назад. Полученные результаты могут применяться как в проведении курсов по теории и истории исполнительского искусства, так и в практической деятельности современных пианистов-концертмейстеров. Выводы исследования позволяют сформировать устойчивую картину начального этапа становления концертмейстерского искусства, проследить его ведущие тенденции, которые найдут свое отражение в последующем развитии этой творческой специальности.

**Ключевые слова:**

maestro al cembalo, basso continuo, пианист-концертмейстер, клавишные инструменты, архивные данные, история исполнительского искусства, музыкальная педагогика, концертмейстерская школа, ансамблевое музицирование, музыкальный театр

The profession of concertmaster is among the youngest in the world of academic musical performance. Currently, its main focus is on a pianist's creative work, with representatives of other musical specialties, such as vocalists, instrumentalists of various definitions, a choir, and musical theater artists. However, the methodological apparatus of the profession has not yet been fully formed, strategies for teaching concertmaster skills to a pianist have not been fully defined, and the work of such specialists is extremely low in social terms. Moreover, to date, fundamental research has not been conducted on the history of the formation of this specialty, from its origins to the present. All these factors indicate that concert pianists, who are in demand as specialists in various forms of musical activity, carry out their creative work based on general ideas about the content and structure of their profession. In our opinion, such an unfair situation requires remedial action.

One of the first steps in this regard may be the reconstruction of the formation of the specialty of an accompanist-pianist. Thus, immersion in the study of the period of active activity of the "progenitors" of modern concert pianists, *maestro al cembalo*, will allow not only to lift the "veil" of the mystery of this forgotten specialty, to present the names of the most prominent representatives of these musicians, to demonstrate the features of their work, but also to show that modern pianists can use the results they achieved in the art of collaborative performance in their creative practice.

The heyday of *maestro al cembalo*'s work, which originated during the late Renaissance, falls during the Baroque period in the history of European music and is closely related to the musical and aesthetic attitudes of that time, as well as the existing practice of performance, largely associated with the intensive development and introduction of keyboard instruments into musical practice. The leading line of the latter in the field of joint music making was the art of accompanying *basso continuo*, which carried all the main features of the homophonic-harmonic style and became, according to M. V. Ivanov-Boretsky, "a great help in understanding the chord structure of music" [\[1, p. 6\]](#).

A common phenomenon in secular music-making was the schematics of the musical text, which recorded the basis of the melodic line and *the basso continuo*. Due to the task of studying *maestro al cembalo*'s work, in the framework of this article, we will not analyze in detail the differences and commonalities of *basso continuo* with general bass and digital bass. The reader can learn about this from the material of a special study by A. V. Boyarkina, *Basso continuo*, digital bass, or is it still a general bass? On the question of the translation of musical terms [\[2\]](#). Here we will highlight the most important features of *basso continuo*, which are directly related to the practical activities of *maestro al cembalo*. These include:

1. Improvisation;
2. Clear rhythmic pulsation;
3. Creating a dynamic balance between parties (votes).

The developed skills of stylistic improvisation in *basso continuo* are related to its essential

content: the fixed basis of the melody and the planned harmonic line implied the need for performers to decipher and "imagine" the composer's ideas by appropriate means. In the opera genre, such a composer's co-author was primarily an improvising singer in solo arias. However, G. V. Blagodarov argues that: "<...> the role of continuo in the works of the 17th century was quite significant <...> Not only the accompaniment of recitatives, but also the accompaniment of arias in operas was often entrusted to a single continuo" [3, p. 18]. Moreover, the clavierist improvised in recitatives, revealing the drama of the action taking place on the stage with the performing means of his instrument (among them, we will mention the textural diversity, the use of a spectrum of strokes, agonistic variants, and dynamic contrasts).

In ensemble genres, the leading role in this process was assigned to the performer on a keyboard instrument, which required not only natural musical abilities, developed melodic, harmonic and textured hearing, but also solid knowledge in the field of music theory. This circumstance, in turn, stimulated the trend toward the formation of the first professional musical institutions, in which musicians were comprehensively trained rather than separately through private lessons (however, their systematic discovery was an achievement of a later time).

