The History in This Program

Even though New Yorkers embraced Beethoven symphonies relatively early, with the New York Philharmonic performing eight of the nine symphonies by 1849, it took much longer for his concertos to get a first hearing in Manhattan. Between 1842 and 1865 Boston hosted the American premieres of three of Beethoven's concertos, and Cincinnati and Brooklyn presented the other two. Although the Philharmonic gave its first performances of the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Concertos between 1855 and 1865, it did not perform the First and Second until 1918 and 1920, and even then those performances were actually given by the New York Symphony (which would merge with the Philharmonic in 1928).

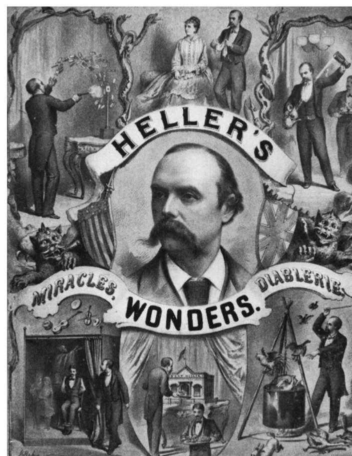
One reason for this delay was that few pianists possessed the technical ability to perform these solo parts. Of course, there were notable exceptions, and those who enjoyed the challenge of Beethoven's concertos were often flashy and idiosyncratic. Take Robert Heller, the "prestidigitator-pianist" and "Magician-Musician" who gave the American premieres of the Fourth and Fifth Concertos.

Robert Heller (1826–78) studied to be a pianist at London's Royal Academy of Music, but abandoned music after he saw the French magician Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin perform. In 1852 Heller moved to New York and leased a hall at Broadway and Spring Street: posing as a Frenchman, with a black wig over his reddish hair and a darkened mustache, he performed more than 200 magic shows. Following appearances in Philadelphia and several other cities, Heller put his props aside and toured with the Germania Musical Society as a concert pianist. It would be with this group that Heller gave the American premieres of the Fourth and Fifth Concertos in Boston. Still, when Heller was not playing the piano he appeared nightly at Chinese Hall as "the Wizard of Wizards and Great Modern Conjuror."

The *Emperor* Concerto was the first of Beethoven's five to be performed by the New York Philharmonic, in 1855. The concert was conducted by Henry C. Timm, and the soloist was pianist Gustav Satter, described by one critic as a "conceited Viennese pianist," who was "unheralded" until his Philharmonic debut. The *Dwight's Journal of Music* critic hailed the "masterly" performance:

> Towards its end, as light gradually broke in a perfectly ethereal *pianissimo* of high notes, the theme reappeared, and there was a breathless hush throughout the whole house, until, with the joining in of the orchestra, there was one deep, long-drawn breath, and all gave vent to the most unqualified admiration.

— The Archives



A poster for Robert Heller's magic show

To learn more, visit the **New York Philharmonic Leon Levy Digital Archives** at archives.nyphil.org.

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 73, *Emperor*

Ludwig van Beethoven

Ludwig van Beethoven's final piano concerto was born into troubled times, with the Napoleonic Wars coursing to full tide across Europe. When the composer's *Leonore* (the opera that would eventually morph into *Fidelio*) was premiered, on November 20, 1805, French armies were closing in on Vienna. By the time the first 15,000 of Napoleon's troops entered the city on November 13, most of the nobility or otherwise upperclass citizens had fled. The aftermath was not good for Austria or its allies — Great Britain, Russia, Sweden, and some German states. Prussia grew nervous and within a year it joined the alliance. Napoleon quickly redeployed his troops, captured the Prussian capital of Berlin, and in late 1806 — at the zenith of his career — made his move toward Russia. In 1807 he also decided to subjugate Portugal and Spain as a way to cut off British supply routes (Goya's famous ink drawings document the horrors of this so-called Peninsular War). Austria had been re-organizing its army and in the spring of 1809, in alliance with Britain, it took advantage of Napoleon's distraction with the Peninsular War to launch an attack on French strongholds in Bavaria. Napoleon's armies descended on Vienna again, but this time they met far more resistance than they had three and a half years earlier. Ferocious and costly fighting ensued between April and July until the Battle of Wagram swung the balance of victory to Napoleon, who appeared yet again to be invincible.

Monetary inflation swerved out of control and people fled Vienna in droves. The Empress left, and with her the Archduke Rudolph, who was her brother-in-law and Beethoven's piano pupil. Hoping to keep Beethoven from joining the exodus, Rudolph — along with two of his aristocratic friends, Prince Lobkowitz and Prince Kinsky — had just recently pledged to support Beethoven for life as long as he would remain in Vienna or thereabouts. Who knows if the composer would have stayed to endure the constant artillery attacks but for that inducement? "We have been suffering misery in a most

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: 1809; dedicated to Archduke Rudolph

World premiere: November 28, 1811, in Leipzig, by the Gewandhaus Orchestra, Johann Philipp Christian Schulz, conductor, Friedrich Schneider, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: March 10, 1855, Henry C. Timm, conductor, Gustav Satter, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: July 19, 2014, Alan Gilbert, conductor, Yefim Bronfman, soloist at Bravo! Vail in Colorado

Estimated duration: ca. 39 minutes

concentrated form," wrote Beethoven that July to his publisher in Leipzig:

> What a destructive and disorderly life I see and hear around me, nothing but drums, cannons, human misery in every form.

Through it all he had been writing a piano concerto, and it is marvelous to think that anything so uplifting and inspiring could emerge from such dismal surroundings. When the work finally received its Vienna premiere two years later, a French officer in the audience had the audacity to shout out "C'est l'Empereur!" — or so the tale is told. The name stuck, with the ironic result that throughout history this transcendent concerto, Beethoven's last, has been shackled with a nickname relating to the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, the same Napoleon in whom Beethoven had once placed so much humanitarian hope (see sidebar below).

Uniquely among Beethoven's five piano concertos, this one was not premiered by its composer. At the time it was introduced, in 1811, he was substantially deaf and no longer felt comfortable performing publicly at the keyboard (although he would do so, very occasionally, until 1815). The world premiere, which took place in Leipzig, was entrusted to Friedrich Schneider, of whom little is known other than that he had a friendly visit with Beethoven in 1819 when he passed through Vienna, giving organ recitals. The Vienna premiere — the one at which the piece apparently got its nickname — took place only on February 12, 1812, with the soloist being Beethoven's pupil Carl Czerny (remembered chiefly for the unavoidable finger exercises he penned to bedevil piano students into eternity).

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

Cadenzas: by Beethoven

The Emperor

It is ironic that Beethoven's transcendent final piano concerto has been shackled with a nickname relating to the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. Beethoven was a partisan of noble humanitarian principles who saw the democratic ideals of ancient Greece reflected in the aspirations of the Jacobins of post-revolutionary France. At the head of the Jacobins was Napoleon Bonaparte, and Beethoven viewed him as a repository of hope for the social enlightenment of humankind. However, in the spring of 1804 Napoleon had crowned himself Emperor, which reportedly threw Beethoven into a rage and led him to scratch Napoleon's name from the title page of his *Sinfonia eroica*. We can therefore bet that, wherever he is spending his afterlife, Beethoven is not referring to the piece heard tonight as his *Emperor* Concerto.

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's Napoleon I on His Imperial Throne, *1806*