**PROGRAM NOTES**

**Ludwig van Beethoven** - Piano Concerto No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 37

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

**Piano Concerto No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 37**

We’re not certain that Beethoven and Mozart ever met. Their names were mentioned in the same breath as early as 1783, when Beethoven’s first composition teacher, Christian Gottlob Neefe, wrote these words in the earliest public notice of his promising pupil: “This youthful genius is deserving of help to enable him to travel. He would surely become a second Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart were he to continue as he has begun.”

Neefe was suggesting that, with proper sponsorship, his young pupil could tour the music capitals and entertain kings with his dazzling keyboard talent—like most musicians, Neefe assumed that Mozart would make his reputation as a virtuoso performer, not as a composer. Neefe didn’t live long enough to understand how limited his view was, but he did see his prize student take the first steps to becoming not a second Mozart, but more importantly, the mature Beethoven.

It’s likely that these two great composers did meet early in 1787, when the sixteen-year-old Beethoven made his first trip from his native Bonn to Vienna, to breathe the air of a sophisticated musical city. Beethoven stayed no more than two weeks, and he may even have taken a few lessons from Mozart before his teacher was suddenly called home by the news of his mother’s failing health. There is, however, no mention of Mozart in a letter Beethoven wrote at the time.

When late in 1792, Beethoven returned to Vienna, where he would stay for the rest of his life, it was to study with Haydn, for Mozart lay in an unmarked grave. We can sense disappointment in the famous words Count Waldstein inscribed in the album that served as a farewell gift from Beethoven’s friends:

> You are going to Vienna in fulfillment of your long-frustrated wishes. The Genius of Mozart is still mourning and weeping over the death of her pupil. She found a refuge but no occupation with the inexhaustible Haydn; through him she wishes once more to form a union with another. With the help of assiduous labor you shall receive Mozart’s spirit from Haydn’s hands.
Beethoven arrived in Vienna in the second week of November 1792. He quickly realized that Haydn had little to teach him and took comfort in the fact that he was welcome in the same homes where Mozart was once popular.

To Beethoven, Vienna was Mozart’s city. The first music he published there was a set of variations for violin and piano on “Se vuol ballare” from Mozart’s The Marriage of Figaro. In March 1795, he played Mozart’s D minor piano concerto (K. 466) at a concert organized by the composer’s widow Constanze. (He later wrote cadenzas for it as well, the only concerto by Mozart he so honored.) And on April 2, 1800, at his historic first public concert, Beethoven included a symphony by Mozart on the program, which also was supposed to have introduced his brand new piano concerto (his third) in C minor. For reasons that we will never know, however, Beethoven played one of his earlier concertos instead.

This C minor piano concerto is one of a handful of works in which the spirits of Mozart and Beethoven convene. To suggest, as some writers do, that Beethoven modeled his concerto after Mozart’s own C minor piano concerto (K. 491) is to confuse the deepest kind of artistic inheritance with plagiarism. The choice of key certainly can’t be taken as a homage to Mozart, for Beethoven seemed unable to get C minor out of his system at the time. (Think of the Pathétique Sonata, or, a bit later, the funeral march from the Eroica Symphony, the Coriolan Overture, and, of course, the Fifth Symphony.)

Obviously, Beethoven remembered Mozart’s C minor concerto when he was writing his own—they share too many musical details for sheer coincidence. According to a popular anecdote, Beethoven and the pianist Johann Cramer were walking together when they heard the finale of the Mozart concerto coming from a nearby house; Beethoven stopped and exclaimed: “Cramer, Cramer! We shall never be able to do anything like that!”

But in his own C minor concerto, Beethoven does something far more remarkable: he writes music that pays tribute to this great masterpiece and, at the same time, transcends the Mozartean model. It was conceived in a complimentary, rather than a competitive spirit. Mozart’s untimely death spared Beethoven a head-on rivalry with the one composer he worshiped, leaving him to make his own way in Vienna. (He hardly knew that Schubert existed, even though they lived in the same city for years; once, when asked to name the greatest living composer other than himself, he suggested Luigi Cherubini—although it took him a moment to come up with anyone.)

