

CONCERTO FOR VIOLIN AND ORCHESTRA IN D MAJOR, OP. 61

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

*Born December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany*

*Died March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria*

In 1806, Ludwig van Beethoven was well on the way to expressing his own musical voice. By this time, he had completed his fourth and fifth symphonies and the *Waldstein* and *Appassionata* piano sonatas, which opened new vistas. The Violin Concerto now took its place as one of his most innovative and, perhaps, perplexing works. A three-minute wait for soloist entry, the “knocking rhythm” from the timpani, direct connectivity between second and third movements, a shockingly brusque ending, and comparative “lack” of traditional virtuosity set this gigantic complex work apart from the usual violin concerto fare. But the new-style writing was perfect for the premiere soloist, Franz Clement, noted for “graceful playing, a relative small but expressive style, and unflinching purity in high positions and exposed entrances.”

On December 23, 1806, the concerto barely survived an inauspicious premiere. Beethoven had delivered the handwritten score only two days before to the musicians. The 26-year-old Clement was sight reading most of the time; a *cadenza* was missing; and Clement probably improvised a *cadenza* on the spot. (Most audiences today are used to the Kreisler *cadenza*.) Between the first and second movements, Clement threw in a couple of compositions of his own and played upside down on one string for a bit of saucy showmanship, which regaled the audience. The concerto itself was marginalized at best.

After the concert, Clement suggested that the concerto be rewritten for piano (Beethoven did turn out a piano version in 1808, which was favored by the pianist Muzio Clementi). Reviewer Johann Nepomuk Moser commented in the *Theaterzeitung*, “The concerto’s many beauties must be conceded but ... the endless repetitions of certain common place passages may easily become tedious ... it is to be feared that if Beethoven continues upon this path, he and the public will fare badly.” In *Harmonicon*, William Ayrton wrote, “Beethoven has put forth no strength in his Violin Concerto. It is merely a fiddling affair and might have been written by any third or fourth rate composer.” Enduring fame and acceptance would not come until 1844 when the precocious Joseph Joachim performed the concerto repeatedly to great acclaim while on tour with Felix Mendelssohn as conductor.

The first movement, *allegro ma non troppo*, opens with five pulsing strokes from the timpani (a gesture that will inhabit the entire work, hence the sobriquet *kettledrum concerto*), followed by a calm, gently sculpted melody (first theme) sung by oboes, clarinets and bassoons. Violins echo the timpani strokes before winds and horns present a second theme in another well-coined statement. After the expansive introduction, the soloist enters with a daring passage of high ascending octaves (no room for an error in intonation) playing in quasi-improvisatory fashion before launching his first theme. A second theme follows, and the two forces work out the ideas in tight collaboration during the huge development, concluding with a quiet section sung by the soloist. The recapitulation is announced by reference to the opening timpani strokes now displayed by full orchestra. Themes from the exposition re-emerge with decorative commentary. Before the Kreisler *cadenza*, most soloists made up their own *cadenza* at this point. A quote of the second theme concludes the movement as a *coda*.

The hymn-like *Larghetto* offers a stately theme of 16 measures presented first by muted strings before repetition by clarinet and bassoon. This theme moves gracefully to a secondary position while the violinist embroiders extensive ornaments in graceful arabesques, again in the dangerous high-register zone. Basically the form is a theme and variations. The violin spins a secondary theme before the first idea re-emerges in *pizzicato* articulation. A *cadenza* passage brings the movement to a close before leading directly into the third movement.

The third movement *rondo-allegro* flows seamlessly with the soloist presenting a rocking theme on the low G string. Voicing thus is warm and folk-like, and the orchestra quickly joins in the informal merrymaking as the rondo unfolds. Contrasting sections offer colorful changes of mood and key in securely crafted, bold writing. The main idea is repeated three times. There is ample opportunity for virtuosic fun (including an inserted *cadenza*), and horns lend pastoral touches throughout. The concerto closes with a bright *coda* and a pair of surprisingly hammered orchestral chords.

Christian Tetzlaff was soloist for the Orchestra's last performances of Beethoven's Violin Concerto in January 2007 under the direction of Mario Venzago.