

Beethoven's Piano Concertos Nos. 2, 3 & 4

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Ludwig van Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat Major, Op. 19

The Second Piano Concerto is a splendid snapshot of the youthful Beethoven. Fresh and enthusiastic, the concerto gives us an idea how he improvised in the 1790s. It has everything we hope for in a great piano concerto: a dramatic first movement, a lyrical and beautiful adagio, and a bright, witty finale.

Ludwig van Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 37

Terse drama, strong gestures: Beethoven left no room for doubt in his Third Piano Concerto. It shares the key of C minor with the Fifth Symphony—as well as that work's martial elements and intensity. Listen for cadenzas: Beethoven wrote cadenzas for all three movements. At the end, he resolves the struggle in sunny C major.

Ludwig van Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 4 in G Major, Op. 58

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.

Ludwig van Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat Major, Op. 19

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born: December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: by 1798; some sketches may date from as early as 1790. The version in which it is known today dates from 1801

World Premiere: Beethoven is known to have played this concerto in Prague in 1798. He probably played it earlier in Vienna as well, but documentation is inconclusive. The Viennese house of Hoffmeister published the Second Concerto in December 1801.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1989–90 season. Enrique Graf was the soloist; Hugh Wolff conducted.

Duration: 28 minutes

Instrumentation: flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, solo piano and strings.

Beethoven's career in Vienna in the 1790s garnered him more prestige as a performer and keyboard improviser than as a composer. Wishing to promote his considerable talents as a pianist, he wrote many pieces for himself. Opus 19 falls into this category. In fact, it was the first major work for piano and orchestra he completed. Despite its numbering as Piano Concerto No. 2 and its higher opus number (which reflects a later publication date of 1801) than the C-major concerto, Op. 15, the B-flat concerto is the earlier work. Recent scholarship indicates that Beethoven may have composed parts of it as early as 1785, when he was still a teenager in Bonn!

Beethoven himself did not consider either of the first two piano concertos to be among his finer works, but both pieces show him having graduated from gifted student to Viennese master. And the Viennese public received him with delight. He may have played the B-flat concerto in public as early as March 1790 (contemporary reports do not specify the key of the concerto); that performance is believed to be his debut with orchestra in the Austrian capital.

Op. 19 follows the Mozartean formal concerto model, with an extensive orchestral exposition in the first movement preceding the soloist's entrance. Listeners more familiar with Beethoven's First Piano Concerto will be pleasantly surprised by the intimate, chamber-music like quality of this work. Scored without trumpets or timpani, it permits more focus on the interaction of the piano with the delicate wind instruments. The outer movements, especially the finale, have an irresistible rhythmic vitality that encourages aural memory of their themes. The B-flat concerto is the forgotten jewel among Beethoven's piano concertos, and its cadenzas give us a tantalizing glimpse at the young genius' improvisatory technique.

Ludwig van Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 37

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born: December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: 1800

World Premiere: April 5, 1803. The composer was the soloist.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1933–34 season. Mischa Levitzki was the soloist; Rene Pollain conducted.

Duration: 34 minutes

Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs; timpani, solo piano and strings

The inherent drama of minor keys

Of Beethoven's seven completed concertos, only the Third Piano Concerto is in minor mode. In the late 18th century, when this work was conceived, any work in minor mode was noteworthy. Two of Mozart's mature piano concertos, No. 20 in D Minor, K. 466, and No. 24 in C Minor, K. 491, were known and admired in late 1790s Vienna. The dramatic possibilities of these works clearly stimulated Beethoven's imagination. The challenge of a stormy key such as C minor was irresistible to Beethoven. Equally attractive were the possibilities of the newer pianos. Beethoven's Hammerklavier had a larger keyboard span and had developed into a more powerful instrument than Mozart's fortepiano.

This piece dates from 1800, and thus falls on the demarcation line between the stages we have come to call "early Beethoven" and "middle Beethoven." That placement is important for a couple of reasons. Beethoven moved to Vienna from his native Bonn in 1792. He established his reputation as a pianist first, and as a composer second. By the late 1790s, he was well-known in Vienna, and the first symptoms of failing hearing were beginning to manifest themselves. It became apparent to him that his performing career would draw to a close, particularly in works with other performers: chamber music and solo appearances with an orchestra.

