

Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58

Ludwig van Beethoven

Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 emerges with unexpected gentleness. In 1807, when this music was first heard, any reasonably informed member of a Viennese audience would have known that a concerto should begin with a long introduction during which the orchestra presents some of the first movement's principal themes. In the case of a piano concerto, the soloist might play along, underpinning the orchestral texture; but the featured instrument would not move into the spotlight until the introduction had come to a resolute conclusion. Beethoven had at least respected that aspect of the Classical mold in his first three piano concertos (not to mention his early "non-canonical" E-flat-major Piano Concerto of 1784) and his Violin Concerto.

Imagine, then, the astonishment with which listeners, conditioned in this way, must have heard Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto when it was new. Rather than the authoritarian sounds of a full orchestra, the first notes they heard were played softly on the piano, the gentle murmuring of a theme based on repeated notes and simple harmonies. And then — just as surprising — following its five-measure presentation of the thematic germ of this movement, the piano simply withdraws, not to be heard from again for another 69 measures. One might say that the silent piano is unusually "present" during the 69 measures of that orchestral introduction, precisely because it made its mark so indelibly at the outset. Beethoven explored radical turf in the opening.

The second movement, too, is extraordinary, even apart from its uncharacteristic brevity (lasting as it does only about five minutes). The music theorist Adolf Bernhard Marx, in his 1859 biography of Beethoven, suggested that this *Andante con moto* bore

some relationship to Gluck's opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* — specifically, to how Orpheus used music to tame wild beasts. At some point music historians began misattributing this observation to Franz Liszt, who probably would have been very happy to assign a programmatic explanation to this expressive, conversational movement, but apparently didn't. (Liszt's "quotation" can still be found in many discussions of this concerto, even though historical research squashed it a few decades ago.) In 1985 the musicologist Owen Jander pointed out that Beethoven's music — indeed, in the whole concerto, not just the slow movement — seems to follow point by point a popular version of the Orpheus legend that was presented as street theater in the Vienna of Beethoven's day. Such a literal

In Short

Born: probably on December 16, 1770 (he was baptized on the 17th), in Bonn, then an independent electorate of Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Work composed: early 1806, and perhaps somewhat earlier; it was probably completed on March 27, 1806

World premiere: March 1807, in a private performance at the palace of Beethoven's patron Prince Lobkowitz; public premiere, December 22, 1808, at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 31, 1863, Theodore Thomas, conductor, Sebastian Bach Mills, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: July 21, 2021, Jaap van Zweden, conductor, Daniil Trifonov, soloist, at the Bravo! Vail Music Festival in Colorado

Duration: ca. 35 minutes

interpretation of text into tones would have been an extraordinary method for Beethoven to follow, and opinions are divided about whether there is much likelihood that this took place. Still Jander put forth a strong argument, and the idea does capture the imagination.

Beethoven unveiled his Fourth Piano Concerto at a private concert in the mansion of his patron Prince Franz Josef von Lobkowitz in March 1807. Then he put it away for nearly two years and performed it only one more time, at a concert at Vienna's Theater an der Wien, on December 22, 1808. This all-Beethoven marathon has gone into the annals as one of the most extraordinary events in all of music history. In addition to this concerto, the performance included the premieres of Beethoven's Symphonies No. 5 and No. 6 as well as of the *Choral Fantasy* (for piano, choir, and orchestra), the Vienna premieres of three movements from the C-major Mass and the concert scena "Ah! perfido," and a solo keyboard improvisation by the composer. To encounter all of these revolutionary pieces at one sitting must have been

overwhelming, and to many attendees the Fourth Piano Concerto must have sounded like just more of the same madness — and who knows what the all-but-deaf Beethoven actually accomplished at the piano. His pupil Carl Czerny termed Beethoven's performance on that occasion as "playful," an odd enough descriptive, in the event, that you might wonder if it should be read as a euphemism. It was Beethoven's last public appearance as a concerto soloist, although he would continue to perform in chamber music or as an accompanist.

Instrumentation: flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings, in addition to the solo piano.

Cadenzas: Mr. Trifonov performs the second cadenza that Beethoven wrote for the first movement, and one crafted by Theodore Kullak for the third movement.

— J.M.K.

Listen for ...

Beethoven explored radical turf in the opening of his Piano Concerto No. 4. Apart from the unorthodox decision to begin with the solo piano, the musical material itself is a bombshell. The piano's opening chords are in G major, but the orchestra's response is in B major, a key only distantly related to the harmonic region marked out by the piano's theme.

The image shows a musical score for the opening of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4. It consists of two staves. The top staff is for the Solo Piano, marked "Allegro moderato" and "Solo Piano". It begins with a piano (*p*) and *dolce* dynamic, playing a series of chords in G major. The bottom staff is for the Strings, marked *pp* (pianissimo), playing a rhythmic accompaniment in B major. The score shows the first few measures of both parts, with the piano part starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic in the second measure.

The relationship of key regions spaced a third apart — such as G and B — would become an obsession of composers as the 19th century progressed. As usual, Beethoven led the way.