

Notes on the Program

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

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 36 Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58

Ludwig van Beethoven

It is no longer fashionable, as it was in much of the 19th and 20th centuries, to speak of Beethoven's symphonies as inhabiting conflicting camps, with the even-numbered ones being conservative and reflective and the odd-numbered ones being radical and extroverted. It's probably for the best. None of Beethoven's nine symphonies are conservative — at least they weren't when he composed them — and each embodies both introspection and bravado to some degree.

Nonetheless, his symphonies do have strong characters and each leaves a discernable and specific impression in its wake. Although the straitened objectivity of the post-World War II era may temper past excesses, one may still find a kernel of truth in the even-odd cliché. The intrepid fortitude of the Third (*Eroica*) or the resolute struggle of the Fifth do leave a different overall impression from, say, the more intimate celebration of nature in the Sixth (the *Pastoral*) or the elegant wit of the Fourth. The **Symphony No. 2** faintly echoes all of the symphonies the composer would go on to write, but it stands out particularly as a spiritual pair with the Eighth Symphony. The latter explores related emotional terrain following a decade of intense musical exploration. Both pretend to be Classical symphonies, although they transgress Classical models in important ways, and both come across as essentially musical arguments rather than Romantic reflections of personal exertions or other “external” factors. Beethoven's Second seems an indispensable step along the path to Beethoven's Eighth, less imposing (despite its greater length) but fully as delightful,

playing Mercury, perhaps, to the Jove of the Eighth, or Puck to its Falstaff.

The Second is the least performed of Beethoven's symphonies — one of them would have to be — but when it is heard it proves irresistibly seductive. The music analyst Donald Francis Tovey remarked of its marvelous *Larghetto* that “to many a musical child, or

In Short

Born: probably on December 16, 1770 (he was baptized on the 17th), in Bonn, then an independent electorate of Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Works composed and premiered: Symphony No. 2, composed 1801–October 1802; dedicated to the composer's friend and patron Prince Karl von Lichnowsky; premiered April 5, 1803, at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna. Piano Concerto No. 4, composed in early 1806, and perhaps somewhat earlier; it was probably completed on March 27, 1806; premiered March 1807, in a private performance at the palace of Prince Franz Josef von Lobkowitz; public premiere, December 22, 1808, at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna

New York Philharmonic premieres and most recent performances: Symphony No. 2, premiered April 22, 1843, Alfred Boucher, conductor; most recent performance, April 13, 2013, David Robertson, conductor. Piano Concerto No. 4, premiered January 31, 1863, Theodore Thomas, conductor, Sebastian Bach Mills, soloist; most recently played, October 8, 2016, Alan Gilbert, conductor, Lang Lang, soloist

Estimated durations: Symphony No. 2, ca. 34 minutes; Piano Concerto No. 4, ca. 35 minutes

child in musical matters, this movement has brought about the first awakening to a sense of beauty in music.” He also argued that, while it does not seem as exorbitantly radical in its content, Beethoven’s Second Symphony may not have had a lesser effect on ensuing music than some of his symphonies whose surface details make a more immediate and obvious impact. He considered it one of “certain works which immediately impressed contemporaries as marking a startling advance in the art without a disconcerting change in its language.”

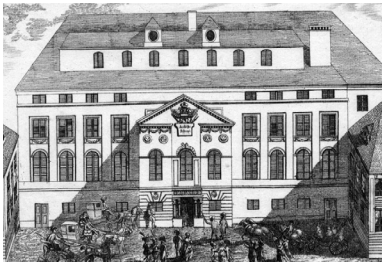
Tovey was referring to the symphony’s musical language, to be sure, but here one also finds a watershed moment in musical terminology. Beethoven nailed a peg into the coffin of the Classical minuet as the predictable structure for symphonic third movements, a role it played almost invariably in the symphonies of Haydn and Mozart. In truth, the

character of symphonic third movements had been changing for some time, but it is in Beethoven’s Second Symphony that the semantic breakthrough takes place; the movement is called not a minuet but a *Scherzo* — literally, a joke.

