

## Ludwig van Beethoven

### Piano Concerto No. 4 in G, Opus 58

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN was baptized in Bonn, Germany, on December 17, 1770, and died in Vienna on March 26, 1827. He composed the Fourth Piano Concerto in 1805 and early 1806 (it was probably completed by spring, since his brother offered it to a publisher on March 27). The first performance was a private one, in March 1807, at the home of Prince Lobkowitz. The public premiere took place at Vienna's Theater an der Wien on December 22, 1808, with the composer as soloist, in the same concert that included, among many other things, the premieres of his Fifth and Sixth symphonies.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO PIANO, the score calls for an orchestra of one flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, and strings, with two trumpets and timpani added in the final movement.

Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto was written between 1805 and June 1806 during a period of intense artistic creativity and output. As was his habit, Beethoven then turned his attention to a new symphony in order to premiere both at the same public concert. During these few years, Beethoven produced not only this new piano concerto and Symphony No. 4, he also finished the Violin Concerto, the Triple Concerto, and the three great *Razamovsky* quartets, all groundbreaking works. Beethoven dedicated the Fourth Concerto to his friend, patron, and pupil, Archduke Rudolph of Austria, who was the dedicatee of eleven of Beethoven's most important works, including the Piano Concerto No. 5 (*Emperor*), the *Archduke* Trio, the *Hammerklavier* Sonata, the *Grosse Fuge*, and the *Missa Solemnis*.

While there is scholarly debate as to exactly when the Fourth Concerto was first performed, it seems to have been unveiled during a private performance in March 1807 at the residence of Beethoven's friend and patron Prince Lobkowitz, with the composer himself as soloist. Even so, Beethoven would still have been eager to present this and other new works to the Viennese.

During 1807, Beethoven actively sought an appropriate venue for such an event, which would be his first concert in six years given for his own benefit. In 1808 he was finally able to secure a theater and orchestra, and on December 22 that year he presented a public concert the likes of which the audience could hardly have anticipated. His program was particularly ambitious, probably the most unwieldy and impractical of his career. It also proved to be one of the most important of his life.

In the press, Beethoven advertised the concert as consisting of pieces that were "entirely new and not yet heard in public." The hall was packed with people, and the program consisted of more than four hours of music, all of it "new" at least to the Vienna audience. And, as things turned out, this 1808 appearance would be the last time he performed in public as a concerto soloist, due to his rapidly progressing deafness.

In addition to the first public performance of his Fourth Concerto (which concluded the first half of the concert, with Beethoven as soloist), the program opened with the premiere of the *Pastoral* Symphony, then continued in the first half with the first Vienna performance of the concert aria "*Ah! perfido*" and the Gloria from Beethoven's Mass in C (the latter sung in German rather than Latin to avoid offending the censors). Following intermission came the first performance of Beethoven's C minor Symphony, the first Vienna performance of the Sanctus from the Mass in C (likewise translated from Latin), a piano improvisation by Beethoven (which, in the words of one attendee, "showed his complete mastery" of the instrument), and the first performance of the Choral Fantasy (which broke down at one point due to lack of adequate rehearsal).

Many of the most important musicians and patrons in Vienna were in attendance that day, including Prince Lobkowitz and his friend Johann Friederich Reichardt, who was then on leave from his job as director of the orchestra in the new state of Westphalia. Reichardt was an accomplished musician and prolific writer; in 1810 he published a large volume of letters that recorded his musical experiences in Vienna in 1808 and 1809. Beethoven's concert of December 1808 figures prominently in his book. He describes the entire experience, not just the music. Setting the scene, he writes, "we shivered in

the comfortable boxes, wrapped in our fur coats and cloaks,” and then complains that the singer of the concert aria merely “shivered rather than sang, but that can be blamed on the bitter cold.” Reichardt also described each piece of music performed that night, and although he thought Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony “protracted and overlong,” he found the G major piano concerto particularly compelling.

Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 4 introduced the audience to something completely new. Gone were the grand gestures meant merely for pianistic display. Instead, the concerto concentrated on a more personal and intimate style, infused with tranquility and lyricism. The very opening, so unusual for the time, signals this new path immediately. The piano begins alone, playing a beautifully simple tune in full chords in the middle register, marked *piano, dolce* (“softly, sweetly”). Entering after the soloist’s initial statement, the orchestra seems hesitant to interrupt the contemplative and intimate opening of the piano. Only after a few minutes does it swell to a full *tutti* and the dialogue between soloist and orchestra truly ensue. Reichardt wrote that the first movement was of “frightful difficulty, the fastest tempos of which Beethoven performed to astonishment.” Yet it is the lyricism and dialogue between the two forces that truly arrest the audience.

