

## Happy Birthday, Ludwig! Program Notes

**LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN** German composer (1770–1827)

**Violin Concerto in D Major**

**Symphony No. 7**

**Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 61** (Estimated length: 45 minutes)

Ludwig van Beethoven's only violin concerto shattered conventional notions of what a Romantic solo concerto could or should be. Instead of using the concerto as a vehicle to show off the soloist's technique, Beethoven placed the music front and center, while also giving the soloist plenty of opportunities to display musical skills.

21-year-old Franz Clement, music director and concertmaster of the Theater an der Wien, commissioned the Violin Concerto in 1806. After the premiere, Clement suggested revisions to the solo part, which Beethoven incorporated into his revised score.

Even masterworks can be diminished by a mediocre performance. According to published accounts, Beethoven finished the concerto just two days before the premiere, which meant Clement had to sight-read the opening performance. Although it was beautiful, and staggeringly difficult, the lack of adequate rehearsal, among other factors, left the Violin Concerto with a bad reputation, which took 30 years to dissipate. 38 years after its premiere, 12-year-old violin virtuoso Joseph Joachim presented the concerto at his debut with the London Philharmonic in 1844. Joachim pored over the score, memorized the entire piece, and composed his own cadenzas in preparation. The hard work paid off; one reviewer noted, "[Joachim] is perhaps the finest violin player, not only of his age, but of his siècle [century]. He performed Beethoven's solitary concerto, which we have heard all the great performers of the last twenty years attempt, and invariably fail in ... its performance was an eloquent vindication of the master-spirit who imagined it."

Unlike Beethoven's concertos for piano, which feature thick, dense chords and difficult scalar passages, the violin solo is graceful and lyrical. This warm expressiveness matched Clement's style of playing, which Beethoven said exemplified "an extremely delightful tenderness and purity."

The concerto begins with five repeating notes in the timpani, an unconventional opening for any piece of music written in 1806. This simple knocking is repeated, like a gentle but persistent heartbeat, throughout the movement, and becomes a recurring motif. In another distinctive break from tradition, the soloist does not enter for a full three minutes, and then begins a *cappella* (unaccompanied), before reiterating the first theme in a high register.

The Larghetto's main melody is stately, intimate, and tranquil, and becomes an orchestral backdrop over which the solo violin traces graceful arabesques in ethereally high registers. The soloist takes center stage in this movement, playing extended cadenzas and other passages with minimal accompaniment.

The final Rondo-Allegro flows seamlessly from the Larghetto; the soloist launches immediately into a rocking melody that suggests a boat bobbing at anchor. Typical rondo format features a primary theme (A), which is interspersed with contrasting sections (B, C, D, etc.) Each of these contrasting sections departs from the (A) theme, sometimes in mood, sometimes by shifting from major to minor, or by changing keys entirely.

## **Symphony No. 7 in A Major, Op. 92** (Estimated length: 42 minutes)

“The Seventh is one of Beethoven's most abstract, ‘absolute’ compositions – in the sense that it is very much about the power of music itself.” – Thomas May

Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, like his Eroica (No. 3), is associated with Napoleon. Unlike the Eroica, however, which Beethoven originally conceived as a tribute to the French emperor, the Seventh can be heard, among other things, as a celebration of Napoleon's defeat.

Beethoven's hearing had been fading since the early 1800s, and by 1813, he was almost completely deaf. To compensate, he adopted an idiosyncratic conducting style, described by colleague Louis Spohr: “Whenever a sforzando occurred, he tore his arms, previously crossed upon his breast, asunder with great vehemence. At piano he crouched down lower and lower according to the degree of softness he desired. If a crescendo then entered he gradually rose again and at the entrance to the forte he jumped into the air. Sometimes, too, he unconsciously shouted to strengthen the forte ... It was evident that the poor deaf master was no longer able to hear the pianos in his music ...”

Beethoven's deafness apparently had no effect on the audience or critics, who received the Seventh Symphony with great enthusiasm. At its premiere, one newspaper reported, the “applause rose to the point of ecstasy.” Writing about a subsequent performance, a Leipzig critic noted, “the new symphony (A major) was received with so much applause, again. The reception was as animated as at the first time; the Andante [sic – the writer is actually referring to the *Allegretto*] (A minor), the crown of modern instrumental music, as at the first performance, had to be repeated.”

The introduction to the Seventh Symphony was the longest ever written in the history of the symphony up to that time. At 64 measures, it remains one of the most extensive. The Poco sostenuto's carefully constructed foundation of anticipatory energy leads gently into the joyful Vivace, which builds into an ebullient shout.

The Allegretto has enjoyed fame separate from the Seventh Symphony as a whole. It quickly became an audience favorite, so much so that 19th century, conductors would often insert it into less popular Beethoven symphonies during concerts.

Beethoven's preference scherzos rather than minuets as symphonic third movements expanded the creative and expressive possibilities of the symphony as a whole. A scherzo (“joke” in Italian) as Beethoven uses it defies expectation, often in a tongue-in-cheek manner. The first section, the scherzo itself, brims with mirthful humor; the joke becomes sharper when paired with the brass-heavy “trio,” which Beethoven indicated should be “very much less fast” than the scherzo.

In 1848, Richard Wagner wrote that Beethoven's Seventh Symphony was “the apotheosis of the dance; it is dance in her highest aspect, as it were the loftiest deed of bodily motion incorporated in an ideal mould of tone.” The whirling energy of the closing Allegro con brio, for example, suggests a ballet dancer performing a series of dazzling *fouettes*, whipping one leg around and around with effortless skill. Critics and scholars have likened this movement to a Bacchic revel, and Beethoven himself wrote, “Music is the wine which inspires us to new generative processes, and I am the Bacchus who presses out this glorious wine to make mankind spiritually drunken ...”