The increased interest in the art of *basso continuo* stimulated another process: the formation of an independent direction in ensemble-instrumental music. This is indicated by V. J. Konen: "Since the 17th century <...> in the era of the unconditional domination of secular art, no developed type of professional music could do without instrumental sound. This is as much a characteristic feature of the style of the new era as the leading importance of melody and harmony in it. So, from the very first days of its existence, the opera relied on the orchestral principle. Chamber vocal lyrics are unthinkable outside of piano accompaniment (that is, their second, instrumental plan) <...>" [4, p. 108].

The trio sonata genre was important in shaping *maestro al cembalo*'s profession. In most compositions of this genre of the Baroque period, the upper voices recorded melodic lines, and the lower ones, which were performed on a keyboard instrument, carried a harmonic and textured load. The main tasks in performing the continuo part included controlling the metrorhythmic pattern and establishing a unified dynamic balance. Keyboard instruments played an indispensable role in this process. According to I. Matteson, "The clavichord, with its versatility, provides the accompanist with the necessary foundation for church, theater, and chamber music. The clavier is a support for the consonantal, majestic, harmonious, full-voiced accompaniment of the main melody and all those who take part in the performance." Realizing the importance of all these functions, K.F.E. Bach rightly notes the following: "The organ, harpsichord, piano, and clavichord are the most commonly used keyboard instruments for accompaniment. <...> The organ is indispensable in church music with its fugues, large choirs, and the widespread use of fused sounds. <...> However, as soon as church recitatives and arias, especially those in which the middle voices, thanks to simple accompaniment, allow the singing voice to vary freely, a harpsichord is needed; unfortunately, it is too often heard how empty the unaccompanied performance is in this case. This instrument is also indispensable in theater and chamber music to accompany arias and recitatives. The piano and the clavichord best support performance when the greatest subtleties of taste meet. Only some singers prefer accompaniment on the clavichord or harpsichord rather than on the piano. – V. K.]" [cit. According to 5, pp. 233-234]. The above quote not only testifies to the active inclusion of keyboard instruments in various forms of ensemble music making. It shows that, already in the Baroque era, the idea began to form that the future concertmaster profession could not use uniform methods

of creative work across different musical genres, but should have specialized areas.

So, the indicated intensive development of joint performance in different genres, as well as the inclusion of a range of keyboard instruments in musical practice, contributed to the emergence of a special cohort of musicians capable of performing these compositions at a high level. This is how the *maestro al cembalo profession appeared*. It should be noted that in the history of performance, they were the first to specialize primarily "in participating in ensemble types of performance, as well as working with soloists and choirs in musical theaters" [\[6, p. 13\]](#).

As already mentioned, the musicians-ensembles, which included the *maestro al cembalo*, within the usual Baroque practice had to improvise freely, build a dynamic balance, and maintain rhythmic stability in performance. However, *maestro al cembalo had other tasks*. So, working with singers in the theater, they mastered the art of playing the clavichord, harpsichord, virginal, knew the basics of performing on string and wind instruments (if necessary, replace an absent musician from the ensemble or orchestra), the basics of vocal technique, be able to transpose into any key, work on the diction of pronunciation of the text by vocalists on the main European languages of that time. As the head of the musical group, *maestro al cembalo* "performed the tasks of artistic management of the staging of a musical performance" [\[7, p. 68\]](#). And in this, we see the beginnings of the future professions of conductor and director.

There is no doubt about another fact. *Maestro al cembalo's* activities, combined with the aforementioned expansive introduction of keyboard instruments into musical practice, led to a gradual displacement from leading positions in the management of ensembles of string players.

