Ludwig van Beethoven
Born December 16, 1770, Bonn, Germany.
Died March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria.

Piano Concerto No. 1 in C Major, Op. 15

Beethoven composed the C major piano concerto in 1795 and was the soloist in the first performance on December 18, 1795, in Vienna. The orchestra consists of one flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. At these performances, Mr. Anderszewski plays a cadenza by Beethoven in the first movement. Performance time is approximately thirty-seven minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Beethoven's First Piano Concerto were given at Orchestra Hall on March 12 and 13, 1915, with Rudolph Ganz as soloist and Frederick Stock conducting.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded Beethoven's First Piano Concerto in 1972, with Vladimir Ashkenazy under Sir Georg Solti, for London, and in 1983, with Alfred Brendel under James Levine, for Philips.

This is not Beethoven's first piano concerto. We are usually taught that the B-flat major concerto known as no. 2 is really no. 1, but that is not entirely accurate either. Sometime in 1784, when Beethoven was only fourteen years old, he wrote a piano concerto in E-flat major. It is the sort of sprawling, self-important, and florid music that teenagers often write (assuming that they compose music at all), and it is a greater testament to the young Beethoven's apparent virtuosity as a pianist than to his incipient talent as a composer. Although the full score is lost, we still have a copy of the piano part, including indications for orchestral cues. (The concerto was reconstructed by Willi Hess and performed for the first time in 1943.)

Jumping ahead nearly a decade, we come to the first works in the genre that Beethoven wished to acknowledge: a concerto in B-flat, probably begun before 1793, and the C major concerto on this program, which was composed in 1795. Both works were published in 1801, but in the reverse order. Although Beethoven played both of these concertos in public on several occasions, he was intensely self-critical, and, when it came time to publish them, he could think of nothing good to say about either one:

One of my first concertos [in B-flat] and therefore not one of the best of my compositions is to be published by Hofmeister, and Mollo is to publish a concerto [in C major] which indeed was written later but which also does not rank among the best of my works in this form.

By 1801, Beethoven's style had changed dramatically. He recently had begun a third piano concerto in C minor, one of the works with which he would establish his primacy in the new century. From our viewpoint, the Third Piano Concerto does not mark a critical advance over the first two, but, for Beethoven, every step forward was important and hard won. Later generations, in fact, would lump all three concertos together as "early period" works, although that does not mean lesser Beethoven.

Beethoven apparently was more interested in the C major concerto than he let on because he composed three cadenzas for its first movement. All three are obviously later efforts, apparently dating from 1809, the time of the EmperorConcerto—his fifth and last piano concerto. By then, Beethoven realized that his worsening deafness would soon force him off the concert stage, and he wrote out definitive versions of the cadenzas that he previously had improvised.
It’s not difficult to understand why this music still held interest for Beethoven as late as 1809, for it is impressive material used with great mastery. Perhaps inspired by Mozart’s great C major concerto, which he undoubtedly knew by the time this piece was written, Beethoven works on a larger canvas here than in the B-flat concerto. (He also adds clarinets, trumpets, and timpani to the orchestra.) Beethoven begins quietly, having already learned that a soft opening is often the quickest way to capture an audience’s attention. The music is robust and energetic, despite the dynamic, and it soon bursts forth with typical Beethoven fervor. There is some characteristic horseplay with the choice of keys—the second theme begins in faraway E-flat—and Beethoven borrows from Mozart the unexpected touch of allowing the piano to enter with music the orchestra has not already presented (although, unlike Mozart, he never returns to the piano’s new theme).

The slow movement is longer than the corresponding movement of any other concerto by Beethoven, but here he has learned how to move through slow music so that it never drags; the extra length is all bonus. The leisurely coda includes a poignant conversation between the piano and the first clarinet. A look through all the Mozart and Haydn finales will not produce a jazzier ending than this boisterous rondo, full of pranks and surprises. The good time goes on for nearly six hundred measures without seeming a moment too long.

*Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*

© Chicago Symphony Orchestra. All rights reserved. Program notes may be reproduced only in their entirety and with express written permission from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

These notes appear in galley files and may contain typographical or other errors. Programs subject to change without notice.