

CHARLOTTESVILLE
SYMPHONY

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

New World Symphony

March 18 & 19, 2023

Program Notes

Concerto in D major for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 61

Ludwig van Beethoven

Baptized 17 December 1770 in Bonn, Germany

Died 26 March 1827 in Vienna, Austria

Approximate duration 45 minutes

The Charlottesville Symphony previously performed Beethoven's Violin Concerto in April 1983.

- Five majestic timpani strokes set the tone for the concerto.
- Their rhythm recurs numerous times in the course of the first movement.
- The *Larghetto* steers a course that is both lyrical and noble.
- Beethoven's writing is at once transparent and richly layered.
- The spirit of dance dominates the buoyant finale.

The Violin Concerto and the *Emperor* Concerto: a comparison

If the Fifth Piano Concerto is Beethoven's *Emperor*, Op. 61 is its royal analogue among violin concertos: the king of them all. Like the *Emperor*, it dates from Beethoven's middle period. The two works are by any standard the pinnacle of his achievement during these richly productive years, and certainly his two finest concerti. Beyond that distinction, the Violin Concerto holds a special place in the hearts of violinists, orchestral players, and music lovers. Yet how different in spirit it is from the *Emperor*. Instead of extroversion we have thoughtfulness; instead of display and inventive methods of exploring virtuoso technique, Beethoven gives us subtle explorations of what the violin's E-string can deliver. In fact, one of the most astonishing aspects of this concerto is Beethoven's instinctive understanding of both soloist and orchestra, despite the fact that he was a keyboard player.

Forgotten virtuoso

Beethoven wrote the concerto for Franz Clement (1780-1842), an Austrian violinist, conductor, and composer who led the violin section at the Vienna Opera. Clement is said to have sight-read the piece at the premiere, because Beethoven finished writing it only at the last minute. If that apocryphal story is true, it may account in part for the fact that this concerto took a long time to win friends, so surprising in light of the staple it has become on today's concert programs.

A struggle to enter the canon

After its premiere in 1806, the Violin Concerto received only one additional documented performance during Beethoven's lifetime, and that in Berlin rather than Vienna, Beethoven's adopted city. The nineteenth century favored flashy showpieces for its concerto soloists, and this one does not focus on the violinist's brilliant technique. Beethoven did study repertoire by his contemporaries Giovanni Battista Viotti, Rodolphe Kreutzer, and Jacques-Pierre Rode to become more conversant with the violin's expressive and technical possibilities.

But display for its own sake never overtakes the broader musical architecture of his mighty work. Among Beethoven's own compositions, the Violin Concerto's closest spiritual sibling is not the *Emperor*, but rather the Fourth Piano Concerto, Op.58, with which it shares serenity, absolute conviction in its own inherent balance, and a lack of need for overt display.

About the music

A timpani pattern of five gentle taps opens the concerto and becomes its *leitmotif*. From this pattern springs the entire first movement: its leisurely, unhurried pace, its emphasis on internal examination rather than external show, and of course the minimal motivic cells from which Beethoven develops his ideas so incomparably. These five beats are a stable foil to the woodwind theme, marked *dolce*, that answers them and eventually emerges as the principal melody of the movement. The same five strokes, understated yet inexorable, firmly anchor the *Allegro ma non troppo* in the tonic key of D; they are a welcome homing point in light of the disorienting and unexpected D-sharps (significantly, repeating the same rhythm of the opening timpani strokes) that the first violins interject as early as the tenth measure.

The first movement has a sense of expansiveness. Beethoven takes subtle liberties with form; for example, he reserves the *cantabile* second theme for the orchestra until the coda, when his soloist finally has the opportunity to express that lovely melody as a single violin line.

Intimate slow movement and foot-tapping finale

Built on variation principles, the *Larghetto* is sheer embroidery. It is lovingly scored: only muted strings and pairs of clarinets, bassoons, and horns accompany the soloist. The mood is comfortable, intimate, friendly. Beethoven's geniality carries through to the Rondo finale, a foray into near-irresistible foot-tapping that wields its power even on those who have heard the music dozens of times. The double-stopped episodes are the only such occurrence in the concerto. Taking unusual and beguiling advantage of the violin's upper register, the finale provides wonderful opportunities for a soloist to display discerning taste and polished execution.

For these performances, Brendon Elliott has chosen the cadenzas by Fritz Kreisler.

The score calls for flute, pairs of oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns and trumpets, timpani, solo violin and strings.

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, "From the New World", Op. 95

Antonín Dvořák

Born 8 September 1841 in Nelahozeves, Bohemia

Died 1 May 1904 in Prague

Approximate duration 55 minutes

The Charlottesville Symphony previously performed Dvořák's New World Symphony in October 1976, October 1982, March 1991, October 1997 and April 2010.

- Tradition holds that Dvořák adapted many of his themes from folk songs and spirituals he heard in America.

- A once-upon-a-time opening in the slow movement ushers in the beloved English horn solo we know as “Going Home”.
- Listen for syncopations and catchy dance rhythms. The Czechs *love* to dance!

Misunderstood masterpiece

“In spite of the fact that I have moved about in the great world of music, I shall remain what I have always been -- a simple Czech musician.”

These words of Dvořák are uncannily apt when considering the familiar, beloved and misunderstood *New World Symphony*. Sketched and written between December 1892 and May 1893 when Dvořák had come to New York to head the new National Conservatory of Music of America, the piece was ridiculed at its premiere because of its alleged incorporation of American Indian tunes. The critics did acknowledge the symphony's individuality and its unique mesh of Czech and American elements. In fact, Dvořák never intended to directly appropriate American Negro or Indian folk song; some years later, in 1900, he wrote to his former student Oskar Nedbal declaring of the *New World Symphony*: “I have only composed in the spirit of such American national melodies.”

Connections to indigenous American music

Late in 1892, Dvořák became acquainted through Henry Thacker Burleigh with America's Negro spirituals. Since his first visit to the United States, he had also been intensely curious about the native music of the American Indian tribes. Innumerable critics have

commented on the strong echoes of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” in the first movement and “Deep River” later in the work. In fact, as Dvořák’s biographer Gervase Hughes has pointed out:

Folk tunes often tended (one could put it no higher than that) to be based on a pentatonic scale -- C, D, E, G, A (or the equivalent) -- indigenous to Bohemia, Somerset, the Hebrides, Ireland and the Appalachians; furthermore the old “plantation songs” of the “deep south” of North America sometimes held rhythmic inflexions similar to those of Slav folk music. Dvořák had the pleasant sagacity to capitalize on these coincidences.

The result is a symphony with extraordinary and spontaneous emotional appeal. If the *New World* has its formal lapses, it amply compensates for them with rhythmic punch and a wealth of memorable, singable melodies that have made this symphony his most popular work.

The most famous movement is, of course, the delicious Largo, which opens with a startling series of coloristic modulations from distant keys: E major to D-flat major. The immortal “Going Home” melody is said to have been inspired by Dvořák’s consideration of Longfellow’s *Hiawatha* as a potential opera subject. He was drawn to the legend; nothing came of that project, but his mind was clearly churning with ideas stimulated by his exposure to Negro and American Indian musical culture. His English horn solo has become one of the best-known melodies in all of classical music.

Structurally, the first movement is the strongest. Its rhythmic profile manifests itself in one form or another in all of the succeeding movements. Dvořák wrote a true scherzo for this symphony rather than the Czech *furiant* he favored in other large instrumental works. And in his finale, he incorporates quotations from each of the preceding movements to cyclically unify the symphony.

The score calls for pairs of flutes, clarinets and bassoons; four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings.

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