

BYOC: Five Principles for Building Your Own (Classical) Cadenzas
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Basic Principles of Cadenza Writing

1. Reflect the character of the surrounding music.
 - Use thematic material from the surrounding music.
 - Stay in the general tempo area of the surrounding music (e.g., no adagio cadenzas for fast movements, no allegro cadenzas for slow movements).
2. Make it sound improvised.
 - Use virtuosic figures (e.g., fast scales and sequences) within thematic material or to connect different themes or motives.
 - Surprise the listener with devices like tempo changes, irregular meter, harmonic surprises, changes in mode, and broken-off ideas.
3. Know the basics of harmonic function.
 - The stereotypical classical cadential formula is I^6 - ii^6 - I^6_4 - V^7 - I (where IV can be substituted for ii^6). The cadenza must end with this formula, though it can be subverted along the way to surprise the listener.
 - The cadenza gives the impression of being frozen in time at the moment of greatest harmonic tension approaching the final structural cadence: the impending resolution of the $6/4$ - 7 suspension over the final dominant harmony. It should therefore begin within I^6_4 harmony before wandering to all kinds of places by using thematic material from the surrounding music.
4. Keep it reasonably brief.
 - 18th-century musicians cautioned against cadenzas longer than what could be played in a single breath. We have somewhat more leeway now, but we still should probably heed the words of Daniel Gottlob Türk, who stated that “enormously long cadenzas which sometimes last several minutes are in no way excusable.”
 - Mozart’s piano cadenzas last no longer than a couple of minutes, generally speaking, and Joachim Andersen’s famous flute cadenzas for the Mozart concertos, written with romantic sensibilities, come close to that. Perhaps it is enough to say that cadenzas for orchestral instruments, which generally lack the power and harmonic possibilities of the piano, should not far exceed a minute.
 - If you have a question of length, play through a cadenza for your teacher or colleagues, or record yourself playing it. If boredom sets in before the end comes, it is likely too long.
5. Balance your choices.
 - Balance and clarity are hallmarks of classical-period music. With this in mind, balance the previous four principles against each other. For example, if you find a way to modulate from the tonic to the tritone and back (an unheard-of harmonic device in the classical period) clearly and convincingly, go for it. Consider balancing such an unconventional choice by not staying that distant from the tonic for long and by strictly following the other conventions of eighteenth century style outlined above, such as thematic variety, freedom of tempo and meter, et al.

Musical Examples

Mozart's cadenzas closely follow the conventions of eighteenth-century style. Beethoven's cadenzas for Mozart's piano concertos go a bit afield but compensate in a way that makes them satisfyingly classical. Andersen goes even further out of bounds—especially in length, considering he was writing for a wind instrument—but he also retains many elements of classical style. Finally, Aho's cadenzas are recommended as entertaining, creative examples that nevertheless violate many classical conventions and are likely not suitable models for competitions, auditions, and many performances.

- W. A. Mozart: Cadenzas for Piano Concerto No. 23 in A Major, K. 488
- L. V. Beethoven: Cadenzas for W. A. Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 20 in D Minor, K. 466
- C. J. Andersen: Cadenzas for W. A. Mozart's Flute Concerto No. 2 in D Major, K. 314
- K. Aho: Cadenzas for W. A. Mozart's Flute Concerto No. 1 in G Major, K. 313

Suggested Reading

Karatofis, Samuel. "The Composition and Performance Practice of the Cadenza in the Classical Era." *McNair Scholars Research Journal* 2/1 (2009), 155-164.

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Swain, J. P. "Form and Function of the Classical Cadenza." *The Journal of Musicology* 6/1 (1988), 27-59.

Tromlitz, J. G. *The Virtuoso Flute Player* (A. Powell, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Türk, Daniel Gottlob. *School of Clavier Playing* (R. H. Naggh, Trans.). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982.

