

Violin Concerto in D Major, op. 61—Ludwig van Beethoven

By 1806 Beethoven had surmounted a series of significant distractions that had seriously affected his creative life. The difficulties that he had with writing his only opera, *Fidelio*, are well documented. Other factors were the misery of his ardent, but unsuccessful, personal relationship with the young widow, Josephine von Brunsvik, and, of course, dealing with the reality of his deafness. But by 1806 he entered into a new period of inspiration and productivity. Significant compositions that are now central to his legacy stemmed from his sense of renewal in that year: the “Rasumovsky” quartets, the “Appassionata” piano sonata, the Fourth Symphony, and the Violin Concerto.

The concerto was written for the young Franz Clement, whom Beethoven had known for over ten years, having met him not too long after the composer had moved to Vienna. While Clement is almost totally unknown to concert audiences today, in his time he enjoyed a reputation for formidable musical talent and skill. A child prodigy on the violin, he was known for an incredible musical memory, as well as a penchant for public displays of what today would be deemed cheap, carnival tricks on his instrument. Nevertheless, Beethoven had great respect for him and valued his friendship. Clement had returned the favor with consultative advice on *Fidelio*, and helped in other ways, as well. As in the case of so many other famous compositions in music history, the concerto was finished so late that legend has it Clement practically sight-read the première performance in December of 1806. If one can imagine it, Clement apparently also entertained the audience between movements of this now sacred composition by playing some impromptu variations with his fiddle held upside down. Times have changed.

Beethoven’s Violin Concerto has, of course, come to hold a central place in the repertoire of concert violinists. It was not always so, however, and it only slowly came to be appreciated for its genius. While a work of great difficulty, it is not at all a showy vehicle for technical prowess and virtuosity—a characteristic of not a few of our favorite violin concertos of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the challenges are certainly there, and recent scholarly research has shown that there is more than a little of Clement’s signature passagework for violin that Beethoven adapted for use in his work. Beethoven obviously did not treat its composition lightly; the first movement was the longest that he had composed up to that time. Moreover, the whole work is one of lyricism, dignity, and seriousness of purpose. Its attractive melodies and leisurely tempos have stimulated more than one commentator to speak of its “Olympian nature,” “nobility,” and “dignity.” All of that it is.

The work begins unusually with five little taps in the timpani (they go on to appear again at important places and played by others, as well), followed immediately by the woodwind section playing the main theme in rich, full harmony. When we’re ready for the second main idea, rising scales soon herald our friends, the woodwinds, again, who introduce this theme, as well. The solo violin finally enters with a brief flourish, and then begins to explore the two ideas. Beethoven takes the time, and in such a context, it’s welcomed, to thoroughly examine the possibilities of his material, the violin regaling us with an ingratiating variety of figurations. The soft drum taps of the beginning herald the recapitulation, a noble and grand affair. Now time for the cadenza—usually a substantial one—and since Beethoven did not originally provide them, many have been written by numerous famous violinists. Tonight the soloist will be playing those by the great Fritz Kreisler. After the display, accompanied by soft, low string *pizzicatos*, the solo violin leads us quietly home with the second theme.

The second movement technically is a series of variations, but not one in the normal sense of clear figurations that gradually accumulate in activity. It’s rather a simple affair—not even a change of key—that sounds almost choral in nature. Beethoven has given us some wonderful examples of this in many compositions—even in his piano sonatas. He keeps our interest in this warm and regal simplicity by a series of color changes in the orchestration that carries on through the delicate filigree of the violinist’s embellishments. A short cadenza leads us without a break—not unusual in this period—directly into the last movement. The solo violin immediately plays the tune—which, if not already familiar, soon will be. It’s a rondo, meaning one easily recognized and usually cheerful idea is interspersed with a few contrasting sections, but with the main idea always coming back. And so, this little country tune, based upon a jaunty five-note figure, lopes and gallops to a rollicking conclusion, reminding us that Beethoven is not always storm and stress.

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