The turning point in the development of the *maestro al cembalo* profession was the activity of the famous Florentine Camerata and its production of the first opera, *Daphne* by J. Peri. Its premiere took place in 1608, but individual scenes from this work were presented to a small circle ten years earlier. At the same time, J. Peri himself worked with soloists and ensembles on musical material, learning musical material with them at the harpsichord. His work as *maestro al cembalo* inspired his contemporaries so much that a whole queue of people wanted to learn this art. According to J. Peri, a *maestro al cembalo* had to master not only all the above-mentioned keyboard-playing skills but also sing fully. He writes about this in a letter to one of his patrons, the Duchess of Mantua. "I am studying with her [my student, V. K.] quite intensively, and I hope that she will be successful. She has more than a good voice, loves to study, and has excellent hearing, which is very important. The student is very confident in transposing into various keys and begins to comprehend the basics of proper singing: she sings small arias to the accompaniment of keyboard instruments and learns to accompany herself. Considering that she has just started studying music, this result can be called a wonderful achievement" [\[7\]](#). Let us emphasize that this fragment of the letter is one of the first recorded evidence of the formation of not only the *maestro al cembalo profession*, but also vividly demonstrates the principles that will form the basis of the future Italian concertmaster school.

Famous composers Claudio Monteverdi, Domenico Scarlatti, and Alessandro Scarlatti have made significant contributions to the development of the *profession of maestro al cembalo*. C. Monteverdi, who held the position of director of the Venice Opera House since 1637, ensured that by 1650, from 8 to 13 *maestro al cembalo worked permanently in this collective, as well as in the opera houses of Florence, Milan, Parma, and Rome* [\[8\]](#).

At the end of the 17th century, the Venice Theater lost its position, and the Neapolitan opera, dominated by Scarlatti's father and son, entered the vanguard of musical and theatrical life. They were no less sensitive to the need for *maestro al cembalo* to work at the opera. Conditions were created for them: the theater was equipped with tutors to conduct classes with singers and a choir, and they were paid a remuneration that allowed them to support their families and avoid additional earnings. However, they found the opportunity to work in parallel in different places, as evidenced by the biographies of these musicians, presented below. Understanding this situation, the management of the Neapolitan Theater set a prerequisite: any part-time job should not affect the level of opera preparation. These factors certainly improved the quality of the performances, which toured throughout Europe, including Russia's St. Petersburg.

It is known that in a long period of time, from the Renaissance to classicism, the successful functioning of musical groups largely depended on funding from influential and wealthy dignitaries. In the development of *maestro al cembalo* art, the Medici family played a major role in its promotion, with its representatives supporting the best practitioners of this profession. The archives have preserved some of the names of these *maestro al cembalo*, as well as information (albeit very modest) about their professional activities. Let's name some of them.

Giovan Battista Strozzi (the elder) (1504-1571) was an Italian poet, composer, and *maestro al cembalo*. In 1539, with the support of the Medici family as a composer and *maestro al cembalo*, he prepared and staged the musical interlude "An Opportunity" for the comedy by A. Landi. The soloists of the Florence Opera took part in this interlude, and the performance was accompanied by a clavichord played by the composer [\[9\]](#).

The biography of Giovanni del Turco (1577-1647) is interesting. Being a nobleman and a hereditary military man, he left the service and devoted himself to music. He studied counterpoint and clavichord playing with Marco de Galliano. From 1587 to 1591, he studied the art of *maestro al cembalo* with Ya. Peri became the chief *maestro al cembalo* of the Florentine Camerata for eight years, until the premiere of "Daphne" [\[10, p. 111\]](#). It should be noted that a similar position, senior concertmaster of opera and senior concertmaster of ballet, exists to this day in Russian repertory musical theaters.

Antonio Cesti (1623-1669) was an Italian composer, bandmaster, *maestro al cembalo*, singer, and vocal teacher. Initially, he specialized in writing sacred music. However, under the patronage of the Medici family, he mastered the art of *maestro al cembalo* perfectly, and from 1652 to 1655, he was simultaneously the artistic director and *maestro al cembalo* of the musical theater at the court of Prince Ferdinand Karl in Innsbruck. Under his leadership, more than forty operas were prepared and staged [\[10, p. 112\]](#).

