

Ludwig van Beethoven

Piano Concerto No. 1 in C, Opus 15

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN was baptized in Bonn, Germany, on December 17, 1770, and died in Vienna on March 26, 1827. According to The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, he composed his C major concerto in 1795 and gave the first performance on December 18 that year in Vienna; but earlier sources hold that the concerto was written probably in 1796-97, completed in 1798, and premiered during Beethoven's visit that year to Prague. He evidently revised the score somewhat before its publication in 1801. Beethoven himself wrote three different cadenzas for the first movement at a later date, presumably after 1804, judging by the keyboard range required.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO PIANO, the score calls for an orchestra of one flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. At these performances, Leif Ove Andsnes plays cadenzas by Beethoven.

Beethoven's career was intimately bound up with the keyboard, from his teens as an organist and budding virtuoso to his years as a composer/pianist in Vienna, and even beyond that, after encroaching deafness put an end to his performing. In later years, almost stone-deaf, Beethoven still played alone and sometimes for friends, extemporizing brilliantly as in the old days, when by then he could not hear a note he played. His fingers could still find the music in his inner ear.

So pervasive was the piano to Beethoven that we have to remind ourselves that he was part of the first generation to grow up playing the instrument, which had only recently replaced the harpsichord and was evolving rapidly. Haydn and Mozart came up playing the harpsichord and only later arrived at the piano. As musicians tend to be, Beethoven was critical of the competition. "*Putsch, putsch, putsch,*" he said of the flashy new virtuosos, "and what does it all mean? Nothing!" He heard Mozart perform, he said, and the man was a harpsichordist. He didn't know how to play the piano: no legato, no singing style. Part of his implication was that Mozart didn't really know how to write for the piano either.

On one hand this is familiar musicianly complaining about the rivals. On the other hand, in his terms, Beethoven was right. From the beginning the piano was his frame of reference, and for a long time performing was the better part of his income. The consummate professional, he paid minute attention to finding new and idiomatic ways for playing and composing for the piano. Meanwhile he was an adviser to piano manufacturers, who listened to what he said. Mostly what he told them was, Make your pianos bigger and stronger. His music said the same thing. As soon as an instrument appeared with higher notes he used them, and the force of his conceptions demanded louder and richer instruments. Érard in Paris and Broadwood in England sent him pianos, hoping he would be pleased and endorse them.

In other words, as performer as well as composer, Beethoven looms large in the development of the modern instrument, in its playing and composing technique, and in its design. All that, in turn, is another symptom of the Beethoven approach to everything musical: a solid grounding in technique and tradition, but no less a relentless pushing of envelopes.

If you were a virtuoso in Beethoven's day, a prime bread-and-butter medium was the concerto, and to his programs Beethoven often added solo improvisations. He was celebrated for the power and velocity of his playing, the brilliance of his ornaments including triple trills, but above all for the fire and imagination of his extemporizing. Years before his music started to define the rising Romantic temperament, that wild and passionate spirit was prophesied in the music that flowed directly from his mind to his fingers.

Thus while the hoary division of Beethoven's work into Early, Middle, and Late periods persists, one of the many caveats to that pattern is that when it came to his own instrument the piano, the Middle started early: the authentic Beethoven voice appears first in works including the piano sonatas and piano trios. It was in the last years of the eighteenth century, when he was composing the startling and prophetic piano trios of Opus 1, that he wrote the C major concerto with one foot in the past and

the other in the future.

Even then Beethoven was often ill, but otherwise his life in those years was quite pleasant. He was a hot young virtuoso and composer playing in the best salons, and had not yet been forced to confront the specter of deafness. In the pattern familiar to Mozart and most composer/performers, as a soloist Beethoven needed to have a fresh concerto in his repertoire, written to strut his particular stuff. For that reason he didn't publish his early piano concertos right away; they were for his own use, and he tinkered with them from performance to performance. When one concerto had lost its novelty he wrote another, and only then published the old one.

The Piano Concerto No. 1 in C major was written after the Second in B-flat major, thus numbered because the C major was published first. The B-flat major concerto had a long and rambling gestation, starting in Bonn before he came to Vienna. In that period Beethoven was preoccupied with polishing his craft, mastering one genre after another. With one concerto already under his belt, however, he pulled together the C major in a relatively short time, probably in 1795. That year a visitor to his flat found Beethoven, miserable with colic, with four copyists stationed in the hall, writing the finale two days before the premiere. The final version of the concerto is a score from 1800. Shortly after, Beethoven declared that he was unsatisfied with everything he'd written and intended to make a new beginning. Soon followed the epochal Symphony No. 3, *Eroica*.

