**Chapter 6**

**Music for Soloists with Orchestra—the Concerto**

The concerto is the most important form of music for instrumental soloist and orchestra. It developed in the Baroque era and is still commonly written and performed today. It can be written for more than one soloist, but it is most commonly for just one instrumental soloist with orchestral accompaniment. These works are usually in three contrasting movements that often are in the format of a fast first movement, slow second, and a fast third movement.

In its earliest form it was written for a small group of soloists called a concertino. This group was musically pitted against the full ensemble. This early form is now referred to as a concerto grosso to distinguish it from the more common solo concerto. There were thousands of concertos written during the Baroque era for just about every instrument, and for some that no longer exist. One of the leading composers of this form was an Italian named Antonio Vivaldi who lived from 1678 to 1741. He wrote many other styles as well, including chamber music, opera, suites, oratorios, and cantatas. Vivaldi lived in Venice much of his life and this geographic location helped spread his name as a composer throughout Europe. Vivaldi wrote in most important styles of the day, including opera and chamber music, but his concertos are his best works. One of the most beloved works of all time, a set of four violin concertos called *The Four Seasons,* is an excellent example of his work.

One of the things to listen for in concertos is a cadenza. This is a short, virtuosic section of music for just the soloist, and is not accompanied by the orchestra. Most often, the cadenza is not written by the composer. Instead, it is written by the performer to show off more of his or her skills. And many times the best performers create these cadenzas extemporaneously at the performance and change them each time.

The popularity of the concerto continued in the Classical era, and both Haydn and Mozart wrote a good number for various instruments. The most famous of this time are for piano or violin, but composers wrote concerti for all instruments of the day. As time passed and instruments improved, concertos became more and more virtuosic. By the Romantic era the concerto was a long and complicated work that displayed great virtuosity of the player. As public concerts became more popular in the Romantic period more and more virtuoso players appeared, and concertos from the Baroque and Classical time periods were performed alongside new works of the Romantic era. In the Romantic time period great violin and piano concertos were the most popular, and composers like Ludwig van Beethoven, Felix Mendelssohn, Johannes Brahms, and Peter Tchaikovsky all wrote masterpieces that are still performed today.

One of the most popular Romantic era concertos still played today is the violin concerto written by Felix Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn lived from 1809 to 1847 as a member of a prominent musical family in Germany. Like Mozart, he was a child prodigy, performing on the piano and composing at the professional level by age nine. He was an early champion of the greatness of J. S. Bach and was well known as a conductor as well as pianist and composer. In his short life he became one of the world’s leading composers, performers, and teachers, having also founded the modern music conservatory program of study.

The concerto relies on the notion of contrast to make the long work interesting. The movements usually have more than one theme and this theme is usually developed or varied throughout the movement. A common form to be used in a concerto is the theme and variation form because the variations can become increasingly difficult and complex as the work progresses.