

## Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58

### Ludwig van Beethoven

In 1807, when Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 was first heard, any reasonably informed member of a Viennese audience would have known that a concerto should begin with a long introduction, during which the orchestra presented some of the first movement's principal themes. In the case of a piano concerto, the soloist might play along, adding a sort of underpinning to the orchestral texture, but the featured instrument would not move into the spotlight until the introduction had come to a resolute conclusion. Beethoven had at least respected that aspect of the Classical mold in his first three piano concertos (not to mention his early "non-canonical" E-flat-major Piano Concerto of 1784) and his Violin Concerto.

Imagine, then, the astonishment with which listeners conditioned in this way must have heard Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto when it was new. Rather than the authoritarian sounds of a full orchestra, the first notes

they heard were played softly on the piano, the gentle murmuring of a theme based on repeated notes and simple harmonies. Then — just as astonishing — following its five-measure presentation of the thematic germ of this movement, the piano simply withdraws, not to be heard from again for another 69 measures, during which span suspense mounts as to what is fueling its behavior. One might say that the silent piano is unusually "present" during the 69 measures of that orchestral introduction, precisely because it made its mark so unmistakably at the outset.

The second movement, too, is extraordinary, even apart from its uncharacteristic brevity (lasting as it does only about five minutes). The music theorist Adolf Bernhard Marx, in his 1859 biography of Beethoven, suggested that this *Andante con moto* bore some relationship to Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* — specifically, to Orpheus's using music to tame wild beasts. (At some point music historians began misattributing this observation to Franz Liszt, who probably would have been very happy to assign a programmatic explanation to this expressive, conversational movement,

but apparently didn't. You'll still read Liszt's "quotation" in nearly every discussion of this concerto, even though historical research quashed it two decades ago.)

In 1985 the musicologist Owen Jander pointed out that Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto seems to follow, point by point, a popular version of the Orpheus legend that was presented as

### In Short

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

**Died:** March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

**Work composed:** early 1806, and perhaps somewhat earlier; it was probably completed on March 27, 1806

**World premiere:** in a private performance in March 1807 in the palace of Beethoven's patron Prince Lobkowitz; the public premiere was on December 22, 1808, at the Theater an der Wien, in Vienna

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** January 31, 1863, Theodore Eisfeld, conductor, S.B. Mills, soloist

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** April 5, 2008, Sir Colin Davis, conductor, Richard Goode, soloist

**Estimated duration:** ca. 35 minutes

**30B New York Philharmonic**

street theater in the Vienna of Beethoven's day. Such a literal interpretation of text into tones would have been an extraordinary method for Beethoven to follow, and opinions are divided about whether there is much likelihood that this took place; still, Jander did put forth a strong argument, and the idea does capture the imagination.

Beethoven unveiled his Fourth Piano Concerto at a private concert in the mansion of his patron Prince Franz Josef von Lobkowitz in March 1807. He then put it away for nearly two years and performed it only one more time, in his last public appearance as a pianist, at a concert at Vienna's Theater an der Wien on December 22, 1808. This all-Beethoven marathon has gone into the annals as one of the most extraordinary events in all of

music history. In addition to this concerto, the performance included the premieres of the Symphonies Nos. 5 and 6 and the C-minor *Choral Fantasy* (for piano, choir, and orchestra), the Vienna premieres of three movements from the C-major Mass and the concert scena "Ah! perfido," and a solo keyboard improvisation by the composer. To encounter all of these revolutionary pieces at one sitting must have been overwhelming, and to many the Fourth Piano Concerto must have sounded like just more of the same madness — and who knows what the all-but-deaf Beethoven actually accomplished at the piano. His pupil Carl Czerny termed Beethoven's performance on that occasion as "playful," an odd enough descriptive, in the event, that you might wonder if it should be read as a euphemism.

## Listen for ...

Beethoven explored radical turf in the opening of his Piano Concerto No. 4. Apart from the unorthodox decision to begin with the solo piano, the musical material itself is a bombshell. The piano's opening chords are in G major, but the orchestra's response is in B major, a key only distantly related to the harmonic region marked out by the piano's theme.

**Allegro moderato**  
Solo Piano

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The top system is for the Solo Piano, marked 'Allegro moderato' and 'Solo Piano'. It begins with a piano (*p*) and *dolce* dynamic. The bottom system is for the Strings, marked 'pp' (pianissimo). The key signature for both systems is one sharp (F#). The piano part features a series of chords in G major, while the strings part features a series of chords in B major, illustrating the key relationship mentioned in the text.

The relationship of key regions spaced a third apart — such as G and B — would become an obsession of composers as the 19th century progressed. As usual, Beethoven led the way.

## At the Time

In 1806, when Beethoven wrote his Piano Concerto No. 4, the following events were taking place:



In Germany, Napoleon's army enters Berlin; Napoleon's Berlin Decree begins the Continental System, whereby Continental ports are closed to British vessels and Napoleon's conquests are forbidden to trade with the United Kingdom

The Holy Roman Empire comes to an end when Emperor Francis II abdicates, following the recent success of Napoleon's army in the Battle of Austerlitz

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres paints *Napoleon I on His Imperial Throne* (left)

In France, the Arc de Triomphe is commissioned, in honor of Napoleon's victory at Austerlitz; artist Jean-Honoré Fragonard dies in near obscurity



In Italy, Gioacchino Rossini enters the Conservatorio di Bologna

In England, former Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger dies

In the United States, explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark (left, with Sacajawea) return to Missouri, after exploring the land of the Louisiana Purchase and reaching the Pacific Ocean

In Africa, the British annex the Cape of Good Hope after the Dutch East India Company declares bankruptcy

- The Editors

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

**Cadenzas:** Emanuel Ax plays the first- and third-movement cadenzas that the composer wrote for this concerto in 1809.

## From the Premiere

In his *Autobiography*, published in 1865, the composer Louis Spohr recounted an anecdote told to him by Ignaz Xaver Seyfried, music director of the Theater an der Wien from 1797 to 1825, about Beethoven's performance at the premiere of the Fourth Piano Concerto:

Beethoven was playing a new Pianoforte Concerto of his, but forgot at the first *tutti* that he was a solo player, and, springing up, began to direct in his usual way. At the first *sforzando* he threw out his arms so wide asunder that he knocked both the lights off the piano upon the ground. The audience laughed, and Beethoven was so incensed at this disturbance that he made the orchestra cease playing and begin anew. Seyfried, fearing that a repetition of the accident would occur at the same passage, bade two boys of the chorus place themselves on either side of Beethoven and hold the lights in their hands. One of the boys innocently approached nearer, and was reading also in the notes of the piano part. When therefore the fatal *sforzando* came, he received from Beethoven's out-thrown right hand so smart a blow on the mouth that the poor boy let fall the light from terror. The other boy, more cautious, had followed with anxious eyes every motion of Beethoven, and by stooping suddenly at the eventful moment he avoided the slap on the mouth. If the public were unable to restrain their laughter before, they could now much less, and broke out into a regular bacchanalian roar. Beethoven got into such a rage that at the first chords of the solo, half a dozen strings broke. Every endeavor of the real lovers of music to restore calm and attention were for the moment fruitless. The first *allegro* of the Concerto was therefore lost to the public. From that fatal evening Beethoven would not give another concert.



A depiction of Beethoven composing in Vienna, by Carl Schloesser, 1890