

Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Op. 37

Ludwig van Beethoven

Ludwig van Beethoven had moved from his native Bonn to Vienna in 1792 to embark on a course of study with Joseph Haydn. Although Beethoven's composition lessons with Haydn would prove to be few and generally unfruitful, he respected the older master's works as symphonic models and adhered to generally Classical structures in his early symphonies and concertos. But when it came to melodies, rhythmic gestures, and phrasing, it seems to have been the recently departed Mozart whom Beethoven held most dear.

A music lover listening to Beethoven's C-minor Piano Concerto may entertain more than fleeting thoughts about an earlier C-minor Piano Concerto, the brooding, even despairing one that Mozart had composed in 1786. During Mozart's lifetime, however, it could be played only from manuscript parts. It was not published until 1800, the same year Beethoven brought the first movement of his own C-minor Piano Concerto into reasonably finished form. Beethoven went on record as a great aficionado of the Mozart work. Walking in the company of the pianist and composer Johann Baptist Cramer, he came within earshot of an outdoor performance (or perhaps a rehearsal) of Mozart's C-minor Concerto. He is reputed to have stopped in his tracks, called attention to a particularly beautiful motif, and exclaimed, with a mixture of admiration and despondency, "Cramer, Cramer! We shall never be able to do anything like that!" Cramer's widow recounted:

As the theme was repeated and wrought up to the climax, Beethoven, swaying his body to and fro, marked the time and in every possible manner manifested a delight rising to enthusiasm.

By the time the old century yielded to the new, Beethoven had gained renown in Vienna as a pianist, and aristocrats were beginning to seek him out to provide piano lessons for their offspring. He had composed quite a few pieces, some more inspired than others, and was already embarked on his earliest works in the major large-scale musical genres. On April 2, 1800, at Vienna's Burgtheater, Beethoven had undertaken his first benefit concert (in those days, a benefit concert being understood to mean "for the benefit of the composer"). The program included a Mozart symphony, excerpts from Haydn's newly-unveiled oratorio *The Creation*, piano improvisations, one of Beethoven's piano concertos (probably the C-major), and two new Beethoven pieces: the Septet (Op. 20) and Symphony No. 1 (Op. 21).

He had planned to unveil his C-minor Piano Concerto on that high-profile occasion

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: 1796–1803; dedicated to Prince Louis Ferdinand of Prussia

World premiere: April 5, 1803, at Vienna's Theater an der Wien, with the composer as soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: February 1, 1862, Carl Bergmann, conductor, Ernst Hartmann, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: April 5, 2018, Esa-Pekka Salonen, conductor, Benjamin Grosvenor, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 36 minutes

but had managed to complete only the first movement and a detailed sketch of the second. That's why he switched the program to include one of his "old" concertos and basically stopped working on the new one until an opportunity for another prominent concert arose, which it did in 1802. But for some reason that concert didn't happen, and again Beethoven devoted himself to other more immediately profitable projects rather than finish his concerto. As a result,

the composition of this concerto ended up stretching over a good three and a half years, not counting preliminary sketches, which reached back to 1796 — plus a further year, counting the time it took him to actually write out the piano part, and yet another five beyond that till he wrote down the first-movement cadenza. Neither of these last two bits of work was necessary as long as Beethoven was the soloist; he knew how the piece should go, after all.

Beethoven's Piano

Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3 reflects an important advance relating to technology. In the final decades of the 18th century, manufacturers were beginning to stretch the piano's range by incorporating extra keys beyond the five-octave span that was then the standard. Beethoven was aware of the risk in making use of these extra notes as they were added; doing so, after all, would limit the practicality of his scores for musicians whose pianos were not so equipped. Nonetheless, his C-minor Concerto makes full use of this technological development, calling for his soloist to play all the way up to high G.

This concerto is thought to be the first piano piece ever to employ that particular note — certainly there are no earlier ones in today's active repertoire — and Beethoven leads his pianist there right at the outset of the solo part, when the first movement's main theme is announced in double octaves. By the time he got around to writing out the piano part for his student Ferdinand Ries, in 1804, Beethoven was emboldened to push the range further, all the way up to the C that sits atop the fifth ledger line above the treble staff. His C-minor Concerto therefore stands not only as a great work in its own right, but also as a document relating to the adolescent growing pains of the instrument it spotlights.



A Graf piano, ca. 1804, a time when keyboards on the instrument were expanding

Despite the protracted compositional process, this work displays a striking unity of vocabulary and tautness of structure. One might argue that is the first of his five canonical piano concertos to sound like fully mature Beethoven. Despite its obvious connection to Mozart's C-minor Concerto, we sense that Beethoven is here throwing down the gauntlet toward that work, clambering up on its shoulders to create something still more towering, rath-

er than exploring the essentially Mozartian territory that had characterized his earlier Piano Concertos in B-flat major and C major.

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

Cadenza: by Beethoven, written out in 1809

At the Premiere

It strikes modern music-lovers as odd that Beethoven had not finished writing out the solo piano part by the time the Piano Concerto No. 3 was finally premiered. But on a practical level it was unnecessary because Beethoven himself was the soloist on that occasion. The piece was in his head, after all, and in any case the practice of the time would have allowed for a fair amount of improvisation. In order for the work to enter the repertoire of other players the solo part would obviously have to be written down in its entirety. Beethoven therefore finished that part of the job sometime after the work's premiere, but prior to July 19, 1804, when it was performed with his pupil Ferdinand Ries as soloist. In the event, Beethoven may have made a misjudgment in failing to notate the solo part prior to the premiere. Ignaz von Seyfried, the Theater an der Wien's conductor, who was turning pages for Beethoven during the concerto, left an alarmed account of his experience:

I saw almost nothing but empty leaves; at the most, on one page or another a few Egyptian hieroglyphs, wholly unintelligible to me, were scribbled down to serve as clues for him; for he played nearly all of the solo part from memory since, as was so often the case, he had not had time to set it all down on paper. He gave me a secret glance whenever he was at the end of one of the invisible passages, and my scarcely concealable anxiety not to miss the decisive moment amused him greatly and he laughed heartily during the jovial supper which we ate afterwards.



Beethoven, in a portrait by Joseph Willibrord Mähler, ca. 1804