Those who heard the premiere of the Second Symphony found the piece to be startling indeed, and the critics were reserved in their response. The *Zeitung für die Elegante Welt* found it wanting in comparison to Beethoven’s First Symphony, its critic expressing the opinion that the first symphony is better than the later one because it is developed with a lightness and is less forced, while in the second the striving for the new and surprising is already more apparent.

That critic was certainly right about the Second Symphony’s “striving for the new.” The piece is often highly dramatic, from the long, searching, slow introduction of

A Difficult Birth



The Theater an der Wien, where Beethoven resided in the year his Second Symphony was premiered there, at the invitation of impresario Emanuel Schikaneder, who had built it two years earlier

Beethoven’s **Symphony No. 2** was premiered in April 1803, at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna, on a concert that also included his First Symphony, Piano Concerto No. 3, and the oratorio *Christus am Ölberge* (*Christ on the Mount of Olives*). It was one of those interminable programs that late 18th- and early 19th-century audiences seem to have endured with patience, curiosity, and *sitzfleisch*. It was also one that got by on a wing and a prayer. Beethoven’s pupil Ferdinand Ries was summoned to the master’s apartment at five in the morning on the day of the concert and found the composer in bed, writing out trombone parts. The program had yet to be rehearsed for the first time, despite the amount of music to be played, and that much of it was new and complex. “The rehearsal began at eight o’clock in the morning,” Ries recounted. “It was a terrible rehearsal, and at half past two everybody was exhausted and more or less dissatisfied.” He continued:

Prince Karl Lichnowsky, who attended the rehearsal from the beginning, had sent for bread and butter, cold meat, and wine, in large baskets. He pleasantly asked all to help themselves, and this was done with both hands, the result being that good nature was restored again. ... And so the rehearsal began again. The concert began at six o’clock, but was so long that a few pieces were not performed.

the opening movement — rich in harmonic surprises and cunning contrasts of orchestration — through to the outsize coda of the finale, which even comes to a halt and creeps on in considerable mystery before concluding in rambunctious fashion.

Beethoven's **Piano Concerto No. 4** emerges with unexpected gentleness. In 1807, when this music was first heard, any reasonably informed member of a Viennese audience would have known that a concerto should begin with a long introduction during which the orchestra presents some of the first movement's principal themes. In the case of a piano concerto, the soloist might play along, underpinning the orchestral texture; but the featured instrument would not move into the spotlight until the introduction had come to a resolute conclusion. Beethoven had at least respected that aspect of the Classical mold in

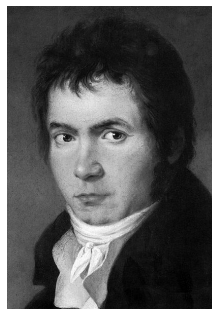
his first three piano concertos (not to mention his early “non-canonical” E-flat-major Piano Concerto of 1784) and his Violin Concerto.

Imagine, then, the astonishment with which listeners, conditioned in this way, must have heard Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto when it was new. Rather than the authoritarian sounds of a full orchestra, the first notes they heard were played softly on the piano, the gentle murmuring of a theme based on repeated notes and simple harmonies. And then — just as surprising — following its five-measure presentation of the thematic germ of this movement, the piano simply withdraws, not to be heard from again for another 69 measures. One might say that the silent piano is unusually “present” during the measures of orchestral introduction, precisely because it made its mark so indelibly at the outset. Apart from the unorthodox decision to begin with the solo piano,

At the Premiere

In his *Autobiography*, published in 1865, the composer Louis Spohr recounted an anecdote told to him by Ignaz Xaver Seyfried, music director of the Theater an der Wien from 1797 to 1825, about Beethoven's performance at the premiere of the **Fourth Piano Concerto**:

