



Classics Concert Insights Lecture

Moris Senegor, music aficionado

BEETHOVEN TRIPLE CONCERTO (1804)



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CONCERTO IN C MAJOR FOR VIOLIN, CELLO AND PIANO

CONCERTO: A three movement musical work for solo instrument and orchestra.

PIANO TRIO: Chamber music written for piano and two other instruments, usually violin and cello.

SINFONIA CONCERTANTE: A late 18th, early 19th century concert genre for two to four soloists and orchestra in two or three movements.

MUSICAL HISTORY:

- Middle Ages and Renaissance.
- **Baroque** (1600-1750): Bach, Handel, Vivaldi.
- **Classical** (1750-1803): Haydn, Mozart, early Beethoven.
- **Romantic** (1803-1900): Late Beethoven, Brahms, Schumann, Tchaikovsky, Mahler.
- **20th Century**: Stravinsky, Copland, Bartok.

BEETHOVEN BIOGRAPHY (1770-1827):

- Born and raised in Bonn; father was musician.
- Moved to Vienna 1792, studying briefly with Haydn and Salieri.
- Early career as a piano virtuoso; compositions receive praise.
- 1796 Beginning of hearing loss.
- 1802 Heiligenstadt Testament.
- 1803 Symphony #3 Eroica, ushers in the Romantic Era.
- **1804 Triple Concerto completed.**
- 1804 Piano Sonata # 21 (Waldstein).
- 1805 Piano Sonata # 23 (Appassionata); Opera Fidelio
- 1806 Piano Concerto #4
- **1808 Triple Concerto premiered.**
- 1808 Fifth & Sixth Symphonies.
- 1809 Piano Concerto #5.
- 1811 Stopped performing or conducting due to hearing loss.
- 1815-20 Drop in compositional output; custody battle for nephew.
- 1824 Ninth Symphony.
- 1827 Died of alcoholic liver disease.

BEETHOVEN'S CAREER (1770-1827):

- **Viennese Period** (1790-1802): Classical works; Symphonies #1-2, Piano Concerti #1-3.
- **Heroic Period** (1803-1815): Romantic works; Symphonies #3-8, Piano Concerti # 4-5, Violin Concerto, **Triple Concerto**.
- **Late Period** (1815-1827): Symphony #9, Great Fugue.
- **BEETHOVEN CONCERTI**: Violin Concerto (1806), Five Piano Concerti (1787-1809) Triple Concerto (1804).

HISTORY OF THE TRIPLE CONCERTO:

- The background of the work is not precisely known.
- It was composed 1802-04. The solo parts may have been intended for Archduke Rudolph, then sixteen, Beethoven's pupil and later patron.
- Rehearsals and a private performance took place in the spring of 1804 at the palace of Prince Lobkowitz, a loyal and generous Beethoven patron.
- It was published in Vienna in 1807, with a score dedicated to Prince Lobkowitz who also received dedications for the Eroica, Fifth and Sixth Symphonies and others.
- The work first performed in Leipzig, April 1808, then Vienna, May 1808. These performances were not successful.
- The Triple Concerto has been derided by scholars and critics. It is Beethoven's least commonly performed concerto.

MOVEMENTS:

- 1) ALLEGRO C major
- 2) LARGO (Attaca) A-flat major
- 3) RONDO A LA POLACCA C major

FIRST MOVEMENT:

ORCHESTRAL EXPOSITION:

- Hushed opening in cellos and bases intone the main theme, Theme A (C major), in a stark, unaccompanied presentation; generates a sense of mystery and suspense. Pause.
- In an electrifying crescendo Theme A erupts in tutti and is soon developed, moving from the tonic C major to G major.
- Note that Theme A is a rising melody with prominent dotted rhythms.
- The second theme, Theme B, a four square, pleasant melody, also featuring dotted rhythms, and with an antecedent-consequent phrase structure, is a genial melody. It begins in G major and moves back to the tonic C major.
- Theme B interrupted by a quiet passage labelled by Sir Donald Tovey as the "*purple patch*", longing gestures in the far away key of A-flat major.

- Closing theme, Theme C, rises in G major, and leads to loud, tutti concluding chords back in C major. This theme is also a rising idea with prominent dotted rhythms.
- NOTE: Theme C will not be heard again until the Coda.
- Brief transition to solo exposition.

