

Notes on the Program

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Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 19

Ludwig van Beethoven

It is customary to point out that Ludwig van Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 2 was really his Piano Concerto No. 1. That is true only to a degree. There is no question that the so-called Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, performed here, occupied Beethoven sporadically through the decade of the 1790s and that he may have premiered it as early as March 29, 1795; the so-called Piano Concerto No. 1 in C major appears to date entirely from 1795 and to have been premiered on December 18 of that year. They were issued by different publishing houses in different cities, and both were probably revised immediately before they were engraved. The C-major Concerto was brought out in print in March 1801 and the B-flat-major that December, with the result that the former was identified as the composer's First Piano Concerto and the latter as his Second. But, putting a fine point on details of chronology, one might as well observe that the B-flat-major Concerto really was, in a sense, Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 2. In 1784, when he was only 13 years old, Beethoven produced a Piano Concerto in E-flat major. The reason it is probably not familiar is that its historical interest outshines its musical value by several degrees of magnitude.

Beethoven was already an adept keyboard player by the time he embarked on that early concerto. In June 1782 he had filled in as deputy court organist in Bonn, and nine months later his teacher, Christian Gottlob Neefe, contributed a glowing report of the 11-year-old to Cramer's *Magazine der Musik*, noting that

he plays the piano very skillfully and with power, reads at sight very well, and ...

would surely become a second Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart if he were to continue as he has begun.

In 1787 Beethoven visited Vienna, where it seems certain that he met Mozart and may have taken piano lessons from him. In November 1792 he finally moved to Vienna, which would be his home for the rest of his life. In his baggage was the preliminary work he had done on his Piano Concerto in B-flat major. A high-profile event came Beethoven's way on March 29, 1795, when he was

IN SHORT

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

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Work composed: sketched as early as 1788, provisionally completed in 1794–95, revised in 1798 and 1801; dedicated to Prince Carl Nicklas von Nickelsberg, a bureaucrat in the Austrian Commerce Department

World premiere: perhaps March 29, 1795, at Vienna's Burgtheater, with the composer as soloist and conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: February 17, 1920, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928), Alfred Cortot, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: July 28, 2017, at Bravo! Vail in Colorado, Alan Gilbert, conductor, Inon Barnatan, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 29 minutes

featured as both composer and pianist in a charity concert at Vienna's Burgtheater, held for the benefit of the Vienna Composers Society, which looked after the welfare of musicians' widows and orphans. It is widely assumed that he seized this occasion to premiere his B-flat-major Concerto, although it is conceivable that the "new concerto of his invention" that was included on the program may have been the C-major instead. Franz Gerhard Wegeler,

a friend from Beethoven's years in Bonn, happened to be visiting Vienna at the time, and related that

not until the afternoon of the second day before the concert did he write the rondo, and then while suffering from a pretty severe colic which frequently afflicted him. ... In the anteroom sat four copyists to whom he handed sheet after sheet as soon as it was finished.

Off the Cuff



A depiction of Beethoven by Carl Schloesser, 1890

The slow movement (*Adagio*) of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 2 offers a lyrical, rather solemn melody that becomes increasingly embroidered as the movement progresses. This would have provided Beethoven-the-pianist with an opportunity to show off his skill as an improviser. It seems unlikely that he would have constrained himself literally to the score as it is known, especially since he hadn't gotten around to actually writing it down by the time of the premiere.

In fact, he probably didn't set much of the concerto down on the page for another six years after the first performance. The composer wrote to the concerto's eventual publisher, Hoffmeister and Kühnel in Leipzig (which would become known as C.F. Peters after 1814) in a letter dated April 22, 1801:

As is usual with me, the pianoforte part in the concerto was not written out in the score, and only now have I done so, hence, because of the haste you will receive that part in my own illegible manuscript.

Anyone writing a piano concerto in Vienna at that time did so in the shadow of the late lamented Mozart. Beethoven knew at least some of Mozart's concertos intimately, and in his B-flat major concerto he employed an orchestra identical to that required by four of Mozart's piano concertos of 1784. In general structure he also adhered to a Mozartian norm: three movements, of which the first is a sonata form with an orchestral exposition; the second, a lyrical slow movement; the third, a rondo. In addition, the texture is truly orches-

tral, following the Mozartian ideal of an integrated work in which the piano plays the role of *primus inter pares*. Nonetheless, the soloist has plenty to keep him busy — and if the finger work sounds not quite Mozartian, the fact remains that the apple has not fallen far from the tree.

Instrumentation: flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, and strings, in addition to the solo piano.

Cadenza: by Beethoven

Listen for . . . the Rondo

It is ironic that in the last portion of his Piano Concerto No. 2, the rollicking Rondo that Beethoven seems to have tossed off just days before the premiere, should be the movement that remains the most memorable. It almost certainly was a replacement for what Beethoven initially conceived as the finale, which survives as the stand-alone Rondo for Piano and Orchestra in B-flat major (WoO 6 — WoO referring to the catalogue of works to which the composer did not assign opus numbers). Both of the preceding movements in this concerto are beautifully composed and filled with interesting ideas and imaginative working-out. But the Rondo theme, an infectious little tune in compound time, is blessed with short-long rhythms — colloquially known as “Scotch snaps” — that have a way of sticking in the ear:



The Rondo refrain appears four times in the course of the movement, and the interludes provide delightful contrast, including a foray in the direction of what late-18th-century listeners would have taken to be Gypsy music.