Ludwig van Beethoven
Romance No. 1 in G for violin and orchestra, Opus 40
Romance No. 2 in F for violin and orchestra, Opus 50

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN was baptized in Bonn, Germany, on December 17, 1770, and died in Vienna on March 26, 1827. He composed his two Romances for violin and orchestra not later than fall 1802, when his brother Karl offered both of them to the publishers Breitkopf & Härtel. The dates of the first performances are not known.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO VIOLIN, the Romances are scored for a modest orchestra of one flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, and strings.

Eighteenth-century German composers borrowed the term “Romance,” or Romanze, from their French contemporaries to denote a kind of simple but affecting song; eventually Haydn and Mozart used the label not only for vocal works but also for some lyrical slow movements in their larger works. In each of the movements they labeled thus, melodic invention and lyrical feeling dominate. “Romance,” however, was not a name used for individual character pieces until the nineteenth century.

Beethoven studied the violin when he lived in Bonn, and even played viola in an orchestra there before he moved to Vienna in 1792. Thus it is not surprising that he displayed an interest in writing for the violin early on in his career, and that he wrote two Romances—No. 1 in G, Opus 40, and No. 2 in F, Opus 50. One way to approach his two charming single-movement Romances is to perceive them as way stations on his journey to the composition of his famous Violin Concerto, which he completed in 1806. These pieces, composed in sectional form, also require both technical fluency and elegant musicianship from the violin soloist. Music historians know that they were both completed by 1802, when the composer’s brother negotiated their publication, but it is most likely that they were written in the years leading up to that. The Romance in F is presumed to have been composed first, although it is called No. 2 and has a later opus number than the other Romance. It was probably premiered shortly after it was completed, although facts about its early performance history are not available. The year of its publication was the same year that Beethoven completed his Symphony No. 2 and his Heiligenstadt Testament, in which he revealed his despair about his increasing deafness. Marion M. Scott, an English biographer of Beethoven, writes of the Romances, “They are beautiful in their way, not easy as to technique, and very difficult to interpret satisfactorily.” The famous 19th-century violinist Joseph Joachim was known to have valued the Romance in F highly and counted the original manuscript for the work, which he received as a gift from an admirer, as one of his most prized possessions.

No one knows just why Beethoven composed his Romances. Some historians speculate that one or the other may have been originally intended as the slow central movement for a fragmentary C major violin concerto that he had begun earlier; but some ponder that if that were true, why would he have created two Romances in different keys? In any event, the two Romances share a similarity in form as well as in mood, both being completely lyrical in spirit.

Susan Halpern

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THE EARLIEST BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA PERFORMANCES of either Beethoven Romance were of the Romance No. 2 in F, Opus 50: in January 1898 with Emil Paur conducting and then BSO concertmaster Timothée Adamowski as soloist, followed that February by a performance in Brooklyn; and a single December 1904 performance in Philadelphia with soloist Eugène Ysaïe under the direction of Wilhelm Gericke. It then wasn’t until July 1965 at Tanglewood that either Romance was programmed by the BSO: with Erich Leinsdorf conducting, Isaac Stern performed the F major Romance that July 18 and the Romance No. 1 in G, Opus 40, that July 24. Klaus Tennstedt led both Romances with then concertmaster Joseph Silverstein as part of an all-Beethoven concert at Tanglewood on July 28, 1978 (the program in fact being the same as tonight’s, the two Romances being followed by the Symphony No. 7); and Itzhak Perlman doubled as soloist and conductor on two occasions for Tanglewood performances of the two Romances paired in a single concert, on August 19, 2000, and August 27, 2011. The only other BSO performances, also at Tanglewood, were of the Romance No. 2 in F: with soloist Daniel Hope and conductor Jens Georg Bachmann on July 22, 2007, and soloist Joshua Bell and conductor Susanna Mälkki on August 21, 2010. Tonight’s
performance of the G major Romance is the first to be played by the BSO at Symphony Hall.