NOTES ON ORCHESTRAL EXPOSITION:

- Starting the concerto with an orchestral exposition adheres to the Classical Era model.
- The section however, is brief and introductory in character. The solo exposition that follows will be more elaborate and twice as long.
- The three themes are similar, simple, rising ideas with dotted rhythms. The similarity of the themes has been a target of criticism from some musical scholars.
- The key areas are unconventional. Expected plan would be Theme A in the tonic (C major), Theme B in the dominant (G major) and the closing theme back in the tonic. Instead Beethoven delivers tonal ambiguity, each theme featuring both keys, and an unexpected section (the “*purple patch*”) in a distant key.

SOLO EXPOSITION:

- Loud orchestral chords announce entry of the soloists.
- While the first violins quietly pulse in C major accompaniment, Theme A is re-stated and ornamented by each soloist, beginning with the cello (C major), then violin (G then C major) and piano (C major), each entering in imitative fashion. A virtuosic cadential passage follows using all three soloists.
- A new theme, Theme D (C major) is stated by the orchestra in a march-like passage.
- Cello presents a lyrical version of Theme D (C major) with piano in accompaniment, then presents a second phrase in extension.
- Violin picks up and extends this second phrase (C major).
- In what some consider yet another new theme, soloists and orchestra present another extension of Theme D which leads to an A-minor solo episode on the piano. A virtuosic section in piano transitions into Theme B. This section sounds developmental.
- Theme B stated first by cello (A major) then violin (D and A major). Piano picks up and extends, initially with orchestral accompaniment (A major to A minor), then in a solo episode (A minor). This solo episode was coined as the *Für Elise* section by Levi Hammer, as another *purple patch* by Steinberg.
- A new theme, Theme E (A minor) presented. This is labeled *Hungarian* by Levi Hammer, featuring a minor key, steady thumping accompaniment, short phrases with dotted rhythms, and folk or dance-like character.
- Theme E is initially on cello and violin. It continues in two variations, by the soloists and then in virtuosic piano. The variations sound developmental.
- Closing section begins with a transitional passage, each soloist playing a motive derived from Theme C, cello-piano-violin. Violin drops this motive like a diving airplane. With

the aid of the piano the melody now rises in a crescendo, all three instruments playing ascending scales in counterpoint.

- This leads to a dramatic, loud orchestral concluding passage made of Theme A fragments. It ends in a deceptive cadence.
- NOTE: This closing section is different than Theme C, the Closing Theme of the Orchestral Exposition, and it will also close the Recapitulation.

NOTES ON SOLO EXPOSITION:

- In summary the soloists re-state the two themes of the Orchestral Exposition plus add two new themes of their own, the sequence of presentation being A-D-B-E.
- While Beethoven keeps equal weight between the soloists, the cello is clearly in the lead.
- As in the Orchestral Exposition, this section does not adhere to the Classical norm in its key areas, modulating to A major and minor rather than the expected G major. This, along with various extensions and variational passages give the section a developmental character.
- Some scholars consider the Solo Exposition both Exposition and Development.

DEVELOPMENT:

- Brief. In three parts.
- Part 1: Cello states Theme A in its highest register (A major). Violin (E major to A major) and piano (A major) follow with their own statements of Theme A, extending the melody in much the same way as they did at their exposition.
- Note: Part 1 is essentially a restatement of the solo entries of the exposition except in a different key area and gives the illusion of Recapitulation.
- Part 2: Dramatic rising and falling arpeggios in the soloists, in “*vigorous counterpart*” (Hammer). Music finally sounds developmental.
- Part 3: A passage in C minor derived from the second phrase of Theme D, initially in cello, then echoed in violin. The extensions of Theme D presented in violin and piano in much the same way as in the exposition.
- Brief transition prepares Recapitulation.

NOTES ON DEVELOPMENT:

- The brevity of the development is not unexpected for Classical Era music.
- However the mostly thematic, non-developmental nature of the music is unconventional, especially at the onset when the soloists re-state their exposition entry.
- In a way the Solo Exposition was the first development, this section the second. As will become evident, the Recapitulation can be similarly considered a third development.

