

# Piano Concerto No. 1 in C major, Op. 15

## Ludwig van Beethoven

Ludwig van Beethoven was an adept keyboard player from early on. In June 1782 he had filled in as deputy court organist when his teacher, Christian Gottlob Neefe, left his usual spot in the loft at the court church in Bonn to take a brief trip out of town. Nine months later, Neefe contributed a glowing report of his 11-year-old pupil to Cramer's *Magazin 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." Soon Beethoven was serving as keyboard player and violist in the court orchestra in Bonn, and in 1784 he began receiving a small salary for his efforts. In 1787 he took a trip to Vienna, where it seems that he met Mozart and may have taken piano lessons from him. He also met Joseph Haydn when that eminent figure passed through Bonn either on his way to London in 1790 or on his way back home to Austria in 1792. In November of the latter year Beethoven moved to Vienna, which would be his home for the rest of his life.

Shortly after arriving in Vienna he signed up for lessons with Haydn. The relationship turned out to be mostly cordial but not particularly fruitful, and when Haydn left Vienna for his second English residency, in 1794, Beethoven seized the opportunity to sign on as a pupil of Johann Georg Albrechtsberger, the Kapellmeister of St. Stephen's Cathedral. A more thorough academician than Haydn was, Albrechtsberger put Beethoven through his paces in contrapuntal writing at various levels of complexity, from simple note-against-note exercises through double fugue, triple counterpoint, and strict canon. Thus did Beethoven's native talent as a composer become refined to a degree

that enabled him to master and, in his way, exceed the musical *lingua franca* of his time and place, which, thanks to Haydn and Mozart, had already achieved the status of a Golden Age.

It is customary to point out that Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 1 was actually his Piano Concerto No. 2 and that his Piano Concerto No. 2 was his Piano Concerto No. 1. The so-called Piano Concerto No. 1 in C major appears to date from 1795 (it was premiered on December 18 of that year), while the so-called Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major occupied Beethoven sporadically during the 1790s and may have been premiered as early as March 29, 1795. Both works were released to the public in 1801, by different publishing houses in different cities, and both were probably revised shortly before they were engraved; the C-major certainly was revised in 1800. But since that work was brought out

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## 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:** apparently in 1795, but revised to its final form for a performance in 1800; dedicated to Princess Barbara Odescalchi

**World premiere:** December 18, 1795, in Vienna, with the composer at the keyboard

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** December 15, 1918, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which merged with the New York Philharmonic in 1928), Alfred Cortot, soloist

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** February 17, 2017, Manfred Honeck, conductor, Inon Barnatan, soloist

**Estimated duration:** ca. 37 minutes

in print before the B-flat-major, it was identified as Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 1.

Anyone writing a piano concerto in Vienna in the last decade of the 18th century did so in the shadow of the late lamented Mozart, several of whose concertos Beethoven had in his performance repertoire. Indeed, there is much that is Mozartian in this work, particularly in sections that make prominent use of the trumpets, horns, and timpani that Mozart was fond of using in C-major orchestral pieces, including three of his four piano concertos in that key. But on the whole, this concerto of Beethoven's exhibits assertive originality. The first movement displays the subtlety of a profound musical intelligence, and connoisseurs can profitably investigate its structural niceties,

particularly in the magical development section in its middle. The *Largo* is moody and contemplative, prefiguring such famous slow movements as that of the *Pathétique* Sonata, which would follow within a few years. But it is in the finale that one may glimpse the most unmistakably Beethovenian traits, including a boisterous sense of humor, an appetite for mixing high sophistication with less elevated references, and an abiding fondness for surprise.

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

**Cadenzas:** by Beethoven.

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## Angels and Muses

During his first decade in Vienna, Beethoven set about cultivating a circle of potential patrons. He had reasonable success in gaining access to influential aristocrats, even serving as piano teacher to some of them, and quite a few sponsored him in piano recitals at their impressive homes.

These strands come together in his C-major Piano Concerto: it was written while Beethoven was living as a houseguest of Prince Karl Lichnowsky, who would serve as one of the composer's



most important patrons until a rupture in their relationship occurred in 1806. The work bears a dedication to Princess Barbara ("Babette") Odescalchi, another noble supporter who, at least in 1797, was also his piano pupil; and it was premiered at a concert in Vienna that was organized by Haydn for the principal purpose of showing off some of his own new *London Symphonies*.

Prince Karl Lichnowsky (1756–1814) and Princess Barbara Odescalchi (?–1813)