

## Beethoven Symphony No. 3 – May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018

### Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 61

Ludwig van Beethoven  
1770-1827

Despite the customary long gestation of his music, when pressed, Beethoven could work fast. In a letter to his publisher in mid-November 1806 there is no mention of the Violin Concerto as work in progress, but on December 23 it was premiered by Franz Clement, a friend of the composer and leader of the orchestra at the Theater an der Wien. As was common with Beethoven, he made continual changes in the manuscript after the premiere until publication in 1808, but the changes were mostly in detail and not in the fundamental conception of the work.

Franz Clement was a formidable musician with a prodigious musical memory, lauded both for his technique and his impeccable intonation and musicianship. From manuscript sources it becomes clear that he tried to advise Beethoven on phrasing and the technical possibilities of the instrument, but that the composer took only some of his suggestions. In the Concerto Beethoven provided him with immense challenges, both technical and musical. In retrospect, it is clear that the Concerto was the first major violin concerto of the late Classical period, acting as a model for the subsequent works of Felix Mendelssohn, Johannes Brahms and Max Bruch.

The premiere, however, was not a success, nor did the work fare much better the following year. The public simply didn't get it. The turning point for the Concerto came in 1844, when 13-year-old Joseph Joachim performed it in London with the Philharmonic Society, Mendelssohn conducting. For the occasion, the Society set aside its rule against the appearance of child prodigies. Joachim at 13 was considered a fully mature artist.

It is an amusing – and often educational – exercise in virtual time travel to put oneself in the shoes of an audience who rejected a work of art that subsequently went on to be hailed as a masterpiece. So what did Beethoven's audience object to in the Violin Concerto?

First of all, there is the sheer heft of the piece; even Mozart's five violin concertos were significantly shorter and lightweight by comparison. Then there's the opening; Beethoven was no newcomer to controversial openings. Was it the four repeated identical solo timpani beats that form part of the main theme that amazed Beethoven's contemporaries? Haydn had done the same thing in the Symphony No. 103, the "Drum Roll," but *that* was a symphony, not a violin concerto. At the fifth beat, the woodwinds, and particularly the oboe, chime in with a gentle melody, but the four notes return immediately, now a motto that carries over as a part of all of the subsequent themes.

The Concerto contains cadenzas for all three movements, but it also contains many cadenza-like passages. Clement's virtuosity and pinpoint accuracy of intonation inspired the composer to give special prominence to the high E-string. The soloist's entrance in the first movement is a telling example, and passages in all three movements occupy the instrument's stratosphere where even Vivaldi had seldom trod.

The second movement, *Larghetto*, is a chorale-like gentle theme with a set of four variations. The theme is not the standard sequence of two repeated strains. Rather, it is a long melody with no internal repeats. Moreover, the soloist doesn't simply embellish the melody with increasingly acrobatic and elaborate decoration, but rather builds the emotional intensity.

Near the end of the movement, Beethoven provides a section of new material and a short cadenza, leading without a break into the Rondo Finale. This, a lively bravura movement based on a dancing folk-like theme, is the technical counterbalance to the emotional intensity of the first two movements. Brahms was to imitate the ebullient good humor in the finale of his own Violin Concerto.

One other reason for the initial rejection of Beethoven's Concerto resides in the violin concertos of the Classical period. Like Mozart's five concerti, these were modest – although elegant – in their requirements of the soloist. Unlike twentieth century music lovers, who revere the music of centuries past more than contemporary music, the challenging Italian-style concerti of Vivaldi or Bach had long since become passé in nineteenth-century Vienna. Beethoven was virtually reinventing the genre, setting the stage for a rash of challenging virtuoso violin works by such performer-composers Niccoló Paganini that soon took Europe by storm.

### **Symphony No. 3 in E-flat major, Op. 55, “Eroica “**

Ludwig van Beethoven  
1770-1827

Few musical manuscripts have elicited so much musicological discussion as has Beethoven's personal conductor's copy of his Symphony No. 3. The story of its original dedication to Napoleon, the chief military defender of the French Revolution with its ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, and the subsequent violent erasure of the dedication when Napoleon crowned himself emperor, has been told time and again.

Reality, however, is often more complex than history books would have it. Beethoven was clearly disgusted at Napoleon's coronation, exclaiming: “Is he then, too, nothing more than an ordinary human being? Now he, too, will trample on all the rights of man...become a tyrant.” But his disappointment with the Emperor was tinged in no small part by self-interest. Hoping at the time to establish a foothold in the musical life of Paris, the composer had planned to travel there with his mentor, Prince Lobkowitz, using the premiere of the Symphony as a passport to the French capital and lucrative commissions. Napoleon's coup, and the resultant political upheavals, disrupted these plans and are the probable reason why the Symphony, finished at the beginning of 1804, did not receive its premiere in Vienna until a year later.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Symphony is how Beethoven – who had surprising difficulty coming up with melodies – was able to make so much out of so little. The opening theme is nothing more than an arpeggiated E-flat major chord; the Scherzo theme is a descending E-flat major scale; and the theme for the Finale is a brief simple bass pattern that he had used three times previously – in the Piano Variations, Op. 35, in one of his Contredanses (WoO. 14, no. 7) and in the grand finale of his ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus*, Op. 43 – repeated beneath a set of spectacular variations. Only the second movement, the Funeral March, begins with a fully formed theme.

It is hard for us today to appreciate the revolutionary impact of this symphony on Vienna's audience. The constantly modulating keys, rhythmic shifts, large dynamic leaps and unfamiliar harmonies baffled Beethoven's friendly but conservative public, and the reception was anything but enthusiastic. It took a few years for the Viennese to warm to this innovative work.

Although it would take many pages of in-depth musical analysis to explain what was so different and disturbing about this Symphony, here are some highlights that we now take for granted after over 200 years of development and change in Western music:

To begin with, there is the sheer length and scope of the work. The first movement alone is longer than anything that had been written up to this time. It follows a complex and, at times, astonishing, key structure, whose wanderings and surprises blur the distinctions between the basic components of sonata form (The coda, for example, is another mini-development in a distant key.)

The *Andante*, entitled “Funeral March for a Hero,” counters even the most poignant Mozartian second movement with a totally new depth of emotional intensity and grandeur. The *Scherzo* – an earlier Beethoven invention to replace the sometimes stately, sometimes thumping minuets of Mozart and Haydn – breaks with tradition in its Trio, scored as a section solo for the horns.

Instead of creating a sprightly and upbeat rondo, in the style of his predecessors, Beethoven gives a weight and importance to the Finale that would inspire both his own future symphonic writing (culminating in the Ninth Symphony) and that of his successors. The theme is nothing more than a skeleton, actually more a ground bass than a true melody. The variations that constitute this lengthy movement are also quite new in structure. While variation forms tended to be somewhat static, adhering throughout to a single key and the standard phrase length of the original theme, Beethoven includes variations in different keys and of varying lengths; he even breaks away from the variations altogether for a while in the middle of the movement. Whereas most sets of variations progress steadily from the simple to the complex – or, at least, the more ornamented – Beethoven was less interested in bravura than in giving each variation its own mood, for which he also employed an innovative use of orchestral solos and ensembles.

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