

The Greats: Beethoven & Schubert
November 13, 2021

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

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Premiered in Vienna on December 23, 1806 by violinist Franz Clement.

Ludwig van Beethoven's *Violin Concerto in D Major* was composed in 1806 and has become one of the most popular and frequently performed violin concertos of all time. It is Beethoven's only concerto composed for the violin. It was commissioned by violinist Franz Clement who was looking for a new piece for an upcoming concert. Beethoven completed the concerto in just a few short weeks. The premier performance of this concerto was unsuccessful, however, and the concerto vanished for several decades. Its popularity truly began in 1844 when, then 12-year-old violin prodigy, Joseph Joachim performed it alongside the London Philharmonic Society, conducted by Felix Mendelssohn. The performance was a huge success with much acclaim. From then on, the work has become standard to the violin repertoire.

Beethoven's *Violin Concerto in D Major* consists of three movements. The first movement, *Allegro ma non troppo*, is composed in the classical sonata form (including an exposition, development, and recapitulation with coda). It begins with four pulses in the timpani, a motif that will continue on throughout the entirety of the concerto. The first theme follows and is beautifully sung by the woodwind voices. The strings enter with an echo of the strokes in the timpani before the full winds and horn join in to present the second theme. After a lengthy introduction of the first and second themes, the soloist enters with a virtuosic passage of ascending octaves before joining into a restatement of the first theme. The second theme follows leading to a very lengthy development, highlighting the versatility and gymnastic ability of the violin. The recapitulation begins with an announcement in the timpani - a return of the five pulses. Here you can hear the emergence of themes from the exposition but with decorative embellishment. The cadenza performed for this movement was composed and standardized by Fritz Kreisler. Before this, soloists were expected to improvise and compose their own cadenza. The movement ends with a conclusive statement of the second theme.

The second movement, *Larghetto*, is a group of variations on two themes. The first theme is presented by muted strings and then repeated in the clarinet and bassoon. The solo violin emerges from this texture providing melodic decoration (including ornaments in the high register). From here, the theme and variation format is set. The violin gradually initiates the secondary theme, providing more than just decorative commentary. The first theme returns with pizzicato in the accompanying strings supporting the singing solo on the violin. The final cadenza passage leads the concerto into the finale.

The third movement, *Rondo. Allegro*, is considered a rondo sonata, including elements of both musical forms. It begins with a sing-song theme in the low voice of the solo violin. The warm, folk-like melody is repeated three times quickly joined by the orchestra. Contrasting sections within the movement offer changes in mood, color, and key, highlighting the virtuosic fun and pastoral quality of the violin. The concerto fades away at the end, becoming ever softer, until a pair of powerful chords in the orchestra concludes the piece.

Symphony No. 9 in C Major, D944 “The Great”

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Premiered on March 21, 1839, more than a decade after Schubert’s death.

Franz Schubert began his final *Symphony No. 9 in C Major “The Great”* in the summer of 1825. In 1828, Vienna’s Society of Friends of Music agreed to premiere the work but struggled with its length and complexity. They refused to perform the work, so Schubert offered a shorter piece to take its place. His *Symphony No. 9* may have vanished if it had not been for Robert Schumann. While visiting Vienna in 1838, Schumann convinced Schubert’s brother, Ferdinand, to send his unperformed compositions to his friend, Felix Mendelssohn, in Leipzig. Mendelssohn agreed to perform the composition and it premiered the next year.

Schubert’s *Symphony No. 9* indicates the deep influence that Beethoven had on his composition. Beethoven lived in Vienna throughout Schubert’s young life although Schubert never dared to meet him. Composed in four movements, the symphony is unusually long compared to other symphonies of the time and a typical performance of the work lasts an hour. It is nearly as long as Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 9* and also draws on similar compositional styles and form.

The first movement, *Andante — Allegro, ma non troppo*, opens with a solo call in the horn, followed by a glorious melody in the woodwinds that later reappears in the full orchestra. The arrival of the *Allegro* offers a galloping motif dramatically charging the movement forward. The fundamental rhythm reappears throughout the movement albeit with contrasting melodies. Similar to a typical Beethoven sonata form, early melodies reappear after hearing them developed in fragments.

The second movement, *Andante con moto*, begins with a soft, marching theme along with a gentle solo in the oboe. The theme is then restated by the strings with fervor. This movement highlights diversity between the assertiveness in the string and brass voices and the nostalgic quality in the woodwind voices. This movement shows a lot of similarity to that of the second movement in Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 5*.

The third movement of Beethoven symphonies was regularly a scherzo. It comes to no surprise that the third movement of Schubert’s *Symphony No. 9* is a *Scherzo- Allegro vivace*. The movement begins with a boisterous statement in the brass and strings followed by gentle fluttering throughout the woodwind voices. After the opening theme, you can hear Ländler-like melodies (flowing melodies indicative of the traditional Bavarian dance). The movement ends as powerfully as it began with a release of energy throughout the whole orchestra, setting us up for the powerful finale.

The final movement, *Allegro vivace*, begins with a heroic fanfare in the brass followed by a whirlwind of energy in the strings. This intensity continues throughout the movement for the whole orchestra and follows the classical sonata form. The concluding movement of this symphony truly lets the orchestra shine with its nonstop power and energy, storming through into its final bars.