

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Piano Concerto No. 1 in C major, Op. 15

Allegro con brio

Largo

Rondo: Allegro

Born: December 16, 1770, in Bonn

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna

Work composed: 1795 or 1796

World premiere: Unknown, but possibly December 1795 in Vienna or May 1796 in Berlin, and not later than 1798 in Prague. On any of these occasions, the performance would have featured the composer as soloist, conducting from the keyboard.

Beethoven composed two works for piano and orchestra during his early years in Vienna, where he settled in 1792. The Piano Concerto in C, completed in 1795 or 1796 and now known as No. 1, Op. 15, actually was the second he produced; but since the composer preferred this work to its predecessor, the Piano Concerto in B-flat, Op. 19, it was published earlier and consequently given a more forward position in the catalogue of his works.

Beethoven may have played the concerto in Vienna as part of a charity concert given in the Austrian capital in December of 1795. He probably also presented the work during a trip to Berlin the following year, and he definitely performed it in Prague in 1798, at which time Jan Tomášek, another accomplished pianist, heard him and reported on “Beethoven’s magnificent playing ... ; indeed, I found myself so profoundly bowed down that I did not touch my pianoforte for several days.”

Tomašek’s impression notwithstanding, the C-major Concerto is not a virtuoso showpiece in the usual sense of the term. There are, to be sure, moments of brilliant keyboard passagework throughout the piece, but these are always in the service of larger musical purposes. Like all Beethoven’s concertos, this one is notable for its thoughtful conception and musical integrity rather than as a vehicle for pianistic display.

The work begins in the tradition of the “military concerto” openings often used by Mozart, though the first movement takes on a more varied expressive complexion. The ensuing *Largo* is elegant and dream-like. Beethoven, in his own performance, must have “produced a magical effect,” as his pupil Carl Czerny described the composer’s playing of slow, sustained passages. The finale, by contrast, brings the type of musical humor often found in the works of Beethoven’s occasional teacher, Franz Joseph Haydn, as well as an energetic episode in “Turkish” style.

What to Listen For

Beethoven establishes the martial character of the concerto’s initial theme through its proud demeanor, a conspicuous fanfare motif and the use of trumpets. The introduction of the second subject provides an example of Beethoven’s fondness for harmonic deception. A rustling figure in the violins promises a shift to a minor key, but the melody itself appears smoothly in a sunny major tonality (though it does not remain there for long). The humorous character of the finale extends to the closing moments. Here Beethoven slows the tempo to a decorous adagio only to pull the rug from under us with a sudden rush to the final measure.

Scored for 1 flute, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets and 2 bassoons; 2 horns and 2 trumpets; timpani and strings.