Still more compelling is the second movement, which follows no traditional formal design. Instead Beethoven organizes his musical material as a dialogue between two disputants. The orchestra begins *forte*, with an almost angry, choppy *tutti*, only to be met with the soloist’s quiet pleading, in music written to sound almost as if it were an improvisation. The two forces respond to each other until the piano, with its calming, expressive music, finally prevails. Reichardt commented upon the singing quality of the pianist’s part in 1808, writing that “the adagio, a masterly movement of beautiful and continuous lyricism, he [Beethoven] sang with his instrument with a deep, melancholy feeling that really thrilled me.” In *Ludwig van Beethoven: Leben und Schaffen*, published in 1859, the great musician and writer Adolf Bernhard Marx likened the soloist’s songlike role in this movement to that of Orpheus taming the wild beasts with his lyre. Although we can’t be sure whether Beethoven had the Orpheus legend in mind, the piano’s calming, expressive music ultimately prevails, “taming” the orchestra. The triumph of tenderness, calm, and beauty over the gruff, stormy orchestra is still one of the most magical moments in the concerto literature.

The third movement follows immediately after a final gentle gesture from the piano. The orchestra plays quietly, but with a hint of mischief, and the game is afoot. This is his only piano concerto in which Beethoven begins the third movement with the orchestra rather than the soloist alone—a reversal of what happens in the work’s opening movement. A particularly exhilarating coda ends the finale in high spirits.

In 1809, the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* reported that Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 4 was “the most admirable singular artistic and complex Beethoven concerto ever.” Though the concerto was well received during his lifetime, it was all but forgotten until 1836, when Felix Mendelssohn performed it in Leipzig. Robert Schumann, who was in the Leipzig audience, later wrote that the concerto was so astounding that “I sat in my place without moving a muscle or even breathing.” Even today, audiences remain awed by Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 4, which seamlessly combines lyricism and intimacy with gravity and power.

Elizabeth Seitz

ELIZABETH SEITZ is a faculty member at The Boston Conservatory, a frequent guest speaker for the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Boston Lyric Opera, and a musicologist whose interests range from Mozart, Schubert, and Mahler to Ravel, Falla, and Tito Puente.

**THE AMERICAN PREMIERE OF BEETHOVEN’S PIANO CONCERTO NO. 4** took place at the Boston Odeon on February 4, 1854, with soloist Robert Heller and the Germania Musical Society conducted by Carl Bergmann.

**THE FIRST BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCE** of Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 4 was conducted by Georg Henschel in December 1881, during the orchestra’s first season, with soloist George W. Sumner. Carl Baermann was the soloist with Henschel in January/February 1883, since

*which time it has also been programmed in BSO concerts led by Wilhelm Gericke with soloists Mary E. Garlichs, Anna Clark-Stennige, Rafael Joseffy, Baermann, and Ernst von Dohnányi; Arthur Nikisch with Ferruccio Busoni; Emil Paur with Baermann, Harold Randolph, and Alberto Jonas; Max Fiedler with Josef Hofmann; Otto Urack with Leopold Godowsky; Karl Muck with Harold Bauer, Winifred Christie, and Guiomar Novaes; Pierre Monteux with Arthur Rubinstein, Felix Fox, Edouard Risler, and Leon Fleisher; Bruno Walter with Artur Schnabel; Serge Koussevitzky with Myra Hess, Schnabel, Rudolf Serkin, Jan Smeterlin, and Joseph Battista; Richard Burgin with Claudio Arrau; Ernest Ansermet with Aldo Ciccolini; Leonard Bernstein with Rubinstein and Eugene Istomin; Charles Munch with Miklos Schwalb, Istomin, Serkin, Arrau, and Michele Boegner; Erich Leinsdorf with Rubinstein, Serkin, Malcolm Frager, and Istomin; Max Rudolf with Serkin; William Steinberg with André Watts; Michael Tilson Thomas with Frager; Sir Colin Davis with Gina Bachauer; Seiji Ozawa with Alexis Weissenberg, Watts, Murray Perahia, and Serkin; Lorin Maazel with Vladimir Ashkenazy; Hans Vonk with Weissenberg; Klaus Tennstedt with Peter Serkin; Kurt Masur with Frager and Horacio Gutiérrez; Adam Fischer with Krystian Zimerman, Neeme Järvi with Emanuel Ax, Andrew Davis with Ken Noda, Jesús López-Cobos with Arrau, Bernard Haitink with Maurizio Pollini, Kurt Sanderling with Richard Goode, Ozawa with Maria Tipo and Emanuel Ax, Jeffrey Tate with Christian Zacharias, Haitink with Andrés Schiff, Hans Graf with André Watts, Ozawa with Robert Levin and Dubravka Tomsic, Andrew Davis with Emanuel Ax, Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos with Yefim Bronfman, James Levine with Daniel Barenboim (the most recent subscription performances, in October 2006, followed by a performance at Carnegie Hall), and Herbert Blomstedt with Emanuel Ax (the most recent Tanglewood performance, on July 10, 2009).*