

Happy Birthday, Herr Beethoven – February 22 & 23, 2020

Coriolan Overture, Op. 62

Ludwig van Beethoven
1770-1827

Plutarch, the Ancient Greek historian and biographer, tells the story of the Roman general Coriolanus, who defeated the Volscians in central Italy, southeast of Rome, and captured their city of Corioli in 493 B.C. According to the story, Coriolanus returned victorious to Rome, but soon had to flee the city when charged with tyrannical conduct and opposition to the distribution of grain to the starving plebs. He raised an army of Volscians against his own people but turned back after entreaties of his mother and his wife. The Volscians, however, regarding him as a traitor because of his indecisiveness, put him to death.

The inspiration for Beethoven's *Coriolan Overture* came neither from Plutarch nor from Shakespeare, who made him the subject of his play *Coriolanus*, but from a play by Heinrich Joseph von Collin – poet, dramatist and functionary in the Austrian Finance Ministry (Austria's way of supporting its artists). Von Collin's play was a philosophical treatise on individual freedom and personal responsibility. It premiered in 1802 to great acclaim, using incidental music derived from Mozart's opera *Idomeneo*.

Beethoven took just three weeks to compose the *Coriolan Overture* in January 1807. It was meant to stand on its own as a composition inspired by the play. The Overture was premiered in March at an all-Beethoven concert held in the palace of one of Beethoven's patrons, Prince Lobkowitz.

Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 61

Ludwig van Beethoven
1770-1827

Despite the customary long gestation of his music, when pressed, Beethoven could work fast. In a letter to his publisher in mid-November 1806 there is no mention of the Violin Concerto as work in progress, but on December 23 it was premiered by Franz Clement, a friend of the composer and leader of the orchestra at the *Theater an der Wien*. As was common with Beethoven, he made continual changes in the manuscript after the premiere until publication in 1808, but the changes were mostly in detail and not in the fundamental conception of the work.

Franz Clement was a formidable musician with a prodigious musical memory, lauded both for his technique and his impeccable intonation and musicianship. From manuscript sources it becomes clear that he tried to advise Beethoven on phrasing and the technical possibilities of the instrument, but that the composer took only some of his suggestions. In the Concerto Beethoven provided Clement with immense challenges, both technical and

musical. In retrospect, it is clear that the Concerto was the first major violin concerto of the late Classical period, acting as a model for the subsequent works of Felix Mendelssohn, Johannes Brahms and Max Bruch.

The premiere, however, was not a success, nor did the work fare much better the following year. The public simply didn't get it. The turning point for the Concerto came in 1844, when 13-year-old Joseph Joachim performed it in London with the Philharmonic Society, Mendelssohn conducting. For the occasion, the Society set aside its rule against the appearance of child prodigies. Joachim at 13 was considered a fully mature artist.

It is an amusing – and often educational – exercise in virtual time travel to put oneself in the shoes of an audience who rejected a work of art that subsequently went on to be hailed as a masterpiece. So, what did Beethoven's audience object to in the Concerto?

First of all, there is the sheer heft of the piece; even Mozart's five violin concertos were significantly shorter and lightweight by comparison. Then there's the opening; Beethoven was no newcomer to controversial openings. Was it the four repeated identical solo timpani beats that form part of the main theme that amazed Beethoven's contemporaries? Haydn had done the same thing in the Symphony No. 103, the "Drum Roll," but *that* was a symphony, not a violin concerto. At the fifth beat, the woodwinds, and particularly the oboe, chime in with a gentle melody, but the four notes return immediately, now a motto that carries over as a part of all of the subsequent themes.

The Concerto contains cadenzas for all three movements, but it also contains many cadenza-like passages. Clement's virtuosity and pinpoint accuracy of intonation inspired the composer to give special prominence to the high E-string. The soloist's entrance in the first movement is a telling example, and passages in all three movements occupy the instrument's stratosphere where even Vivaldi had seldom trod.

Symphony No. 7 in A major, Op. 92

Ludwig van Beethoven
1770-1827

There is little information about Beethoven's activities during 1812, the year of the composition of the Seventh Symphony. He was in poor health and while he produced little else that year, the Symphony makes up for in quality what was lacking in quantity. The year itself was momentous; the Russian winter had finally halted Napoleon in his eastward march of conquest, a fact that must have lightened Beethoven's heart. Napoleon had been the composer's hero, the intended dedicatee of his Third Symphony, but his insatiable lust for conquest and power was so disillusioning that Beethoven rescinded the dedication and harbored a lifelong grudge. The hardship resulting from Napoleon's occupation of Vienna in 1809-10 added to his bitterness. The Seventh Symphony premiered on December 8, 1813 at a gala benefit concert to aid the wounded of the latest battles against Napoleon.

Also on the program were *Wellington's Victory* (the "Battle Symphony"), celebrating another Napoleonic defeat, the Eighth Symphony and numerous smaller works. Beethoven – although profoundly deaf – directed an orchestra made up of Vienna's most important

musical celebrities: Louis Spohr, Domenico Dragonetti, Mauro Giuliani and Ignaz Schuppanzigh played in the strings; Giacomo Meyerbeer and Johann Nepomuk Hummel played timpani; Ignaz Moscheles played the cymbals, and even old Antonio Salieri was there, heading the percussion section.

Each movement of the Seventh Symphony is dominated by persistent rhythmic motive that – especially in the second movement – is equal in importance to the melodic content of the themes. Richard Wagner described the Seventh Symphony as "the apotheosis of dance in its loftiest aspects." The story goes that he once attempted to demonstrate this dance to the accompaniment of Liszt's piano playing.

The nineteenth-century musicologist Sir Donald Tovey described the finale as "A triumph of Bacchic fury." The rondo theme, with its emphatic timpani part, resembles a stomping peasant dance – admittedly refined for the occasion.

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