

Ludwig van Beethoven

German composer and pianist

born: December 17, 1770, Bonn; died: March 26, 1827, Vienna

***Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 61***

*Allegro ma non troppo*

*Larghetto*

*Rondo: Allegro*

First BPO Classics performance: November 9, 1937, conducted by Franco Autori, with violinist Albert Spalding; most recent performance: March 24, 2012, conducted by Maximiano Valdes, with violinist Joshua Bell; duration 42 minutes

With regard to Beethoven's well-known hearing loss, we can be certain that the ***Violin Concerto in D*** of 1806 was scored under the umbrella of gathering silence. Already four years had passed since the composer confided to his brothers Caspar and Johann in a letter known as the Heiligenstadt Testament:

"For the last six years I have been attacked by an incurable complaint...I am obliged to live as in exile. What a humiliation, when anyone standing beside me could hear at a distance a flute that I could not hear, or any one heard a shepherd singing, and I could not distinguish a sound!"

Fortunately, Beethoven's hearing was yet unaffected when in 1794 he attended an extraordinary violin recital by Franz Clement, a 13-year-old Viennese wunderkind. The impression held fast, and 12 years later, Clement was honored by the dedication of Beethoven's ***Concerto for Violin and Orchestra***. But along the way, Clement had also matured into a very fine conductor and had further endeared himself to Beethoven by conducting the premier of the master's great "Eroica" symphony.

We sometimes overlook the wide vista of Beethoven's full catalog: volumes of folk settings (including many songs on light Irish and Scottish lyrics) an abundance of chamber music, an opera titled ***Fidelio*** (also premiered by Clement), various overtures, oratorios, nine grandiose symphonies, five concertos for piano, and - among much else - even a few drinking songs! As for ***Opus 61***, it became one of the most formative works in the violin repertoire. Indeed, most of the major composers who followed Beethoven with important contributions to the violin scored their respective concertos in D - among others: Brahms, Paganini, Tchaikovsky, Sibelius, Wieniawski and Stravinsky.

Opus 61 begins with a cryptic statement - five repeated D's on the timpani - like trail markers for a long journey ahead. What follows is a full, generous introduction in the classical mode followed by a brief cadenza at the first entrance of the soloist. From that point, the movement unfolds into an expansive symphonic form, with strong but lyrical first and second themes developed and served with elegant virtuosity.

Marked *Larghetto* (moderately slow), the second movement offers a lovely G major retreat. Note the lush mid-register writing for the orchestral strings over which the solo violin traces a legato soliloquy, pensive and lyrical, as if a poetic reverie. Just before the close, dark and powerful intonations seem to break the mood. Surprise..! It is only a deflecting link to the bright D major escape of the brilliant third movement. Here, the solo fiddle takes the lead at once with the famous little tune that prances like a folk dance. With bravura and esprit, the movement

continues through a handsome set of theme and rondo variations. Needless to say, the easy charm and grace of this *Allegro* belie the spectacular technical demands on the soloist. And at about the half way point, has Beethoven stolen a gypsy tune? Or is Ludwig van B. the gypsy? The very well-known snippet in G minor is mirrored for a moment in the bassoon - not to be missed. Without skipping a beat, the main motif then returns to continue its blithe scamper through additional variations, a brief double-stop cadenza and finally a light symphonic coda to end the tour in sunny D major.

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Ralph Vaughan Williams

English composer

born: October 12, 1872, Down Ampney; died: August 26, 1958, London

***Symphony No. 2 in G major, "London"***

*Lento; Allegro risoluto*

*Lento*

*Scherzo (Nocturne); Allegro vivace*

*Andante con moto; Maestoso alla marcia*

First BPO Classics performance: March 13, 1992, conducted by Kazuyoshi Akiyama; most recent performance: October 3, 2004, conducted by Ron Spigelman; duration 37 minutes

Composer Ralph Vaughan Williams is the first among few equals with regard to original scores from the hearth of the British Isles. Not even his in-depth study with composers as diverse as Max Bruch in Germany and Maurice Ravel in France could distract his instinct from the idioms of his beloved England. Originally scored in 1914, the "London" Symphony is a treasure chest of picturesque reference, about which the composer wrote:

"Have we not all about us forms of musical expression which we can take and purify and raise to the level of great art? For instance, the lilt of the chorus at a music-hall joining in a popular song, the children dancing to a barrel-organ, the rousing fervor of a Salvation Army hymn, St. Paul's and a great choir singing in one of its festivals, the Welshmen striking up one of their own hymns whenever they score a goal in an international soccer match, the cries of street peddlers, the factory girls singing their sentimental songs. Have all these nothing to say to us? Every composer cannot expect to have a world-wide message, but he may reasonably expect to have a special message for his own people."

After extensive revision in 1920, the "London" was dedicated 'To the memory of George Butterworth,' the promising English composer who was killed in combat in World War I. The symphony received its re-premiere that same year under the baton of the British maestro Albert Coates who, with Vaughan Williams' acknowledgement, provided the following commentary:

"The first movement represents daybreak by the river, Old Father Thames - deep and thoughtful and shrouded in mystery. 'Big Ben' solemnly strikes the half-hour. Suddenly one is in the Strand in the midst of the Bustle and turmoil of morning traffic. Then one turns off the Strand into the quiet little streets known as the Adelphi, haunted principally by beggars and ragged street-urchins. We return to the Strand and are once again caught up in the bustle and life of London.

“The second movement is in Bloomsbury whereupon dusk is falling. It is the damp and foggy twilight of a late November day. In front of a pub an old musician plays the fiddle. In the distance is heard the street cry “Sweet lavender; who’ll buy sweet lavender?”

“The third movement represents all the noises of Saturday night in the very poor quarters on the south side of the Thames, when these slums resemble a street fair, heard while one sits across the River on the Temple Embankment.

“The fourth movement concerns a Hunger March - ghostly marching past of those who are cold and hungry and unable to get work. The symphony ends as it began, with the river - old Father Thames flowing calm and silent, as he has flowed through the ages, the keeper of many secrets, shrouded in mystery.”

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program notes by Edward Yadzinski

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