

Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 2 was the last of his major symphonic works to be performed by the New York Philharmonic. In fact, it was not programmed until 1949 — more than 80 years after the Orchestra's first performances of the composer's Third, Fourth, and Fifth Piano Concertos, and 100 years after his nine symphonies. (Beethoven's Piano Concertos Nos. 1 and 2 were first heard locally in 1918 and 1920, respectively, in performances by the rival New York Symphony, which would merge with the Philharmonic in 1928.)

Star soloist William Kapell was the soloist in the Philharmonic premiere on November 10, 1949, with Leopold Stokowski conducting. The 27-year-old Kapell was the first American-born pianist to become world famous — the Van Cliburn of the 1940s. He had grown up in Manhattan and attended New York City schools, including the High School of Music and Art and the Third Street Music School. He won the Naumberg Foundation Award and The Philadelphia Orchestra's youth competition in 1941, and made his Philharmonic debut at Lewisohn Stadium in 1944 (for a fee of \$75). Kapell's brash, New York style and quick tempos were a great part of his appeal. As Michael Kimmelman described in a 1998 *New York Times* article: "In a postwar world still dominated by turn-of-the-century European pianists, audiences found in Kapell something new: the first modern American star, not intimidated by Old World styles; he was fresh, a stupendous virtuoso, rivaling Horowitz."

Kapell's 1949 Beethoven performance with the Philharmonic was somewhat of a breakout, marking a step toward the mature artist he was becoming. His previous Philharmonic repertoire had consisted only of Rachmaninoff, Khachaturian, and Prokofiev, but he was finding those showpieces less artistically fulfilling, even coming to resent their thrill factor. He wrote to a friend in 1953: "The only moments I have when I play that are worth anything to me are when I can blissfully ignore the people I am supposed to be entertaining." *The New York Times* review noticed the change; as opposed to "pounding and relying upon power and speed for his ends," Beethoven's Second Concerto forced him to project a much subtler tone. He "triumphed, by the most legitimate means, in a way that made us additionally aware of the charm and distinction of a little known or appreciated score." After this success, Kapell began performing the more standard repertoire associated with his older, European rivals, including Brahms's Piano Concerto No. 1 and two Mozart concertos. Had his life not been cut short in a 1953 plane crash, returning from a tour to Australia, one could imagine how the television age might have made Kapell one of the most well-known pianists of the 20th century.

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Kapell, in a caricature by Alfred Berdiner, and in performance



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 not until that December, with the result that the former was identified as the composer's Piano Concerto No. 1 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 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

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 again just prior to publication in 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 conductor and soloist

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: June 21, 2014, Alan Gilbert, conductor, Yefim Bronfman, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 29 minutes

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.

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 this 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, and the third a rondo. In addition, the texture is truly orchestral, 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 movement 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, a movement that 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 an opus number). 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.