Carlo Pallavicino (1630-1688) was an Italian composer (composer of more than 20 operas and other works), teacher, and *maestro al cembalo*. During two periods, from 1666 to 1673 and in 1687, he served as *maestro al cembalo* in Dresden. He was one of the first teachers of this art: from 1674 to 1685, he taught it at one of the conservatories (educational institutions for orphaned children) in Venice.

Antonio Sartorio (1630-1680) was an Italian composer, teacher, and *maestro al cembalo*. He was one of the leading composers of Venice opera in its heyday. As *maestro al cembalo*, he worked from 1665 to 1675 in Hanover for Duke Johann Friedrich. It is interesting to note that for four years after returning from Hanover, he held this position at the Chapel of San Marco in Venice, where, in addition to learning and performing sacred music, he mastered

opera parts from the Venetian theater repertoire with singers [\[11\]](#).

Giovanni Battista Lampugnani (1708–1786) was an Italian composer, *maestro al cembalo*. From 1779 to 1784, he served in this position at the Milan Imperial Theater, where he prepared the premieres of more than ten operas [\[8\]](#). From 1743 to 1756, as *maestro al cembalo* and artistic director, he staged several operas by G.F. Handel.

Girolamo Abos (1715–1760) was a Maltese-Italian composer and *maestro al cembalo*, a pupil of F. Durante. In 1756–1758, he served as *maestro al cembalo* at the Italian Theater in London (later the famous Covent Garden). From 1758 to the end of his life, he taught music composition and art to *maestro al cembalo*. One of the most famous students of Abosa was J. Paisiello.

Pasquale Cafaro (1715–1787) was an Italian composer, *maestro al cembalo*, and teacher. For a long time, from 1759 to 1781, he taught *maestro al cembalo* at the Neapolitan Conservatory of the Pietà dei Turcini. He was appointed at the request of Girolamo Abos, who had previously taught there. It is noteworthy that P. Cafaro took up the position of *maestro al cembalo* of the Royal Chapel by decree of King Ferdinando IV in 1768, where he taught this art to orphans and the highest nobility, including Queen Maria Carolina. In 1782, he became a consultant to the Royal Theaters of the state. He succeeded J. Bach in this position. In 1784, he was simultaneously chief *maestro al cembalo* and artistic director of the Royal San Carlo Opera House.

Bartolomeo Cherubini (c. 1732–1783) was an Italian composer, teacher, and *maestro al cembalo*. In 1758–1769, he served as *maestro al cembalo* at the Pergola Theater in Florence [\[9\]](#), in 1769–1777 at the Paris Opera. He taught his son, Luigi Cherubino, composition and the art of *maestro al cembalo*.

Ambrogio Minoia (1752–1825) was an Italian composer, *maestro al cembalo*, and teacher. From 1784 to 1802, he served at the Imperial Theater of Milan as chief *maestro al cembalo*, succeeding J. Lampugnani [\[8\]](#). He was the founder and first head of the Milan Conservatory, where the training in the art of the cembalo was mandatory. The author of the treatise "The Letter on Singing," in one of the chapters of which he outlined the basic principles of *maestro al cembalo*'s creative work.

From the list of *maestro al cembalo* artists given above, it can be seen that their activities spread not only within the theaters, chapels and conservatories of Italy, but also significantly influenced the formation of the outlines of the future profession of a concert pianist in Germany, Austria, France and England, i.e. those countries in which the process of national formation began in the 19th century—concertmaster schools.

Covering a period whose chronology can be traced with a certain degree of error from 1540 to 1800, or two and a half centuries, *maestro al cembalo*'s art made a significant contribution to the formation of concertmaster art. The decline of *maestro al cembalo*'s activity is associated with the tectonic shifts in musical culture that occurred at the end of the 17th century. One of the main reasons is the rapid development of the piano, its formation as a leading keyboard instrument, which in a fairly short time replaced the harpsichord, clavichord, cembalo, and virginal, which were the working instruments of *maestro al cembalo*. But the profession's trajectory continued to develop. A new era was coming, in which *maestro al cembalo*'s profession was transformed into a choreographer, and then into a concert pianist.

