

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 19

BAPTIZED: December 17, 1770, in Bonn, Germany

DIED: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

WORK COMPOSED: sketched as early as 1788, provisionally completed in 1794–95, revised in 1798 and again just prior to publication in 1801; dedicated to Prince Carl Nicklas von Nickelsberg

WORLD PREMIERE: March 29, 1795, at Vienna's Burgtheater, with the composer as conductor and soloist.

Beethoven visited Vienna in the spring of 1787 and though there is an absence of documents to ascertain the purpose of this trip, there seems little doubt that he met Mozart and perhaps had a few lessons from him. His initial trip to Vienna lasted only a couple of weeks as he quickly returned home after receiving news of his mother's deteriorating health. Beethoven returned to Vienna in late 1792.

The Piano Concerto No. 2 is actually the first piano concerto Beethoven wrote. It was numbered as such because it was the second to be published. The first sketches may have been influenced by his short period in Vienna with Mozart, but the only hint of that may be in the Adagio which is reflective of Mozart's last Piano Concerto No. 27 in B-flat major, K.595. Beethoven did realize that anything he would write for the piano would be in the shadow of Mozart. In this concerto he employed an orchestra with the same instrumentation as four of Mozart's piano concertos of 1784. He also adheres to the Mozart structure: three movements, the first being a sonata-allegro form, the second a slow, lyrical movement, and the third a rondo movement. The first two movements were written between 1787 and 1789, although the cadenza in the first movement was composed considerably later, and the final movement was written in 1795 shortly before the premiere. This makes for a very interesting comparison; the young Beethoven's writing in the first two movements and the writing of an older Beethoven who studied with Haydn after his move to Vienna.

When Beethoven premiered his B-flat concerto he had yet to write out the solo part and most probably did not complete that until late in 1800. The premiere was an immediate success, yet Beethoven was dissatisfied with the work. Only with reluctance did he submit it for publication in 1801, sheepishly commenting to his publisher that it, and the C major Concerto (No. 1) were not "among my best works."

The charity concert in 1795 when Beethoven premiered his B-flat Concerto marks one of the earliest performances by him in Vienna. If his attempt was to make a strong impression, he certainly succeeded with the performance of this bright and beautiful concerto. Part of its success must surely have been due to Beethoven's impressive technique; the concerto requires a very accomplished soloist and young Ludwig made his way as a virtuoso on the piano. Also the Viennese, who had become accustomed to the lighter, 'devil-may-care' musical attitude of Mozart and Haydn, were most likely shocked by the 'in-your-face' gravitas of this newcomer. But Beethoven, who must have also felt a need to pay homage to Mozart, wrote a light and jovial finale, assuring the public that he wasn't a threat to the Mozart legacy.

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History:

Surprisingly, there has been only one previous DSSO performance of this concerto. On March 17, 1972 Ursula Oppens was the soloist and Joseph Hawthorne conducted.

Instrumentation:

Flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, strings and solo piano.