Beethoven’s Fourth Piano Concerto

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Ravel: Le Tombeau de Couperin
Ravel’s Le Tombeau de Couperin pays homage to a French Baroque composer, but its balance and delicacy are Mozartean. Woodwinds emulate a rippling brook in the Prelude. Precise accents and piquant harmonies characterize the Forlane. The Menuet mixes tenderness with melancholy, while the Rigaudon closes Le Tombeau with verve and flair.

Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 4
Poetic and inward, Beethoven’s Fourth Concerto explores nuances of thought and expression. His sense of theater emerges in a quieter, gentler way, with an immediate entrance from the soloist. Notice the contrast in the slow movement between stern string declamation and the piano’s understated eloquence. The orchestral complement changes in each movement, culminating in a dance-like finale.

Shostakovich: Symphony No. 1
Shostakovich’s First Symphony was essentially his senior thesis; it announced him as a major figure in Soviet composition. He intended the four movements to be played without pause. Elements of the grotesque foreshadow his ironic sense of humor and political satire.
RAVEL: *Le Tombeau de Couperin*

**MAURICE RAVEL**

**Born:** March 7, 1875 in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrenées, France  
**Died:** December 28, 1937 in Paris, France  
**Composed:** 1914–17 for piano; orchestral transcription in 1919  
**World Premiere:** February 28, 1920, in Paris.  
**NJSO Premiere:** 1935–36 season. Rene Pollain conducted.  
**Duration:** 17 minutes

France has rich cultural traditions: in cuisine, language, viticulture and, of course, the visual and performing arts. In music, France has always revered the great composers of its golden Baroque era, from Jean-Baptiste Lully in the late 17th century to François Couperin—“Le Grand”—and Jean-Philippe Rameau in the first half of the 18th century.

Maurice Ravel was educated with great respect and love for this rich musical legacy. *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is a collection of dances and other musical forms that reached their apogee in the compositions of his Baroque predecessors. The piece originally appeared in 1918 as a six-movement suite for solo piano. The following year, Ravel orchestrated four of its movements in the version we hear.

The word “tombeau,” as its spelling suggests, means tomb or grave; however, the French term connotes “homage” or “tribute” as well. Ravel was paying his respects not only to Couperin but also to French Baroque heritage. His neoclassical choice of older dance forms as an instrumental suite are obvious bows to the earlier era. Preludes were a standard opening movement to an instrumental suite. The Forlana is an Italian dance with possible Slavic roots as well; it is related to the gigue and Passamezzo and shares their 6/8 meter. The Rigaudon is an ancient Provençal dance that was beloved to Ravel, and the Menuet needs no introduction to music lovers, who encounter it regularly as the third movement of symphonies, string quartets and other multi-movement works. All three dances...
were popular in the 18th century.

There is another layer of meaning in *Le Tombeau de Couperin*: each movement bears a dedication to a friend of Ravel’s who died in combat during the First World War. Ravel began the suite in 1914, after he had been discharged from the French military. Many of his friends were less fortunate, and by the time he completed composition of the original piano suite in 1917, French casualties were astronomical. Ravel’s biographer H.H. Stuckenschmidt calls *Le Tombeau de Couperin* “a collection of idealized obituaries,” and points out that a dark current of mourning underlies the superficially light strains of this lovely music. A melancholy streak is particularly evident in the two inner movements, Forlane and Menuet. Ravel’s musical language is contemporary, although he adheres to the formal demands of the older dances. His remarkable gift for orchestration brings *Le Tombeau de Couperin* vividly to life with deft touches of instrumental color, particularly in the woodwinds and brass.

*Instrumentation: two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, trumpet, harp and strings.*

**BEETHOVEN: Concerto No. 4 in G for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 58**

**LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN**

**Born:** December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany  
**Died:** March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria  
**composed:** 1805–06  
**World Premiere:** December 22, 1808, in the Theater an der Wien, Vienna. Beethoven was the soloist—in his last public appearance as pianist.  
**NJSO Premiere:** 1942–43 season. Miecio Horoszowski was the soloist; Frieder Weissmann conducted.  
**Duration:** 34 minutes

When solo piano opens this piece with a series of simple G-major chords that add up to a five-measure irregular phrase, we can surely sense that we are listening to no ordinary piano concerto. Rather than
commencing with a conventional orchestral exposition, Beethoven chooses an intimate, expressive and somewhat improvisatory primary statement. Are we auditory voyeurs by even being here?

Next, the orchestra responds—strings alone, with a related series of chords in \textit{B-major}. Now we know we have something quite extraordinary. And by the 14th measure when, one by one, the woodwinds creep into the orchestral fabric, we are virtually rubbing our eyes and ears in astonishment: this \textit{cannot} be Beethoven. No bombast, no rhetoric, no drama demanding that we sit up ramrod straight in our seats. At least in the first movement, Beethoven’s original full orchestra is Mozartean, lacking timpani and devoid of brass other than the mellow French horns.

Clearly, this concerto stands apart from its four companions. The key concept is intimacy. Sometimes it is mixed with playfulness, other times with the kind of private introspection that makes us a bit embarrassed, as if we have witnessed a corner of someone’s soul to which we have no legitimate right. Always the music touches us with a tenderness Beethoven achieved in no other concerto.

Beethoven worked on the Fourth Piano Concerto during much of 1805, completing his work during summer 1806. It was premiered at the Viennese palace of his patron Prince Franz Joseph Maximilian von Lobkowitz in March 1807, along with first performances of the Fourth Symphony (Op. 60) and the \textit{Coriolan} Overture (Op. 62). That all were new works gives us an idea Beethoven’s astonishing productivity at this time.