Let's summarize the results. During the Baroque period, ensemble music with basso continuo on various keyboard instruments was actively developed. In addition to his natural abilities, the pianist required knowledge of counterpoint, improvisation, a developed sense of rhythm, and the ability to produce a balanced dynamic sound in an ensemble. At the same time, the opera genre was intensively developing, requiring singers, even at the earliest stages, to learn the opera part, understand its dramaturgy, and sing in style. Realizing the difficulty of the task, theater managers began inviting experienced keyboard players to work with singers. This was the birth of the profession of *maestro al cembalo*, who in his professional work, in addition to the usual skills of keyboard musicians of that period, had to be able to play strings, wind instruments, sing, know the basics of vocal technique, the peculiarities of the structure of the vocal apparatus, work on diction and expressiveness of singing, and often provide artistic guidance for musical performances. Note that almost all of this functionality is more or less typical of the work of modern piano concertmasters of opera and ballet theaters, with the possible exception of playing stringed and wind instruments (however, there are exceptions here). In this regard, let us draw the following conclusion: studying the history of the formation of the profession of a concert pianist, opening general access to Russian and foreign music archives, will certainly contribute not only to identifying the "white spots" of this specialty, but will also allow us to use in creative practice those developments that were made by their predecessors hundreds of years ago. In this case, the wisdom sounds very true: everything new is well-forgotten old.

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Со списком рецензентов можно ознакомиться [здесь](#).

Рецензируемый текст «К истокам профессии пианиста-концертмейстера: искусство *maestro al cembalo*» представляет собой попытку исторической реконструкции формирования специальности концертмейстера-пианиста, необходимость которой автор поясняет следующим образом: «....до настоящего времени не были осуществлены фундаментальные исследования в области истории становления этой специальности – от истоков до современности. .... На наш взгляд, такая несправедливая ситуация требует действий по ее исправлению. Одним из первых шагов в данной связи может стать реконструкция формирования специальности концертмейстера-пианиста... изучение периода активной деятельности «прародителей» современных пианистов-концертмейстеров – *maestro al cembalo* – позволит не только приоткрыть «завесу» тайны этой забытой специальности, представить имена наиболее видных представителей этих музыкантов, продемонстрировать особенности их работы, но и показать, что достигнутые ими результаты в искусстве совместного исполнительства можно использовать современным пианистам в их творческой практике». Автор ставит достаточно широкие временные рамки своему исследованию – с XVI и до конца XVIII вв. Целый историографический обзор проблемы отсутствует, но по ходу текста исследования автор отсылает к работам М. В. Иванова-Борецкого, А. В. Бояркиной, Г. В. Благодаров, в библиографическом списке присутствуют работы американских авторов и отсылки к архивным материалам Милана, Венеции и Флоренции. В целом статья соответствует заявленным целям, выдержана хронологическая последовательность в изложении материала и логика повествования, от зарождения профессии *maestro al cembalo* в период Позднего Возрождения к «поворотному моменту в развитии профессии *maestro al cembalo* .... деятельность знаменитой Флорентийской камераты и постановка ее силами первой оперы – «Дафны» Я. Пери» и расцвету данной профессии при поддержке в том числе семьи Медичи. Автор заключает, что «....1540 по 1800 годы или два с половиной века, искусство *maestro al cembalo* внесло существенный вклад в процесс формирования концертмейстерского искусства. Закат деятельности *maestro al cembalo* связан с теми тектоническими сдвигами в музыкальной культуре, которые произошли в

*конце XVII века. Одной из главной причин назовем бурное развитие фортепиано, его становление как ведущего клавишного инструмента, в довольно короткое время вытеснившего клавесин, клавикорд, клавичембало и верджинал, которые были рабочими инструментами maestro al cembalo. .... Наступало новое время, в котором произошла трансформация профессии maestro al cembalo в коррепетитора, а затем и в пианиста-концертмейстера». В целом работа выполнена на должном научно-методическом уровне и представляет интерес для российского читателя. Рецензируемый текст «К истокам профессии пианиста-концертмейстера: искусство maestro al cembalo» рекомендуется к публикации.*