



Ludwig van Beethoven: Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 61: Mov. 1

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BORN: December ~16, 1770. Bonn, Germany

DIED: March 26, 1827. Vienna, Austria

COMPOSED: 1806. Dedicated to the violinist Franz Clement.

WORLD PREMIERE: Clement performed as soloist at the premiere, which Beethoven conducted at the Theater an der Wien on December 23, 1806.

INSTRUMENTATION: Solo violin, flute, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, and strings.

DURATION: ~24 minutes

BACKGROUND:

The highly productive years of 1804-1806 saw Beethoven compose many of his most well-known works. If he had composed only the violin concerto and his “Razumovsky” string quartets we would still call the period a highly creative one. But these fruitful few years would give us his Piano Concerto No. 4, Symphony No. 4, Symphony No. 5, and his Piano Sonata No. 23 (*Appassionata*).

When hearing the term “violin concerto” many individuals find themselves thinking of a bombastic orchestral accompaniment fighting alongside (sometimes against) a whirlwind of virtuosic runs on the violin. Many will also credit Brahms with dispelling this method and treating the soloist and orchestra as one entity in his Piano Concerto No. 2. While Beethoven’s concerto for violin may not treat the soloist and orchestra as one entity, he does approach the work with just as much intimacy.

However, his Violin Concerto was received coldly at its premiere. Audiences were met with an ill prepared orchestra and soloist. This was due to Beethoven handing over the completed score only two days before the concert. Franz Clement had to *sight read* the work during the



performance. Clement had to perform parlor tricks such as improvising a solo while holding his violin upside down just to reel the audience back in.

The piece would be played scarcely throughout the years due to a less than lukewarm reception at the premiere. It wasn't until 1844 when Felix Mendelssohn led a revival concert with a then 12-year-old violinist virtuoso by the name of Joseph Joachim. We also owe Mendelssohn a debt for reviving the works of Bach and we owe Joachim a debt for introducing a young Brahms to Robert and Clara Schumann.

MUSIC:

1. The first section of the movement is marked as *Allegro ma non troppo*, which translates to "Fast, but not too much." The work opens unconventionally with five quiet, little beats on the timpani. This is a prime example of Beethoven's innovative approach to the concerto form. It might seem simple, but these five taps of the timpani are quite genius. The work is in 4/4 (four beats in each measure) and the timpanist plays on the first beat of the opening measure and concludes its "theme" on the first beat of the next measure. This creates a sense of continuous breath in the exchange of melody between instruments. The orchestra enters with a proud theme in D Major. We transition into B flat major at the bridge and continue to modulate into G minor, D minor, and then find ourselves modulating into the second theme of A Major. Listen for the contrast between the two themes, with the first being light and playful, and the second being more dramatic and intense. The orchestra works its way back to the home key of D Major and after about 3 minutes into the work the orchestra extends its hand to the solo violin and invites it to join in on the conversation.
2. The solo violin enters with a simple, almost Mozart-like ascent in octaves and descent in patterns of falling thirds and rising seconds. This entrance gives the audience a friendly handshake. It's as if we're making acquaintances with an old friend. There is nothing harsh or bombastic about this.
3. Beethoven develops the theme with the solo violin accompanied by the orchestra, then the orchestra takes up the theme. This is not a butting of heads. The two entities are simply allowing the other to take the lead when appropriate.



4. The violin melody now takes on textures similar to Beethoven's studies in his youth. About 5 minutes in and you'll hear the sweet, Mozart-like melodies start to spin into lines similar to those in Bach's writing for violin. Listen to the way Beethoven weaves the soloist in and out of the orchestral texture, sometimes blending in and sometimes standing out.

5. The only time Beethoven lets virtuosity shine over lyricism is during the beginning of the cadenza. He lets us know that he is more than capable of writing music that can dazzle and floor the audience with acrobatic writing. We're offered just a taste of this before the soloist eases us back into the welcoming arms of the orchestra.