Maynard Solomon writes of the G-major concerto’s “sense of calm, spaciousness, and measured nobility of rhetoric.” Fundamentally different in spirit from the other concertos, the fourth achieves a level of spiritual peace we might all wish that Beethoven had experienced during his lifetime.

From the startling asymmetry of the unaccompanied statement that opens the concerto to the charm and muted insouciance of the dance-like finale, the Fourth Concerto debunks our stereotyped notions of Beethoven’s style. His piano writing is unusually delicate: lace filigree, yet with the strength of wrought iron in its structural integrity. Few of his works marry fanciful, self-indulgent imagination so
happily with inventiveness of form. At once capricious and reliable, the G-major concerto never ceases to be endearing, perhaps because of its fundamental ambiguity.

The concerto is scored differently in each movement. It opens with an orchestra comprising flute; pairs of oboes, clarinets, bassoons and horns, strings and solo piano. The second movement consists solely of dialogue between strings and soloist. For the finale, which ensues attacca from the slow movement, Beethoven returns to his first movement ensemble.

*Instrumentation: flute; oboes, clarinets, bassoons and horns in pairs; strings and solo piano.*

**SHOSTAKOVICH: Symphony No. 1 in F Minor, Op. 10**

**DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH**

**Born:** September 25, 1906, in St. Petersburg, Russia

**Died:** August 9, 1975, in Moscow, Russia

**Composed:** December 1925

**World Premiere:** May 12, 1926, in Leningrad; Nikolai Malko led the Leningrad Philharmonic.

**NJSO Premiere:** 1978–79 season. Thomas Michalak conducted.

**Duration:** 28 minutes

With 15 symphonies to his credit, Shostakovich must be considered the premier symphonist of the mid-20th century, and one of the greatest of modern times. His First Symphony clearly heralded a gift for handling large ensemble. Remarkably, it is the work of a studious youth preparing a suitable piece to submit for graduation. Although he was still a teenager, Shostakovich had already experienced emotional and financial hardship. His father had died, and he had taken a job playing piano in a silent movie house to help support his family.

At this early stage, Shostakovich already demonstrated the brilliant gift for orchestration that distinguishes his work. His use of piano in the second and fourth movements lends an incisive edge
that throws the other orchestral colors into relief without overwhelming them. The keyboard is fully integrated into the orchestral fabric. Indeed, the slow introduction that opens the symphony emphasizes woodwinds and brass, allotting important solo material to muted trumpet and bassoon. Their material generates most of what follows. Musical democracy is clearly established in the opening measures. The strings do not dominate, and Shostakovich focuses on the varied colors of the other instrumental sections.

The symphony’s four movements are intended to be played without a break. The sardonic second movement reflects a pronounced Prokofievan influence rare elsewhere in Shostakovich; it particularly calls to mind the effervescent “The Young Juliet” movement from the ballet Romeo and Juliet (1935–36), yet it preceded that music by a decade. A fine oboe solo introduces the Lento in B-flat minor. The finale is quintessential Shostakovich: sarcastic, decisive, energetic. He strikes a wonderful balance between propulsive motion and soaring romantic melody. Hearing this remarkable debut symphony, we can readily concur with Alexander Glazunov (one of the grand old men at the Conservatory during Shostakovich’s student years) that Shostakovich, in this work, exhibited a “distinct and striking creative talent.”

**CHRONICLE OF A SYMPHONY’S PROGRESS**

Shostakovich was a prolific, if careful, letter writer. (In Soviet Russia, after all, one never knew whom else besides the intended recipient might read a missive.) Fortunately, a good deal of his correspondence survives from the 1920s, giving us insight into the progress of his First Symphony.

In 1924, he decided to relocate from St Petersburg to Moscow. The main reason he cited was a better climate, but the capital had other attractions. One was Tatyana Glivenko, who lived there; she was his first sweetheart and, some say, the great love of his life. Another was the composer and music theorist Boleslav Yavorski, then chair of the music section of Narkompros—the state scientific council—and a teacher at Moscow’s First Musical Technical School. Yavorski became an important mentor and confidant to the young composer.
Before he could leave, however, he needed to complete his studies at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. In a letter dated November 7, 1924, Shostakovich reported to Tanya Glivenko, “Now I’m writing a Symphony (Conservatory task for this year), which is quite bad, but I have to write it so that I can have done with the Conservatory this year.” Graduation was essential if he were to pursue advanced study and a career in Moscow.

By early December, two movements were complete. Distractions intervened. The Shostakovich family’s straitened circumstances had prompted Dmitri to seek employment playing piano in silent movie houses. The work took a lot of time and energy. That meant that composition came in fits and starts.

In January 1925, he blocked out the slow movement. He wrote to Glivenko that he now thought of the work as a “symphony-grotesque,” providing a clue as to its overall character. His letters to friends speak of exhaustion and writer’s block after the slow movement was done. Finally, in late April he had a burst of energy, writing to Yavorski that “in a single breath” he had completed the symphony. (The finale took him a week.)

His professors heard in a two-piano version the following month. Shostakovich continued to tweak the score for the balance of the year, putting on the final touches in December. Nikolai Malko led the Leningrad Philharmonic in the premiere on May 12, 1926, and the young composer’s career was launched.

Instrumentation: Two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, alto trumpet, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, glockenspiel, piano and strings.