LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Triple Concerto in C for piano, violin, and cello, Opus 56


Beethoven composed his Triple Concerto, Opus 56, for his pupil and patron, the Archduke Rudolph of Austria, who was a pianist and amateur composer. The concerto was intended for performance by the Archduke himself, along with his court violinist and cellist; for this reason Beethoven made the piano part much easier than those of the two string soloists. He sketched the first movement early in 1803, about the same time he was composing the *Eroica* Symphony (which was largely finished by November), and continued working on it the following year, while also planning and writing two of his most famous piano sonatas—the *Waldstein* and the *Appassionata*—and the first of the Razumovsky quartets. Thus the Triple Concerto falls squarely into the period of Beethoven’s most prolific, and popular, work.

The choice of three soloists for his C major concerto was an unusual one. Not that there weren’t concertos with more than one soloist before; the Baroque era is full of them, and even the symphonic concertante of the classical era has many examples. But the particular combination of piano, violin, and cello seems never to have been tried before. The choice of solo instruments may have been dictated by his dedicatee, the young Archduke Rudolph, who wanted it for performance by his private orchestra. He was one of the Emperor’s sons, was no mean pianist himself (he was a pupil of Beethoven’s), and remained for years one of the composer’s most steadfast supporters. The Archduke himself was to play the piano in the performance, and the violin and cello parts were written for the principal players in the orchestra, a violinist named Seidler and the cellist Anton Kraft, who was one of the leading virtuosos of the day. Beethoven apparently admired Kraft especially, because the cello part is notably more difficult than either of the other two solo parts and remains, indeed, one of the hardest works in the cello repertory.

It is not entirely clear when Beethoven finished the concerto. He interrupted work on it in January 1804 to begin the composition of *Leonore* (which ultimately became *Fidelio*). In the spring of 1804 he spent some time getting the score of the *Eroica* into its final state for performance. And he seems to have been shifting back and forth between several works in progress at this time, so it may have been a year or more before he actually brought the piece to conclusion, probably at the urgent request of the Archduke. The Archduke presumably kept the manuscript (now lost) of the finished work and took part in private performances. The parts were published in 1807—oddlly enough with a dedication to Prince Lobkowitz rather than the Archduke—and the work was publicly performed in Vienna’s Augarten in May 1808.

Like many of the post-*Eroica* works, the Triple Concerto is expansive, making a virtue out of length. In this particular case the length is generated in part by the presence of three soloists, each of whom requires a separate statement of the material in the exposition. This format, in turn, means that the concerto as a whole tends more toward lyric elaboration than to dramatic transformation of the material. The first movement is far more leisurely and less heaven-storming than Beethoven’s other compositions of the same time, and he seems to have been more leisurely and less heaven-storming than Beethoven’s other compositions of the same time, and he seems to have been

To follow the unusually long first movement Beethoven employed the same procedure he had already tried in the *Waldstein* Sonata of having a short set of variations that links directly to the final *Rondo alla polacca*, which uses the polonaise rhythm that even then, long before Chopin, was popular all over Europe for festive music of a particularly ceremonial type in triple meter.

The Triple Concerto has long been the stepchild of Beethoven’s concerto compositions, the work least often played and most severely criticized. To be sure, the demands of three soloists sometimes lead to more repetition than we expect from Beethoven, but at the same time the sheer breadth of the work and the intrinsic beauty of many of the ideas mark it as a fascinating step in Beethoven’s progression. And beyond the Triple Concerto, we can already sense the two broadly lyrical concertos that could not have been written without this preliminary, the Violin Concerto and the Fourth Piano Concerto.

—Steven Ledbetter