

Notes on the Program

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Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 61

Ludwig van Beethoven

Ludwig van Beethoven studied the violin as a young man in Bonn and spent some time as an orchestral violist before moving to Vienna in 1792 to seek his fortune as a pianist and composer. In the early 1790s he tried his hand at a Violin Concerto in C major (WoO 5), which he left incomplete, and he penned two charming, single-movement Romances for violin and orchestra. He was also composing chamber music with violin, and by the time he got around to this Violin Concerto he had completed all but the last of his ten violin sonatas. He obviously arrived at the concerto project with considerable mastery of the instrument for which he was writing.

Still, the piece failed to impress at its premiere. Anton Schindler, the sometimes credible chronicler of Beethoven's life, recalled in 1840:

The concerto enjoyed no great success. When it was repeated the following year it was more favorably received, but Beethoven decided to rewrite it as a piano concerto. As such, however, it was totally ignored: violinists and pianists alike rejected the work as unrewarding (a fate it has shared with almost all of Beethoven's works until the present time). The violinists even complained that it was unplayable, for they shrank from the frequent use of the upper positions.

It is true that Beethoven requires his soloist to spend a great deal of time in

the stratosphere playing streams of swirling figuration, and that by the end of the concerto relatively little rosin will have been rubbed off on the G string, the lowest of the instrument's four.

Carl Czerny, another member of the composer's circle, said that Beethoven had written the concerto very quickly and had only managed to complete it two days before the premiere, so that Franz Clement, the soloist, had no choice but to sight-read the solo part at the performance. Other accounts relate the same story, but they may simply be repeating one another. It would seem odd that Clement should not at least have dropped

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: late 1806, probably in the space of about a month beginning in early- to mid-November; dedicated to Stephan von Breuning, a friend of the composer

World premiere: December 23, 1806, at Vienna's Theater an der Wien, with Franz Clement as the soloist and with the composer conducting

New York Philharmonic premiere: December 21, 1861, Theodore Eisfeld, conductor, Edward Mollenhauer, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: January 30, 2016, Juanjo Mena, conductor, James Ehnes, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 45 minutes

in at Beethoven's apartment to scan the score in progress as the performance date approached and panic began to set in. Nonetheless, even a best-case scenario would not have provided time in which to rehearse with the orchestra — a far from auspicious way to launch a work that is so symphonic at its core. Apparently, Clement acquitted himself with honor under the circumstances. The *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* of Leipzig ran a news item that suggests so:

To the admirers of Beethoven's muse it may be of interest that this composer has written a violin concerto — the first, so far as we know — which the beloved local violinist Klement [*sic*], in the concert given for his benefit, played with his usual elegance and luster.

One wonders whether the same elegance and luster extended to Clement's performance, on the same program, of a set of variations (almost certainly of his own composition) that he played on a single string while holding his violin upside down.

Who's in Charge?

In his delightful book *Musical Blunders* (1996), the late flutist and raconteur Fritz Spiegl tells how, during World War II, many top-notch British musicians joined the Central Band of the Royal Air Force and pressed the bandmaster to include some "real" symphonic pieces in the band's repertoire. The bandmaster, it seems, "was a little out of his depth in the classical repertoire," and when the Beethoven Violin Concerto showed up on the music stands he "clearly had not studied the score (let alone recordings of the work)." Spiegl continues:

[He] began the first movement under the impression that it started with the oboes and bassoons in the second bar — having failed to spot the opening four solo timpani notes, whose rhythm pervades the whole of the first movement. He brought down his stick for the oboes but instead, the timpanist went "bom-bom-bom-bom" just as Beethoven indicated. On hearing the drumbeats he rapped on his desk and called to the timpanist, "Thank you very much, but I don't need you to give me the tempo."

Schindler was quite right in describing the neglect this concerto suffered in its early years. Despite occasional,

Listen for ... the Timpani

Audience members at the premiere of Beethoven's Violin Concerto could not have anticipated the first sounds of this concerto — five quiet beats on the timpani, the last of which coincides with the entrance of a more standard orchestral complement:



As tunes go, it's not much to write home about, and perhaps those first listeners' immediate response, once the wind choir announced a full-fledged theme, was to discount that opening as either a joke or simply bizarre. But right away the timpani returns with another five beats, and then for their entrance the orchestral strings mimic the same rhythm. That motif will be present often in the first movement; indeed, when Beethoven transformed this work into a piano concerto a year later, he incorporated the timpani as an obbligato participant in the first-movement cadenza he wrote for the solo pianist.

valiant attempts, the piece failed to whip up much audience enthusiasm until 1844, when the Philharmonic Society of London programmed it with Felix Mendelssohn conducting and the 12-year-old Joseph Joachim as soloist. It should be stated that the Beethoven Violin Concerto that Joachim played, and that violinists have played ever since, was not quite the same Beethoven Violin Concerto that Clement premiered. Due to the apparent haste of composition, some of the solo notation was on the sketchy side, and before he published the piece Beethoven subjected the entire concerto to severe revision in both the solo and orchestral parts.

Instrumentation: flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings, in addition to the solo violin.

Cadenzas: Beethoven did not provide cadenzas for Clement to play at the premiere, but he did compose cadenzas when he transformed this piece into a piano concerto a year later. Some violinists choose to play versions of those piano cadenzas retrofitted for the violin; others have worked out their own cadenzas entirely or play cadenzas created by Fritz Kreisler — as Nikolaj Znaider does here — or by other violinists who have championed the work.

Angels and Muses

The violinist Beethoven chose to serve as midwife for his concerto was Franz Clement (1780–1842), whom he had first met in 1794 when the Vienna native was a 13-year-old touring prodigy on the way to becoming one of Europe’s most acclaimed virtuosos. By that time Clement was already a firm fixture on the concert scene in London, where he rubbed elbows with Haydn during that composer’s visits. From 1802 to 1811 he served as leader of the Theater an der Wien’s orchestra, so that when he unveiled Beethoven’s concerto in that theater he was walking onto a very familiar stage.

Clement would go on to achieve success elsewhere as a conductor and violinist, with critics citing firmness of tone, elegant clarity, tender expressiveness, spot-on intonation, and deft bowing among his characteristic strengths. He published several compositions, too, including a D-major Violin Concerto of his own, but his career concluded badly, with financial mismanagement leading him to an ignominious and impecunious end.

In 1806, when he introduced Beethoven’s Violin Concerto, Clement had had plenty of experience making sense of Beethoven’s audacious style, which he had encountered in abundance as one of the first conductors to lead the *Eroica* Symphony. “Concerto par Clemenza pour Clement,” Beethoven inscribed at the top of the concerto’s manuscript — “Concerto for Clement, out of Compassion.”



A depiction of Franz Clement at age eight, by Henri Hessell, 1789