

Alan Gilbert on This Program

This program includes works by three titans of the orchestral repertoire – Beethoven, Stravinsky, and Ravel. The Beethoven Violin Concerto is perhaps the greatest of all violin concertos and we are lucky to have Frank Peter Zimmermann, The Mary and James G. Wallach Artist-in-Residence, as soloist. Frank Peter Zimmermann gives one of the most magisterial, important interpretations of this piece that you can hear today. He is an incredibly serious musician – not only a great violinist but a great artist with a sense of humor and depth of passion that quickly reveal themselves.

Stravinsky was a chameleon: he wrote in many different styles, and was absolutely convincing in all of them, but still maintained in all his works the “Stravinsky voice.” In the Symphony in Three Movements (commissioned and premiered by the Philharmonic in 1946) he was looking back to the original symphonic form. I love the way he takes the original shape and intent of a symphony and turns it into something very modern, and I think it pairs very well with Ravel. There’s a huge contrast between these two composers: there’s a spikiness and a terseness to Stravinsky’s language, in opposition to the opulence of the washes of sound that Ravel employs, such as in *Daphnis and Chloé*. Yet, they share a rhythmic rigor. Putting them together creates a portrait of some of the important lines running through composition in the 20th century.





Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator

The Leni and Peter May Chair

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 around the turn of the century he penned two charming, single-movement *Romances* for violin and orchestra. He was also actively composing chamber music for violin, and by the time he wrote his Violin Concerto he had completed all but the last of the ten violin sonatas. Thus, he obviously arrived at the concerto project with considerable mastery of the instrument for which he was writing.

Yet, 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 in this work Beethoven requires his soloist to spend a great deal of time in the stratosphere, playing streams of swirling figuration; by the end of the concerto not much 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

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; dedicated to Stephan von Breuning, a friend of the composer

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

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

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: at Carnegie Hall on November 12, 2010, Alan Gilbert, conductor, Midori, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 45 minutes

premiere, the result being 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 if Clement had not at least dropped in at Beethoven's apartment to scan the score in progress as the performance date approached. Nonetheless, even a best-case scenario would not have provided time 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, as suggested by a news item that ran in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* of Leipzig:

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.)

Schindler was quite right in describing the neglect this concerto suffered in its early years. Despite occasional, 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. Joachim steadfastly kept the concerto in his repertoire, and the cadenzas he wrote for it have long been accepted as the standard against which others are judged.

It should be noted that the Beethoven Violin Concerto that Joachim played, and that practically all violinists worth their salt have played ever since, is not quite the same piece that Clement premiered. Due to the apparent haste of composition, some of the solo notation was on the sketchy side, and before

Listen for ... the Timpani's Beats

Audience members at the premiere of Beethoven's Violin Concerto could not have anticipated the first sounds of this work: **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 the immediate response of those first listeners, once the wind choir announced a full-fledged theme, was to discount that opening as either a joke or simply bizarre. However, the timpani returns right away with another five beats, and then the orchestral strings mimic the same rhythm in their entrance.

That motif will be heard 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 that he wrote for the solo pianist.

Who's on First?

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.”

he published the piece Beethoven subjected the entire concerto to severe revision in both the solo and the orchestral parts.

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

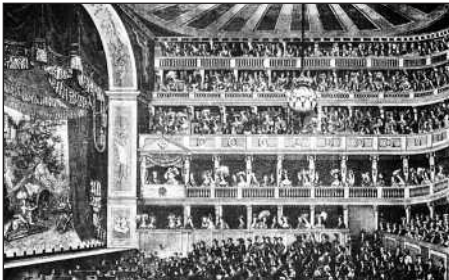
Cadenzas: Beethoven did not provide cadenzas for Clement to play at the premiere, but he did compose cadenzas when he transformed this piece into a piano concerto a year later. Some violinists have retrofitted these for their instrument while others have created their own. In this performance, Frank Peter Zimmermann plays the cadenzas composed by Fritz Kreisler.

Angels and Muses

The violinist whom Beethoven chose to be the midwife for this concerto was Franz Clement (1780–1842). The two had first met in 1794, when the Viennese violinist was a 13-year-old touring prodigy on the way to becoming one of Europe’s most acclaimed virtuosos. By that time Clement had become a fixture on the London concert scene, rubbing 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 out 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 composed and published several works, 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.

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



A depiction of the Theater an der Wien in 1830, where Franz Clement premiered Beethoven’s Violin Concerto in 1806