Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Piano Concerto No. 1 in C, Opus 15


A composer who was also a virtuoso performer in the Classical era was much more likely to make a satisfactory income from concertos that he wrote for himself to play than from any other musical genre (unless perhaps he had the good fortune to be a successful opera composer). In the early part of his career Beethoven composed more concertos than symphonies and became well-known to the musical public as a superbly dramatic and expressive pianist. If he had not lost his hearing and thus been forced to forego playing in public, he might well have continued writing piano concertos all his life; there is an unfinished draft for much of the first movement of what would have been the Sixth Concerto, written after the completion of the Emperor, but Beethoven lost interest and dropped it.

Actually Beethoven had already written at least two piano concertos before writing “Number 1.” The first was composed in 1784 while he was still in Bonn and was never published. Around 1790 in Vienna he composed the B-flat concerto. Probably because performances were a reasonable source of income, and perhaps also because he was not totally satisfied with the work—he revised it substantially before publication—Beethoven withheld that concerto from the publishers for a number of years. As a result it finally came out as his Second Concerto, Opus 19, although there is no doubt that it was composed some years before the so-called First Concerto, Opus 15.

The First Concerto, in C major, also proved financially remunerative to Beethoven. Though its early history is somewhat obscure, it nevertheless marks a significant advance over its predecessor. Perhaps it was the success of the C major concerto that induced Beethoven to rework the earlier B-flat concerto and make it publishable, although even after doing so he referred to it as an early work which “is not one of my best compositions.” Beethoven felt—and critics have agreed with him—that he made significant progress between the B-flat and the C major concertos, and he was concerned that the higher opus number attached to the earlier work would give the public an unfavorable impression of his music.

The Opus 15 concerto follows closely in the classical mold with an extended orchestral exposition that remains in the tonic key, though with surprising feints to foreign tonalities, the first of which is E-flat. The soloist enters and dominates the conversation, moving to the dominant for the first full statement of the lyrical second theme, which had been little more than hinted at in the orchestral statement. The development starts with a sudden upward sideslipping that leads to an extended passage in E-flat, an echo of the unexpected earlier appearance of that key. The concerto opened with an unusual quiet statement of the main theme; when time comes for the recapitulation, the element of surprise is no longer relevant, so Beethoven hammers out the theme fortissimo in the full orchestra, after which the recapitulation deals mostly with the secondary material. Beethoven himself wrote no fewer than three cadenzas for the first movement, each more elaborate than the one that preceded it. All of them were written some years after the completion of the concerto; this is indicated by the fact that they were intended to be played on a piano of larger size than the one Beethoven had when he wrote the rest of the piece. (The piano was a developing instrument at the turn of the eighteenth to nineteenth century, and, in particular, keyboards were not yet standardized for the number of keys.)

The Largo is the longest slow movement of any Beethoven concerto, an extended lyrical song-form with increasingly elaborate ornamentation. The rondo, built on a witty, bouncy tune that goes on just a bit longer than you think it will, is filled with all the standard rondo tricks: the suggestion of modulations to distant keys when it is in fact just about to settle on the tonic for a restatement, offbeat sforzandos and syncopations, rushing scales and a breakneck pace. Though the movement is long in number of measures, the music doesn’t lose its smile for an instant.

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