RECAPITULATION:

- The quiet introductory gesture of the movement returns loud and boisterous, heroic, in full orchestra (C major).
- Theme A restated in crescendo by orchestra (C major). Remainder of the theme is shared by the soloists in a developmental passage (C to F major).
- Theme D returns in cello and then violin (F major). Extensions of this theme shared between orchestra and soloists in various keys (F major, D minor, G major) in yet another developmental sounding passage.
- Theme B returns first in cello playing in high register (C major), then violin (F to C major) and finally in orchestra and piano (C major).
- Piano re-states Hammer's *Für Elise* section in C minor, as it appeared in the Solo Exposition.
- Theme E, the *Hungarian Theme* returns (C major) first in cello and violin, then in piano conversing with its counterparts followed by a virtuosic piano section ending in an open cadence.
- Closing section, Theme C derived dotted rhythm motive in soloists, the dive-bombing violin, and the loud orchestral concluding passage of the solo exposition return. Ends in an open cadence, signifying that it has not concluded.

NOTES ON RECAPITULATION:

- In a traditional Classical Era Recapitulation all themes return to the tonic, home key.
- The Recap begins convincingly in an exciting tutti re-statement of the quiet opening gesture in the tonic.
- It then blends the two expositions, presenting four of the five major exposition themes in the following sequence: A, D, B, E.
- All except D are mostly in the tonic key, but feature developmental sounding sections. D is in a distant key.
- Overall the Recapitulation is more developmental than the Development.

(CADENZA):

- At this point, in the Classical Era double-exposition-sonata-form we expect a cadenza, where the soloist is featured alone, while orchestra rests.
- There is no cadenza.

CODA:

- Theme C, the closing theme of the Orchestral Exposition returns in and is elaborated, first by the cello, then in ornamented variation by violin, firmly in the tonic C major.
- The theme is broken down and extended in a passage by soloists and orchestra, the only development of Theme C.
- Virtuoso passage in solo piano (C major), leads to anticipatory arpeggiations in the three solo instruments (C major).
- Loud concluding chords in orchestra.

NOTES ON THE CODA:

- The Coda begins with a return of Theme C that concluded the orchestral exposition, therefore a useful device for concluding the movement.
- The Coda finally and firmly establishes the tonic, C major, something that failed to happen in Recapitulation as it should have.
- Yet, the Coda is still developmental in its treatment of Theme C.
- The Coda can thus be considered to represent a fourth and final development section.

FINAL COMMENTS ON THE FIRST MOVEMENT:

- Beethoven's unconventional treatment of sonata form in this movement is seen as an effort to rein in the musical forces inherent in combining a piano trio with a concerto, thus keeping the movement to a reasonable length.
- The lack of a Cadenza exemplifies this, a Cadenza being impractical when three soloists are involved.
- Throughout the movement the three soloists are evenly balanced in their presentations but the cello is clearly in the lead. The reason for this choice is unknown.
- Beethoven has been criticized for themes that sound too alike. Some scholars see this as another means to keep the movement compact.

SECOND MOVEMENT:

- This is a very brief movement, "*intense, non-developmental and preludial to the finale.*" (Steinberg)
- Orchestra quietly begins the first phrase of a slow, noble theme that unfolds leisurely, cello taking over in the second phrase. Cello then goes through the lengthy theme soaring and falling back.
- The key is A major, time signature, a rather unusual 3/8 time (Beethoven used this in only one other work, his Piano Concerto #3).
- Beethoven marks the score *Largo*, which means "broad" in Italian, asking for a slower, more leisurely tempo than, say *Adagio*.
- A brief piano/woodwind interlude leads to a re-statement of the theme by the violin.

- The piano remains in accompaniment and will not get its own turn at this theme.
- Anticipatory interlude on woodwinds and orchestra is followed by a transitional passage in the soloists where the music gradually breaks down.
- Segway with cello quietly pulsing. It speeds up as the Third Movement erupts.
- NOTE: Beethoven was experimenting with segways in this period of his career. Other works containing segways include Symphonies # 5 and 6, Piano Concerto #5 and Harp Quartet.

THIRD MOVEMENT:

- Rondo theme (3/4 meter) stated by cello (C major), then violin (E major), with a pulsing accompaniment in strings.
- After a brief transition and a clucking interlude, the soloists and orchestra re-state the rondo theme (C major) loud and dramatic, and extend it, concluding with a firm, closed cadence.
- Note: this unexpected modulation into E major and back is considered a fine touch by Beethoven, “*the genius and romance of the main theme.*” (Tovey)
- Episode 1: Cello and violin present a quiet melody derived from the Rondo theme in counterpoint. Solo piano extends the tune with pizzicato string accompaniment.
- Episode 2: Fast, arpeggiated tune appears as a conversation between the soloists and rises in a virtuosic passage. Orchestra joins in, sharing the tune with the soloists.
- Virtuosic flairs in soloists die down to a long, teasing, Haydnesque transition that will, after much anticipation, usher in a reprise of the Rondo theme.
- Full verbatim reprise of the Rondo theme with cello (C major), violin (E major), transitional music and loud orchestral re-statement (C major). The extension in orchestra now ends in an open cadence, leading to Episode 3.
- Episode 3: “*An exuberant gypsy tune,*” according to Steinberg, which, once the listener knows the piece, they wait for it with eager anticipation. An emphatic, foot-stomping, Polonaise, first in cello and violin, then in piano, with orchestral accompaniment.
- Episode 4: A pretty, mournful melody in cello and violin, sharply contrasts the “*athletic energy*” of what preceded it with “*reproachful pathos.*” (Tovey)
- A quiet, dissonant transition in soloists.
- Rondo theme returns, abbreviated in cello only, then reprised by the loud orchestra.
- Episodes 1 & 2 return, episode 1 abbreviated, 2 elaborated in its virtuosic sections.
- Brief transition harkens back to the earlier Haydnesque one, leading to an expectation of another Rondo reprise.
- Instead Episode 4, the tune with “*reproachful pathos*” is reprised by the soloists.
- Another, brief, clucking transition leads to a surprise: the Rondo theme returns in soloists, but fast and in 2/4 time (so far the movement has been in 3/4 time), “*trotting away at a brisk pace.*” (Tovey)

- Orchestra picks up the theme and extends it, loud and still in 2/4 time, in a brief passage that ends in a 6/4 chord, a leading gesture for a cadenza.
- A brief, virtuosic cadenza with all three soloists in counterpoint, punctuated by occasional orchestral chords. Ends with trills in soloists.
- CODA: The Polonaise Rondo theme returns in a brief reprise by soloists, punctuated by orchestra, in its original triple meter. A revelation of “*the full beauty of Beethoven’s design.*” (Tovey). Concluding chords follow.

NOTES ON THE THIRD MOVEMENT:

- The Polonaise was a common choice for Rondo movements in Beethoven’s time, although Beethoven himself composed only three. The others are Serenade Trio Opus 8 and solitary pianoforte piece Opus 89.
- According to Tovey, Beethoven’s Polonaises do not show the “*formidable temper*” of Chopin, but rather are “*eminently aristocratic and charmingly feminine.*”
- Highlights of this Rondo include the subtle key shift within the main theme (C to E major and back), the “*gypsy dance*” in the mid-section contrasting the “*reproachful pathos*” passage that follows, and the surprise tempo and meter change toward the end.
- Note that the piano in this movement is largely in a supporting, the cello and violin star and co-star respectively.

ACADEMIC CRITICISMS OF THE TRIPLE CONCERTO:

- Genre confusion: “*An amplified piano trio with the orchestra beefing up the textures, ...glorified chamber music.*” (Tom Service, The Guardian music critic)
- “*Less than dazzling piano part,*” (Plantinga), a common criticism by many.
- “*The First Movement prolix, the last awkward and the Largo perhaps overly high minded.*” (Plantinga)
- Length, in and of itself, is not necessarily a problem. Beethoven’s Violin and Fifth Piano Concerti feature longer first movements than the Triple. It is the “*indistinctness of expression,*” and “*sponginess of construction,*” that distracts the listener. (Plantinga)
- First movement themes are “*too much alike and all suffer from a certain lameness and shortness of breath.*” (Deiters) Another common critique.
- Plantinga agrees: “*What (the First Movement themes) lack is expressive distinctiveness, vividness, and above all, contrast.*”
- “*The work represents the easier, discursive side of Beethoven about 1804-05.*” (Lockwood)

IN DEFENSE OF THE TRIPLE:

- It is original. “*Even in a symphonie concertante, the use of a piano trio as collective soloist was new.*” (Lockwood)

- Unlike a typical piano trio where the piano dominates, in the Triple the cello is the star. *“The Triple is as close as we can come to a Beethoven cello concerto.”* (Lockwood)
- It is heuristic: *“Without the Triple Concerto, Beethoven could not have achieved the Pianoforte Concertos in G and E flat (#’s 4 & 5), nor the Violin Concerto.”* (Tovey)

“...if it were not by Beethoven but by some mysterious composer who had written nothing else and who had the romantic good fortune to die before it came to performance, the very people who most blame Beethoven for writing below his full powers would be the first to acclaim it as the work of a still greater composer.” (Tovey)