Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2023-2024 Grand Classics Series

October 29, 2023

RUDOLF BUCHBINDER, PIANO, AND LEADER

Ludwig van Beethoven — Concerto No. 1 for Piano and Orchestra in C major, Op. 15
- I. Allegro con brio
- II. Largo
- III. Rondo: Allegro scherzando

Intermission

Ludwig van Beethoven — Concerto No. 5 for Piano and Orchestra in E-flat major, Op. 73, “Emperor”
- I. Allegro
- II. Adagio un poco mosso —
- III. Rondo: Allegro

CLEF NOTE
CONVERSATION
with Associate Conductor Jacob Joyce
Sunday at 1:35 P.M.
Heinz Hall Stage

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
Concerto No. 1 for Piano and Orchestra in C major, Op. 15 (1795)

ABOUT THE COMPOSER

- Born~~,~~ December 16, 1770 in Bonn~~,~~ died March 26, 1827 in Vienna

PREMIERE OF WORK

- December 18, 1795; Vienna; Ludwig van Beethoven, leader

PSO PREMIERE

- November 12, 1909; Carnegie Music Hall; Emil Paur, conductor; Myrtle Elvyn, soloist

PSO LAST PERFORMANCE

- April 8, 2018; Heinz Hall; **Bernard Labadie**, conductor; Jan Lisiecki, soloist

INSTRUMENTATION

- Flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings

DURATION

- 37 minutes

"His genius, his magnetic personality were acknowledged by all, and there was, besides, a gaiety and animation about the young Beethoven that people found immensely attractive. The troubles of boyhood were behind him: his father had died very shortly after his departure from Bonn, and by 1795 his brothers were established in Vienna, Caspar Karl as a musician, Johann as an apothecary. During his first few months in the capital, he had indeed been desperately poor, depending very largely on the small salary allowed him by the Elector of Bonn. But that was all over now. He had no responsibilities, and his music was bringing in enough to keep him in something like affluence. He had a servant, for a short time he even had a horse; he bought smart clothes, he learned to dance (though not with much success), and there is even mention of his wearing a wig! We must not allow our picture of the later Beethoven to throw its dark colors over these years of his early triumphs. He was a young giant exulting in his strength and his success, and a youthful confidence gave him a buoyancy that was both attractive and infectious. Even in 1791, before he left Bonn, Carl Junker could describe him as 'this amiable, lighthearted man.' And in Vienna he had much to raise his spirits and nothing (at first) to depress them."

Peter Latham painted this cheerful picture of the young Beethoven as Vienna knew him during his twenties, the years before his deafness, his recurring illnesses, and his titanic struggles with his mature compositions had produced the familiar, dour figure of his later years. Beethoven came to Vienna for good in 1792, having made an unsuccessful foray in 1787, and quickly attracted attention for his piano playing, at which he bested such local keyboard luminaries as Daniel Steibelt and Joseph Wölffl to become the rage of the music-mad Austrian capital. His appeal was in an almost untamed, passionate, novel quality in both his manner of performance and his personality, characteristics that first intrigued and then captivated those who heard him. Václav Tomášek, an important Czech composer who heard Beethoven play the C major Concerto in Prague in 1798, wrote, "His grand style of playing had an extraordinary effect on me. I felt so shaken that for several days I could not bring myself to touch the piano."

Beethoven, largely self-taught as a pianist, did not follow in the model of sparkling technical perfection for which Mozart, who died only a few months before Beethoven's arrival, was well remembered in Vienna. He was vastly more impetuous and less precise at the keyboard, as Harold Schonberg described him in his fascinating study of *The Great Pianists*: "[His playing] was overwhelming not so much because Beethoven was a great virtuoso (which he probably wasn't), but because he had an ocean-like surge and depth that made all other playing sound like the trickle of a rivulet.... No piano was safe with Beethoven. There is plenty of evidence that Beethoven was a most lively figure at the keyboard, just as he was on the podium.... Czerny, who hailed Beethoven's 'titanic execution,' apologizes for his messiness [i.e., snapping strings and

breaking hammers] by saying that he demanded too much from the pianos then being made. Which is very true; and which is also a polite way of saying that Beethoven banged the hell out of the piano."

Beethoven composed the first four of his five mature piano concertos for his own concerts. (Two juvenile essays in the genre are discounted in the numbering.) Both the Concerto No. 1 in C major and the Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major were composed in 1795, the Second probably premiered at the Burgtheater on March 29th and the First at a concert under Joseph Haydn's direction on December 18th; both works were revised before their publication in 1801. Beethoven's C major Concerto sprang from the rich Viennese musical tradition of Haydn and Mozart, with which he was intimately acquainted: he had taken some composition lessons with Haydn soon after his arrival, and he had profound affection for and knowledge of Mozart's work. At a performance of Mozart's C minor Piano Concerto (K. 491), he whispered to his companion, John Cramer, "Cramer, Cramer! We shall never be able to do anything like that!"