Beethoven was playing a new Pianoforte-Concerto of his, but forgot at the first *tutti* that he was a solo player, and springing up, began to direct in his usual way. At the first *sforzando* he threw out his arms so wide asunder that he knocked both the lights off the piano upon the ground. The audience laughed, and Beethoven was so incensed at this disturbance, that he made the orchestra cease playing, and begin anew. Seyfried, fearing that a repetition of the accident would occur at the same passage, bade two boys of the chorus place themselves on either side of Beethoven, and hold the lights in their hands. One of the boys innocently approached nearer, and was reading also the notes of the piano-part. When therefore the fatal *sforzando* came, he received from Beethoven's outthrown right hand so smart a blow on the mouth, that the poor boy let fall the light from terror. The other boy, more cautious, had followed with anxious eyes every motion of Beethoven, and by stooping suddenly at the eventful moment he avoided the slap on the mouth. If the public were unable to restrain their laughter before, they could now much less, and broke out into a regular bacchanalian roar. Beethoven got into such a rage that at the first chords of the solo, half a dozen strings broke. Every endeavor of the real lovers of music to restore calm and attention were for the moment fruitless. The first *Allegro* of the Concerto was therefore lost to the public.



Beethoven, ca. 1805

the musical material itself is a bombshell. The piano's opening chords are in G major, but the orchestra's response is in B-major, a key only distantly related to the harmonic region marked by the piano's theme. The relationship of key regions spaced a third apart — such as G and B — would become an obsession of composers as the 19th century progressed. As usual, Beethoven was at the forefront.

The second movement, too, is extraordinary, even apart from its uncharacteristic brevity (lasting as it does only about five minutes). The music theorist Adolf Bernhard Marx, in his 1859 biography of Beethoven, suggested that this *Andante con moto* bore some relationship to Gluck's opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* — specifically, to how Orpheus used music to tame wild beasts. At some point music historians began misattributing this observation to Franz Liszt, who probably would have been very happy to assign a programmatic explanation to this expressive, conversational movement, but apparently didn't. (Liszt's "quotation" can still be found in many discussions of this concerto, even though historical research squashed it a few decades ago.) In 1985 the musicologist Owen Jander pointed out that Beethoven's music — indeed, in the whole concerto, not just the slow movement — seems to follow point by point a popular version of the Orpheus legend that was presented as street theater in the Vienna of Beethoven's day. Such a literal interpretation of text into tones would have been an extraordinary method for Beethoven to follow, and opinions are divided about whether there is much likelihood that this took place; yet Jander put forth a strong argument, and the idea does capture the imagination.

Beethoven unveiled his Fourth Piano Concerto at a private concert in the palace of his patron Prince Franz Josef von Lobkowitz in March 1807. Then he put it away for nearly two years and performed it only one more time, at a concert at Vienna's Theater an der Wien on December 22, 1808. This all-Beethoven marathon has gone into the annals as one of the most extraordinary events in all of music history. In addition to this concerto, the performance included the premieres of Beethoven's Symphonies Nos. 5 and 6 as well as of the *Choral Fantasy* (for piano, choir, and orchestra), the Vienna premieres of three movements from the C-major Mass and the concert scena "Ah, Perfido!", and a solo keyboard improvisation by the composer. To encounter all of these revolutionary pieces at one sitting must have been overwhelming, and to many attendees the Fourth Piano Concerto must have sounded like just more of the same madness — and who knows what the all-but-deaf Beethoven actually accomplished at the piano. His pupil Carl Czerny termed Beethoven's performance on that occasion as "playful," an odd enough descriptive, in the event, that one might wonder if it should be read as a euphemism. It was Beethoven's last public appearance as a concerto soloist, although he would continue to perform in chamber music or as an accompanist.

Cadenzas: by Beethoven.

Instrumentation: Symphony No. 2 calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. Piano Concerto No. 4 employs flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings, in addition to the solo piano.