

In his book **The Classical Style, Charles Rosen puts his**

finger on what gives the concerto its unique brand of drama: “The most important fact about the concerto form is that the audience waits for the soloist to enter, and when he stops playing, they wait for him to begin again.”

In Beethoven’s “Emperor” Concerto (the name neither comes from Beethoven nor offers any special insight into the piece, but in this case, resistance seems futile), one doesn’t have to wait long: one bar, to be precise. It is difficult, with 200 years of subsequent concerti lodged in our brains, to appreciate how startling this must have been to the piece’s early audiences. In the vast majority of the classical concerti that came before the “Emperor,” the orchestra spends several minutes laying out the movement’s main materials before the soloist plays a single note, causing the audience’s anticipation to build. It’s even visually arresting: the soloist comes on stage separately from the orchestra, usually dressed differently from said orchestra, stands or sits in the front and center of the stage, and does ... nothing. For a good long while.

The “Emperor” turns this tradition on its head. And what makes it all the more striking is that the pianist doesn’t break the mold by coming in with a theme (as is the case in the equally radical opening of Beethoven’s Fourth Piano Concerto). The piano’s first entry, rather, is an effusion of E-flat major: a mini-cadenza of one chord, spanning the entire keyboard but going nowhere harmonically, and serving no apparent function other than to demonstrate that the pianist’s excitement is literally uncontainable—he knows it isn’t his turn, but he *cannot wait*.

The struggle to feel how radical and irrepressible this opening is, is emblematic of the larger difficulty in playing or listening to the “Emperor”: It is a work that has been, depending on your point of view, blessed with success, or cursed with ubiquity. I myself have played it dozens of times, and heard it many dozens more. And not just in concert halls and teaching studios, but in elevators on several continents; as the hold music on my German manager’s office line; and once, most tragically of all, dismembered to accommodate a figuring skating routine.

Given that classical music so often languishes on the margins of our culture, I suppose this could be viewed as a kind of a triumph: Clearly, the “Emperor” has made a mark beyond the

Jonathan Biss PHOTO: BENJAMIN EALOVEGA



BY JONATHAN BISS

Imperial



After 200 years, the power
of Beethoven's most
majestic concerto endures,
prompting deep reflection
in those who perform it.

THE EMPEROR ON TOUR

Jonathan Biss is soloist in the
"Emperor" Concerto for a tour of
the eastern United States in January,
culminating in a performance
at New York's Carnegie Hall. Osmo
Vänska conducts. Details are at
Curtis.edu/CSOTour

Wonder

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PHOTO: DAVID SWANSON



MORE ONLINE

Jonathan Biss analyzes Beethoven in depth in the continuing online course Exploring Beethoven's Piano Sonatas. Each lecture includes examples on the keyboard and in-depth historical, theoretical, and artistic analysis of the major musical developments represented by a specific sonata. The lectures are free and available on demand at Curtis.edu/Coursera

circumscribed world of classical music. Within that world, it is ever-present: part of the furniture. And that is precisely the problem: your furniture does not command your attention. You might like how it looks and appreciate its functionality, but it will never take your breath away.

That is what great music is for: taking your breath away, expanding the known world, saying the unsayable. So while I, who love music to distraction, of course want it to be known as widely as possible, paradoxically, I worry that the more familiar it becomes, the harder it is to truly hear it.

A related paradox faces every performer: obviously, if you are going to perform a piece of music, you had better know it. Ideally, you'd know it very well. But at the same time, a performer has no greater responsibility to a piece of music than to play it with a sense of discovery, no matter how many times he has played it, no matter how many hours of practice have gone into it. A performance should always have an element of wonder, the sense that its small and not-small miracles—the moments where it reveals its greatness by taking the path of greater resistance, forgoing the path that a merely good composer might have chosen—are being not just played, but lived, in real time.

A CHALLENGE AND A COMMITMENT

So that is the challenge I am keenly aware of each time I tackle the “Emperor” Concerto: How do I capture that quality of wonder, having spent hundreds of hours practicing it over the past 20 years? How do I convey that wonder to an audience who might have heard it in dozens of concerts, and possibly in the background during their pre-concert dinner?

As these are not questions with concrete, nuts-and-bolts answers, let me begin with what I definitely should not do, and that is to set out to “say something new” about the “Emperor.” When you choose to play a piece of music, you make a commitment to approach it with love, devotion and, perhaps above all, honesty. Your individuality will inevitably make itself felt (how could it not?), but if you begin with the goal of being “different”—of distinguishing yourself from or really in any way comparing yourself to other performances of the piece—playing it becomes an act of vanity: In essence, you are viewing the piece as a vehicle to show off your imagination, and in the process abdicating the profound responsibility of searching for the piece's truth and beauty.

So, that's what not to do; as usual, figuring out what one should do is more complicated! The best answer I can give is the same answer to, really, every problem a musician faces: You have to listen. If you listen—really listen—the wild, uncontrollable joy of that opening will be unmissable. So, too, will be the sense of awe that comes when the second theme moves to far-away C-flat major, both the key and the extreme upper register evoking some unknown universe. As will the sheer ferocity of the confrontation between piano and orchestra at the climax of the development. (Confrontation is central to the concerto as a form, but there are confrontations, and then there are *confrontations!*) Suddenly, when you hear these things properly, the most commonly leveled criticism of this movement—that it is excessively long—seems downright silly: the ambition and vision of the music more than justify the time it takes to unfold.

(And I haven't even come to the second movement, which is more visionary still: It is simultaneously lofty and deeply human in that way that only Beethoven could achieve; it makes time stand still.)

There is no denying it: It's a complicated and difficult business, making a piece as old and as often-heard as the “Emperor” Concerto seem like a living, breathing thing, rather than an artifact. But the process is not just worthwhile; it is exhilarating. Playing a great piece of music makes you feel alive in a way and to a degree that few of life's experiences can come close to. The “Emperor” may be over two hundred years and thousands of performances old, but it is not only still alive: it is life-giving. ♦

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