

## Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D major, Opus 61 (1806)

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

B. Baptised Dec. 17, 1770, Bonn, Germany

D. March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria

*Premiered on December 23, 1806 by Franz Clement and the orchestra at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna; dedicated to Stephan von Breuning.*

*Scored for solo violin, flute, pairs of oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, and trumpets, with timpani and strings. (approx. 42 minutes).*

The image of Ludwig van Beethoven is perhaps more powerful than that of any other composer in the Western classical tradition. Often described as the mythical tormented musical icon, Beethoven exemplifies the Romantic notion of the suffering artist endowed with a godlike talent, perception and creative genius. With roots based firmly in the Viennese classical tradition of Haydn and Mozart, Beethoven took standard genres including the symphony, the string quartet and the concerto to new realms. This axiom holds true for his only complete violin concerto, composed in 1806, the solo in D major. (In the early 1790s, he had begun sketches for the opening moment of a violin concerto in C major; this was finished by Joseph Hellmesberger fifty years after Beethoven's death.) Building upon Mozart's innovations with the piano concerto, the unexpectedly broad proportions and seriousness of Beethoven's 1806 concerto for violin brought the genre to a new level. The concerto was no longer an idiomatic virtuoso showpiece, but a massive work equal in scope and aspiration to that of the symphony. As stated by Georges Enesco, "This is a great symphony. The violin has a leading voice, but it is merely one of the many orchestral voices which make up the whole."

The Violin Concerto in D was premiered under less than favorable conditions. Solo violinist Franz Clement, the leader of the orchestra at the Theater an der Wien, arrived unprepared and read the work from sight (Beethoven shares some of the blame for having finished the concerto so late). The publication *Theater zeitung* published the following critique by Johann Nepomuk Mösler: "Concerning Beethoven's concerto, the judgment of connoisseurs is unanimous: Its many beauties must be conceded, but it must also be acknowledged that the continuity is often broken, and that the endless repetitions of certain commonplace passages may easily become tedious to the listener." (Clement also interrupted the work between the first and second movements to offer his own virtuoso stunt piece—at times playing the instrument upside down—before returning to Beethoven's composition.)

The concerto did not gain much popularity during Beethoven's lifetime; Muzio Clementi even convinced Beethoven to adapt it as a piano concerto to gain more performances. However, it quickly became a staple in the violin repertoire after the 12-year-old Joseph Joachim performed an impressive rendition in his London solo debut of May 27, 1844 and toured with the piece in concerts thereafter. The composer Felix Mendelssohn conducted Joachim's London performance and composed his own beloved Violin Concerto in E minor later that same year.

The length of the first movement of Beethoven's concerto, *Allegro ma non troppo*, alone exceeds the entirety of nearly every other preexistent violin concerto. It opens with five soft strikes on the timpani that bespeak an atmosphere of epic drama. This motive also serves as the rhythmic basis for the entire movement. While the violin's solo line is technically demanding, it emphasizes the lyrical qualities of the instrument as it intertwines with other voices in the orchestra. The second movement is a modified theme and variations form. It does not follow the expected conventional model in which the soloist elaborates upon a theme in increasingly complex ways. Instead, the original theme is varied only in tone color, as it is re-scored for different combinations of instruments throughout the orchestra. Remarkably, the solo violin never gives voice to this theme but rather provides a lyrical, winding commentary. The movement has a feeling of simplicity and romance as the violin maintains a quasi-narrative character that soars over a transparent orchestration.

As in Beethoven's fourth and fifth piano concertos, the second movement of the violin concerto leads directly into the finale—a boisterous rondo with a cheerful folk-like melody. The soloist immediately introduces the rondo refrain, a dance-like tune played on the lowest G string. The violin then offers figures of increasing virtuosity throughout the movement, leading to a flashy cadenza. Rather than a quick final cadence following the soloist's statement, Beethoven adds an unusually long coda filled with complex harmonic progressions. The piece concludes with a quiet unaccompanied statement of the rondo theme by the solo violin, followed by two loud tutti chords punctuated by the whole orchestra. It is significant to note that no one tried to write another concerto of similar proportions or seriousness for over seventy years, until Brahms penned his D minor violin concerto 1878.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed Beethoven's Violin Concerto in D major on Jan. 12, 14-15, 2006, with Nicholas McGegan conducting and Viktoria Mullova as soloist.

DSO Concertmaster Emmanuelle Boisvert Recommends:  
Beethoven, Violin Concerto, Anne-Sophie Mutter, violin, Kurt Masur conducting the New York Philharmonic, Deutsche Grammophon 471349.

*Program note by Yona Stamatis, a doctoral student in ethnomusicology at the University of Michigan, School of Music, Theatre & Dance.*