If the opening of the C major concerto shouts some, it does not entirely shout *Beethoven*. It's a military march, a fashionable mode in concertos of the time. The music begins softly, at a distance, in a stately *dah, dit-dit dah* figure; with a *forte* the parade is upon us. The martial first theme is followed by a lyrically contrasting second; the gesture is expected, the music attractive but impersonal. But the key is Beethovenian: a more highly spiced E-flat for a second key rather than the conventional G, a kind of harmonic move that will become a lifelong Beethoven thumbprint. The soloist enters not on the main theme but with something new—lyrical, quiet, and inward, which alerts us that the agenda of the soloist and the orchestra are not quite the same. In fact, for all the flamboyant passagework, the soloist never plays the martial main theme. The essential voice of the soloist breaks out above all in the middle, at the onset of the development: a suddenly rich and passionate, shrouded, almost minorish E-flat major section, in sound and import entirely Beethoven.

The first movement ends with a conventional martial fervor, and the second movement commences in A-flat major with a Largo version of the work's opening rhythmic motto: *dah, dit-dit dah*. But this movement picks up the mood of the middle of the first movement—atmospheric and introspective, gradually passionate. Again we hear that strangely shadowed major. The main theme has a noble simplicity; the orchestral scoring is rich, warm, and touching; the piano garlands familiar from Classical slow movements are here not precious and *galant* so much as atmospheric and introspective. Here as elsewhere, some of the most moving and fresh music in early Beethoven are the slow movements. In the searching coda there is a striking and soulful duet between piano and clarinet.

So where does this story lead us? A first movement in which the orchestra is militant and the soloist tending more to thoughtful and expressive. A second movement where the latter qualities take over. Then, fun and games.

All Beethoven's concerto finales are rondos, and rondo finales were supposed to be light, rhythmical, quirky, with lots of teasing accompanying the periodic return of the rondo theme. Beethoven plays that game to the hilt, but pushes it: his rondo theme goes beyond merely folksy to a rumbustious, floor-shaking barn dance. For an added fillip, we're not sure whether the main theme begins on an upbeat or a downbeat, so the metric sense gets amusingly jerked around. On its last appearance the rondo theme enters in the wrongest of wrong keys, B major, before getting chased back to the proper C major. The contrasting sections are largely given to brilliant virtuosity. The middle section features a jovial and jokey tune in A minor, perhaps to parallel the minorish major in the middle of the first movement.

For a telling last touch, just before the flashy last cadence there is a brief turn to lyrical and touching.

That's been the undercurrent all along of this concerto that on the surface purports to be militant and exuberant and more or less conventional, but also has an inner life prophetic of much Beethoven to come.

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THE FIRST AMERICAN PERFORMANCE OF BEETHOVEN'S PIANO CONCERTO NO. 1 *was given on March 19, 1857, by pianist Franz Werner with Frédéric Ritter and the Philharmonic Society at the Music Hall in Cincinnati. B.J. Lang was soloist in the first Boston performance on January 16, 1868, in a concert of the Harvard Musical Society, Carl Zerrahn conducting.*

THE FIRST BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCE OF THE CONCERTO *was a single performance led by Emil Paur in Cambridge on December 12, 1895, with pianist Marie Geselschap, after which the BSO did not play the work again until February 15, 1932, with Serge Koussevitzky conducting and soloist Robert Goldsand. Subsequent Boston Symphony performances have featured Shirley Bagley (Koussevitzky conducting), Leonard Bernstein (conducting from the keyboard), Ania Dorfman and Sviatoslav Richter (Charles Munch), Claude Frank (Erich Leinsdorf and, later, Stanislaw Skrowaczewski), Rudolf Serkin and Jerome Lowenthal (Max Rudolf), Christoph Eschenbach (Seiji Ozawa), Misha Dichter (Michael Tilson Thomas), Emanuel Ax (Edo de Waart), Malcolm Frager (Klaus Tennstedt), Rudolf Serkin (Ozawa), Justus Frantz (Eschenbach), Eschenbach again (doubling as soloist and conductor), Alfred Brendel (Hiroshi Wakasugi and, on several later occasions, Ozawa), Rudolf Firkušný (Jesús López-Cobos), Maria Tipo (Robert Spano), Radu Lupu (Mariss Jansons), Richard Goode (Ozawa), André Watts (Alan Gilbert), Murray Perahia (Bernard Haitink), Gianluca Cascioli (Roberto Abbado), Lars Vogt (Andrey Boreyko), Piotr Anderszewski (the most recent subscription performances, in April 2006 with Robert Spano), and Imogen Cooper (the most recent Tanglewood performance, on August 25, 2006, with Gustavo Dudamel conducting).*