

## **Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Op. 37 (1803)**

**LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN** N 1770-1827

By 1803, Emanuel Schikaneder, the colorful character who figured so prominently in the closing pages of Mozart's life as the librettist and producer of *The Magic Flute*, had taken over the management of Vienna's Theater-an-der-Wien, and his house was locked in a fierce competitive battle with the court-subsidized Kärntnertheater, run by Baron Peter von Braun. When von Braun hired the distinguished Luigi Cherubini as resident composer, Schikaneder felt obliged to counter with his own music master, and he approached Beethoven with an offer. Beethoven, who had felt the need to write for the stage for some time, accepted gladly — especially since the job carried free lodgings in the theater as part of the compensation. He and Schikaneder dutifully plowed through a small library of possibilities for an operatic subject, but none inspired Beethoven until he took up work on *Fidelio* late in 1803.

In the meantime, Beethoven took advantage of his theatrical connection to put some of his instrumental works on display. Since opera was forbidden in Catholic countries during Lent at that time, the Theater-an-der-Wien was available for concerts in the early spring, and Beethoven scheduled such an event during April 1803. It had been fully three years since he last presented a concert entirely of his own music, and he had several scores awaiting their first presentations, including the Second Symphony, the oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives* and the Third Piano Concerto. He programmed all of these, and, for good measure, tossed in the First Symphony, which had been premiered at his concert three years earlier.

Beethoven proceeded enthusiastically with plans for the concert, working right up to the last minute putting finishing touches on the new compositions. (His pupil Ferdinand Ries found him in bed writing trombone parts for the oratorio only three hours before the rehearsal began.) He had only a single rehearsal on the concert day for this wealth of unfamiliar music, and public and critical response to the concert was lukewarm, undoubtedly due in large part to the inadequate performance. Beethoven, however, was delighted to have played his music for the Viennese public, and he was well on his way to becoming recognized more for his ability as a composer than as a pianist.

The Third Concerto's first movement opens with the longest introductory orchestral tutti in Beethoven's concertos, virtually a full symphonic exposition in itself. The strings in unison present immediately the main theme, "a group of pregnant figures," assessed the eminent British musicologist Sir Donald Tovey, "which nobody but Beethoven could have invented." The lyrical second theme is sung by violins and clarinet in a contrasting major mode. The closely reasoned development section grows inexorably from thematic fragments heard in the exposition. The recapitulation begins with a forceful restatement of the main theme by the full orchestra. The second theme and other melodic materials follow, always given a heightened emotional weight over their initial appearances, and lead to a cadenza written by Beethoven that takes on the character of a development section for the soloist. The orchestra re-enters, at first accompanied by quiet, ethereal chords in the piano but soon rising to a stern climax that draws the movement to a close.

The second movement is a nocturne of tender sentiments and quiet moods. Though analysis reveals its form to be a three-part structure (A–B–A), it is in spirit an extended song — a marvelous juxtaposition of hymnal tranquility and sensuous operatic love scene.

The traditional, Classical rondo was a form of simple, high spirits meant to send the audience away in a bubbling mood. Mozart, in his late concertos, had begun to explore the emotional depth possible with the rondo, and in this Third Concerto Beethoven continued that search. Beethoven incorporated elements of sonata design into the finale to lend it additional weight, even inserting a fugal passage in the second episode. Only in the closing pages is the dark world of C minor abandoned for a vivacious romp through C major to close the work.

## **Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27 (1906-1907)**

**SERGEI RACHMANINOFF** N 1873-1943

In addition to his prodigious talents as pianist and composer, Sergei Rachmaninoff was also a first-rate conductor, and when his stock began rising after the Second Concerto carried his name into important Russian circles, he was appointed opera conductor at the Moscow Imperial Grand Theater. As with his music, he found excellent success with his conducting, but he had understandable misgivings about the way it interfered with his creative ambitions. In an interview with Frederick H. Martens, he said, "When I am concertizing I cannot compose. When I feel like writing music I have to concentrate on that — I cannot touch the piano. When I am conducting I can neither compose nor play concerts. Other musicians may be more fortunate in this respect; but I have to concentrate on any one thing I am doing to such a degree

that it does not seem to allow me to take up anything else.” There was much that needed to be written, and he knew that a choice about the direction of his future work was imminent.

Early in 1906, Rachmaninoff decided to sweep away the rapidly accumulating obligations of conducting, concertizing and socializing that cluttered his life in Moscow in order to find some quiet place in which to devote himself to composition. His determination may have been strengthened by the political unrest beginning to rumble under the foundations of the aristocratic Russian political system. The uprising of 1905 was among the first signs of trouble for those of his noble class (his eventual move to the United States was a direct result of the swallowing of his family’s estate and resources by the 1917 Revolution), and he probably thought it a good time to start looking for a quiet haven.

A few years before, Rachmaninoff had been overwhelmed by an inspired performance of *Die Meistersinger* he heard at the Dresden Opera. The memory of that evening and the aura of dignity and repose exuded by the city had remained with him, and Dresden, at that time in his life, seemed like a good place to be. The atmosphere in Dresden was so conducive to composition that within a few months of his arrival he was working on the Second Symphony, the First Piano Sonata, the Op. 6 Russian folk songs and the symphonic poem *The Isle of the Dead*. The Second Symphony was unanimously cheered when it was premiered under the composer’s direction in St. Petersburg on January 26, 1908.

The majestic scale of the Symphony is established at the outset by a slow, brooding introduction. A smooth transition to a faster tempo signals the arrival of the main theme, an extended and quickened transformation of the basses’ opening motive. The expressive second theme enters in the woodwinds. The development deals with the vigorous main theme to such an extent that the beginning of the formal recapitulation is engulfed by the buildup.

The second movement is the most nimble essay in Rachmaninoff’s orchestral works. After two preparatory measures, the horns sound the main theme, which bears more than a passing resemblance to the *Dies Irae* (“*Day of Wrath*”), the ancient chant from the Roman Catholic Mass for the Dead that haunted the composer for many years. The vital nature of the music, however, does not support any morbid interpretation. Eventually, the rhythmic bustle is suppressed and finally silenced to make way for the movement’s central section, whose skipping lines embody some of Rachmaninoff’s finest fugal writing.

The rapturous *Adagio* is music of heightened passion that resembles nothing so much as an ecstatic operatic love scene. Alternating with the expressive principal melody is an important theme from the first movement, heard prominently in the central portion and the coda of this movement. The finale bursts forth in the whirling dance rhythm of an Italian *tarantella*. The propulsive urgency subsides to allow another of Rachmaninoff’s melodic inspirations to enter. A development of the *tarantella* motives follows, into which are embroidered thematic reminiscences from each of the three preceding movements. The several elements of the finale are gathered together in the work’s closing pages.

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