

Fantasy for Piano, Chorus, and Orchestra, Op. 80

Ludwig van Beethoven

Ludwig van Beethoven wrote the Fantasy for Piano, Chorus, and Orchestra, widely called the Choral Fantasy, as a *pièce d'occasion* — and what an occasion it was! The event was an all-Beethoven concert at Vienna's Theater an der Wien, on December 22, 1808. Part One of the concert consisted of the premiere of his Sixth Symphony (*Pastoral*), the concert scena “Ah, perfido,” the Gloria from the C-major Mass, and the Piano Concerto No. 4 (with the composer as soloist, in its first public performance); Part Two comprised Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (also a premiere), the Sanctus from the C-major Mass, and a piano fantasy improvised by the composer, in addition to the Choral Fantasy. Beethoven penned his Choral Fantasy quickly to provide a festive ending that would double as a sort of encore spotlighting the various performers who had been featured during the evening: the choir and soloists who had appeared in the Mass segments, the principal orchestral players who had struggled so gallantly with the two symphonies, and Beethoven himself as the evening's pianist.

The concert was arguably a disaster. Vienna was experiencing a cold spell just then, and after expenses for the hall and the musicians there was no money left to pay for heat. The soloist for “Ah, perfido” shivered as she sang. Sitting through the four-hour concert was more than most concertgoers could endure. The composer Johann Friedrich Reichardt, installed next to Beethoven's patron Prince Lobkowitz in the aristocrat's box, regretfully reported:

There we held out in the bitterest cold from half-past six until half-past ten, and experienced the fact that one can easily

have too much of a good — and even more of a strong — thing.

The structure of the Choral Fantasy is desultory, much of it unrolling in short sections that do come across rather like loosely connected curtain calls. The piece begins with a stormy, athletic introduction by the unaccompanied piano. Although marked *Adagio*, this solo section doesn't sound particularly slow after the solid opening of its first four measures, since Beethoven soon paints the pages almost black with fleet 32nd, 64th, and even 128th notes. Clearly in C minor, the section ranges through a wide harmonic landscape. Beethoven was renowned for his ability to create works extemporaneously at the piano, and these pages

IN SHORT

Born: Probably on December 16, 1770 (he was baptized on the 17th), in Bonn, Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Work composed: early to mid-December 1808; text, probably by Christoph Kuffner (1780–1846); dedicated to King Maximilian Joseph of Bavaria

World premiere: December 22, 1808, at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna, with the composer conducting

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 13, 1877, Leopold Damrosch, conductor, Bernard Boekelman, piano, with the Oratorio Society of New York Chorus

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: February 27, 2001, Kurt Masur, conductor, Jonathan Biss, piano, and the Berlin Radio Choir

Estimated duration: ca. 18 minutes

afford a rare glimpse of him in his improvising mode. One cannot assume that the opening Beethoven played at the work's premiere was identical to what was published three years later; he might have worked out a "crystallized improvisation" only when it became necessary for purposes of publication. It is known that he did polish the score generally in 1809.

After about three minutes of piano solo, Beethoven marks the word "Finale" in the score. Since some 15 minutes of music — the bulk of the composition — remains, it would seem more logical to think of the piano solo as an introduction to what is clearly the body of the work. Perhaps Beethoven had in mind that what followed should be viewed as the finale of the concert as a whole. After some tentative-sounding transitional material, he embarks on a theme-and-variations set. The tune, built almost entirely from conjunct notes of the C-major scale, prefigures the

melody he would use as the foundation for another choral monument — the finale of his Ninth Symphony, which he would unveil 16 years later. Five variations of 16 measures each follow: the first features the solo flute; the second, a pair of oboes playing in thirds; the third, a warm-hearted combination of two clarinets and bassoon; and the fourth, a string quartet, which at the end of its section suddenly escalates into a fifth variation for the full orchestra. After a break for further explorations, the voices take over in yet another variation on the theme — pairs of solo female and male voices at first, then the full choir exulting in an ode to the "sound of harmonies of life."

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings, plus the solo piano, vocal soloists (two sopranos, mezzo-soprano, two tenors, and bass), and mixed chorus.

Beethoven the Improviser

The opening pages of Beethoven's Choral Fantasy suggest the imagination and freedom that must have informed the composer's widely admired ability as an improvising pianist. His student Carl Czerny wrote that Beethoven's improvisations "assumed various forms, depending on whether he improvised on themes of his own or on themes given to him [by others]."



The forms could fall into three general types. The first was essentially a first-movement sonata form or a finale-rondo created on the spur of the moment, but the other two led him into more rhapsodic territory. Czerny described those two styles:

Second: A free variation form, more or less on the lines of his *Choral Fantasia*, Op. 89 [sic], or the choral finale of the Ninth Symphony, both of which provide an excellent example of his style of improvisations. Third: A mixed genre in which one idea would follow another, in the manner of a *pot-pourri*, as in his *Fantasia*, Op. 77.

Beethoven in his study, as depicted by Carl Schloesser, ca. 1811

Text and Translation

Beethoven's Fantasy for Piano, Chorus, and Orchestra, Op. 80

*Schmeichelnd hold und lieblich klingen
unsers Lebens Harmonien,
und dem Schönheitssinn entschwingen
Blumen sich, die ewig blühn.*

Soft and sweet thro' ether winging
sound the harmonies of life,
their immortal flowers springing
where the soul is free from strife.

*Fried' und Freude gleiten freundlich
wie der Wellen Wechselspiel;
was sich drängte rauh und feindlich,
ordnet sich zu Hochgefühl.*

Peace and joy are sweetly blended
like the waves' alternate play;
what for mastery contended
learns to yield and to obey.

*Wenn der Töne Zauber walten
und des Wortes Weihe spricht,
muss sich Herrliches gestalten,
Nacht und Stürme werden Licht,*

When on music's mighty pinion
souls of men to heaven rise,
then doth vanish earth's dominion,
Man is native to the skies,

*äuss're Ruhe, inn're Wonne
herrschen für den Glühlichen.
Doch der Kunste Frühlingssonne
lässt aus beiden Licht entstehn.*

calm without and joy within us
is the bliss for which we long.
If the art, the magic win us,
joy and calm are turned to song.

*Grosses, das in's Herz gedrungen,
blüht dann neu und schön empor,
hat ein Geist such aufgeschwungen,
hall't ihm stets ein Geisterchor.*

With its tide of joy unbroken,
music's flood our life surrounds,
what a mastermind hath spoken,
thro' eternity resounds.

*Nehmt denn bin, ihr schönen Seelen,
froh die Gaben schöner Kunst.
Wenn sich Lieb' und Kraft' vermählen,
lohnt dem Menschen Götter-Gunst.*

O receive ye, joy invited,
all its blessings without guile,
when to love is pow'r united,
then the gods approving smile.

— Translation by Natalia Macfarren