The opening movement of the First Piano Concerto is indebted to Mozart for its handling of the concerto-sonata form, for its technique of orchestration, and for the manner in which piano and orchestra are integrated. Beethoven added to these quintessential qualities of the Classical concerto a wider-ranging harmony, a more openly virtuosic role for the soloist and a certain emotional weight characteristic of his large works. Beethoven molded the *Largo* to the songful aspect of his playing and reinforced that quality with lyrical solos for the clarinet. The rondo-finale is written in an infectious manner reminiscent of Haydn, brimming with high spirits and good humor.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
Concerto No. 5 in E-flat major for Piano and Orchestra in E-flat major, Op. 73, "Emperor" (1809)

ABOUT THE COMPOSER
- Born; December 16, 1770 in Bonn: died March 26, 1827 in Vienna

PREMIERE OF WORK
- November 11,1811; Leipzig; Johann Phillip Schulz; Friedrich Schneider, soloist

PSO PREMIERE
- December 12, 1897; Carnegie Music Hall; Frederic Archer, conductor; William H. Sherwood, soloist

PSO LAST PERFORMANCE
- May 19, 2019; Lincoln Center; **Manfred Honeck**, conductor; Till Fellner, soloist

INSTRUMENTATION
- Two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings

DURATION
- 38 minutes

The year 1809 was a difficult one for Vienna and for Beethoven. In May, Napoleon invaded the city with enough firepower to send the residents scurrying and Beethoven into the basement of his brother's house. The bombardment was close enough that he covered his sensitive ears with pillows to protect them from the concussion of the blasts. On July 29th, he wrote to the publisher Breitkopf und Härtel, "We have passed through a great deal of misery. I tell you that since May 4th, I have brought into the world little that is connected; only here and there a fragment. The whole course of events has affected me body and soul…. What a disturbing, wild life around me; nothing but drums, cannons, men, misery of all sorts." He bellowed his frustration at a French officer he chanced to meet: "If I were a general and knew as much about strategy as I do about counterpoint, I'd give you fellows something to think about." Austria's finances were in shambles, and the annual stipend Beethoven had been promised by several noblemen who supported his

work was considerably reduced in value, placing him in a precarious pecuniary predicament. As a sturdy tree can root in flinty soil, however, a great musical work grew from these unpromising circumstances — by the end of that year, 1809, Beethoven had completed his “Emperor” Concerto.

When conditions finally allowed the Concerto to be performed in Leipzig some two years later, it was hailed by the press as “without doubt one of the most original, imaginative, most effective but also one of the most difficult of all concertos.” (The soloist was Friedrich Schneider, a prominent organist and pianist in Leipzig who was enlisted by the local publisher Breitkopf und Härtel to bring this Concerto by the firm’s most prominent composer to performance.) The Viennese premiere on February 12, 1812, with Beethoven’s pupil Carl Czerny at the keyboard, fared considerably less well. It was given as part of a benefit party sponsored by the augustly titled “Society of Noble Ladies for Charity for Fostering the Good and Useful.” Beethoven’s Concerto was only one unit in a passing parade of sopranos, tenors and pianists who dispensed a stream of the most fashionable musical bon-bons for the delectation of the Noble Ladies. Beethoven’s majestic work was out of place among these trifles, and a reviewer for one periodical sniffed, “Beethoven, full of proud self-confidence, refused to write for the crowd. He can be understood and appreciated only by the connoisseurs, and one cannot reckon on their being in the majority at such affairs.” It was not the musical bill that really robbed the attention of the audience from the Concerto, however. It was the re-creation, through living tableaux — in costume and in detail — of paintings by Raphael, Poussin and Troyes. The Ladies loved that. It was encored. Beethoven left.

The sobriquet “Emperor” attached itself to the E-flat Concerto very early, though it was not of Beethoven’s doing. If anything, he would have objected to the name. “Emperor” equaled “Napoleon” for Beethoven, as for most Europeans of the time, and anyone familiar with the story of the “Eroica” Symphony will remember how that particular ruler had tumbled from the great composer’s esteem. “This man will trample the rights of men underfoot and become a greater tyrant than any other,” he rumbled to his young friend and pupil Ferdinand Ries. The Concerto’s name may have been tacked on by an early publisher or pianist because of the grand character of the work; or it may have originated with the purported exclamation during the premiere by a French officer at one particularly noble passage, “*C’est l’Empereur!*” The most likely explanation, however, is given by Anton Schindler, long-time friend and early biographer of Beethoven. The Viennese premiere, it seems, took place at a celebration of the Emperor’s birthday. Since the party sponsored by the Noble Ladies was part of the festivities ordered by the French conquerors, what could be more natural than to call this new Concerto introduced at that gathering the “Emperor”?

The “Emperor” is the largest in scale of all Beethoven’s concertos. It is also the last one, though he did considerable work on a sixth piano concerto in 1815 but never completed it. The Fifth Concerto is written in a virtuosic style that looks forward to the grand pianism of Liszt in its full chordal textures and wide dynamic range. Such prescience of piano technique is remarkable given that the modern, steel-frame concert grand was not perfected until 1825, and in this work, written sixteen years earlier, Beethoven envisioned possibilities offered only by that later, improved instrument.

The Concerto opens with broad chords for orchestra answered by piano before the main theme is announced by the violins. The following orchestral tutti embraces a rich variety of secondary themes leading to a repeat of all the material by the piano accompanied by the orchestra. A development ensues with “the fury of a hail-storm,” wrote the eminent English music scholar Sir Donald Tovey. Following a recapitulation of the themes and the sounding of a proper chord on which to launch a cadenza, Beethoven wrote into the piano part, “Do not play a cadenza, but begin immediately what follows.” At this point, he supplied a tiny, written-out solo passage that begins the coda. This being the first of his concertos that Beethoven himself would not play, he wanted to have more control over the finished product, and so he prescribed exactly what the soloist was to do. With this novel device, he initiated the practice of completely writing out all solo

passages that was to become the standard method used by most later composers in their concertos.

The second movement begins with a chorale for strings. Sir George Grove dubbed this movement a sequence of “quasi-variations,” with the piano providing a coruscating filigree above the orchestral accompaniment. This *Adagio* leads directly into the finale, a vast rondo with sonata elements. The bounding ascent of the main theme is heard first from the soloist and then from the orchestra. Developmental episodes separate the returns of the theme. The closing pages include the magical sound of drum-taps accompanying the shimmering piano chords and scales, and a final brief romp to the finish.