A memorable—and very long—concert

The C-minor concerto is one of the last works he conceived with himself as soloist. It had been in the planning stages for some time, but the premiere did not take place until 1803. It must have been quite an occasion. Beethoven had taken lodgings in the Theater an der Wien, whose director was Emanuel Schikaneder (the librettist of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*). A chorus and orchestra were at Beethoven's disposal, so the two men

planned a concert. On April 5, 1803, the all-Beethoven program took place, including the Symphonies Nos. 1 and 2, the eagerly awaited premiere of the new piano concerto (with the composer at the keyboard) *and* Beethoven's new oratorio, *Christus am Oelberge (Christ on the Mount of Olives)*, which he had composed hurriedly for the occasion.

Breaking with tradition: a Beethoven hallmark

While the C-minor concerto still adheres to classical structure, Beethoven takes some daring steps, beginning with the aggressive scales that introduce the soloist's statement of the main theme.

After the first-movement cadenza, the pianist continues to play through the coda. This was a highly unusual practice in the late 18th century; the sole precedent is in the very last Mozart concertos—including the C-minor concerto, K. 491. In this coda, the soloist engages in a subtle, ominous duet with timpani that is entirely original.

Beethoven's slow movement is cast in the distant key of E major. The soloist, unaccompanied, sets an ecstatic mood with a theme that hints at the intricate embroidery to follow. Flute and bassoon share some glorious woodwind writing in a dialogue throughout this Largo. The closing Rondo returns to C minor and the heroic, driven style that characterizes so much of Beethoven's music in that tonality. Brief cadenzas and furious passage work attest to the continued brilliance of the 30-year-old composer's technique. In the coda, Beethoven switches to C major and 6/8 time, lifting the storm clouds to conclude the work in a blaze of sunshine.

Ludwig van Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 4 in G Major, Op. 58

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born: December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: 1805-1806

World Premiere: December 22, 1808, in the Theater an der Wien, Vienna. Beethoven was the soloist in his last public appearance as pianist.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1942–43 season. Miecio Horoszowski was the soloist; Frieder Weissmann conducted.

Duration: 34 minutes

Instrumentation: flute; oboes, clarinets, bassoons and horns in pairs; solo piano and strings. The second movement consists solely of dialogue between strings and soloist. For the finale, which ensues *attacca* (without pause) from the slow movement, Beethoven returns to full orchestra, adding trumpets and timpani.

Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto stands apart from its four companions. The principal difference is intimacy, best exemplified by the series of simple G-major chords with which solo piano opens the work. Sometimes the music is mixed with playfulness, other times with the kind of private introspection that makes us a bit embarrassed, as if we had accidentally observed a personal moment not intended for our eyes or ears. 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 its composition during summer 1806. It was premiered at the palace of his patron Prince Lobkowitz in March 1807, along with first performances of the Symphony No. 4 in B-flat Major, Op. 60, and the *Coriolan* Overture, Op. 62. That all three were new works gives us a small idea of how astonishingly productive Beethoven was at this time.

Beethoven biographer Maynard Solomon writes of the G-major concerto's "sense of calm, spaciousness, and measured nobility of rhetoric." Fundamentally different in spirit from any of Beethoven's other concertos, the Fourth Piano Concerto communicates a sense of spiritual peace we might all wish that Beethoven had found during his lifetime.

Most surprising of all is the second movement, which has long been linked to the legend of Orpheus. Early in the 20th century, the British musicologist, composer and pianist Donald Francis Tovey mistakenly credited Franz Liszt with having compared the slow movement's dialogue between piano and orchestra to Orpheus taming wild beasts with the music of Apollo's lyre. Liszt was indeed keenly interested in the Orpheus legend, writing a symphonic poem (*Orpheus*, 1853–54), a preface to the published edition of that work and an essay on Gluck's opera *Orfeo*; however, the Orphic associations of Beethoven's slow movement in this concerto have other origins.

According to the American scholar Owen Jander, the *Andante con moto* represents an altogether different episode in the legend: Orpheus' encounter with the Eumenides, those formidable guardians of Hades, as he ventured into the netherworld in an attempt to bring back his beloved Euridice. The earliest reference to this

program for the Fourth Concerto's middle movement is an 1859 biography of Beethoven by Adolph Bernhard Marx, a critic-turned-author who had written for Berlin's *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* in the 1820s. Regardless of whether we espouse this subtext for the slow movement, the dialectic is stark and striking, riveting our attention by the most elemental means.

Beethoven's piano writing in this concerto is among his most delicate: lace filigree, yet with the strength of wrought iron in its structural integrity. We have few works from him that 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.