Even nineteenth-century listeners, who thought Mozart a lightweight and Beethoven a quarrelsome revolutionary, heard the resemblance in this music—both in its details as well as its spirit and sensibility. Certainly the way the soloist continues to play right after the first movement cadenza up to the final bar can be found only in K. 491 among all of Mozart’s piano concertos. Beethoven’s opening theme, too, tosses a glance at Mozart’s. But on the big issues—how the music moves forward, the way it approaches the turning points in its progress—there is less agreement. As Donald Tovey pointed out, Beethoven doesn’t yet seem to have figured out what Mozart always understood—that you shouldn’t give too much away before the soloist enters and the drama really begins. There are touches of pure Beethoven, like the unannounced entry of the timpani just after the cadenza—a complete surprise, even though it has been thoughtfully prepared by a main theme that imitates the beating of a drum every time it appears.
There’s nothing Mozartean about Beethoven’s choice of key for the central slow movement: E major, with its key signature of four sharps, is bold and unexpected in a concerto in C minor, with three flats. For a moment the first E major chord, given to the piano alone, seems all wrong, as if the soloist’s hands have landed in the wrong place; at the same time, it’s fresh and irresistible. Where Mozart generally wrote andante or adagio, Beethoven dictates largo. Deliberately paced and magnificently expansive, this is the first great example of a new kind of slow movement. Throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, composers would profit from remembering this music, although it’s arguable that no one after Beethoven ever thought of anything like the lovely, fully blossomed romanticism of the duet for flute and bassoon over plucked strings and piano arpeggios midway through.

The way Beethoven glances over the final double bar of this movement at the opening of the finale also is new. The two movements aren’t yet literally connected, as they will be in later music, but Beethoven uses all of his wit and wisdom to carry us from one to the next. He capitalizes on the fact that G-sharp is the same note on the keyboard as A-flat, and he uses that note to pivot from the remote world of E major back to C minor. Our ears easily make the connection, and the rondo finale races forward, full of pranks and good humor.

Having convinced his listeners (and himself, perhaps) that E major is no stranger to C minor, Beethoven returns to the key of his slow movement in the middle of the finale as if it were the most logical move of all. Beethoven recovers C minor again, but, after a brief cadenza, he tears off at a gallop into C major, where he has been headed all along.

It’s not clear why this concerto, evidently designed for Beethoven’s first Vienna concert in April 1800, wasn’t performed that night. Perhaps it simply wasn’t ready. The manuscript suggests that last-minute changes were still being made before its premiere on April 5, 1803, when Beethoven also introduced his new Second Symphony and the oratorio Christ on the Mount of Olives. Even then, the music was more firmly fixed in Beethoven’s mind than on the page. Ignaz von Seyfried, the new conductor at the Theater an der Wien, agreed to turn pages for Beethoven, only to discover that it was easier said than done. I saw almost nothing but empty leaves, at most on one page or another a few Egyptian hieroglyphs wholly unintelligible to me and scribbled down to serve as clues for him. He played nearly all of the solo part from memory since, as was so often the case, he had not had time to put it all down on paper. He gave me a secret glance whenever he was at the end of one of the invisible passages, and my scarcely concealable anxiety not to miss the decisive moment amused him greatly, and he heartily laughed at

Nearly a year later, Beethoven finally got around to writing down the piano part for a performance given by his student Ferdinand Ries, who provided his own cadenza.

The first reviewer of the Third Concerto commented that the piece should succeed “even in places like Leipzig, where people were accustomed to hearing the best of Mozart’s concertos.” He continued, suggesting that this music would always require

a capable soloist who, in addition to everything one associates with virtuosity, has understanding in his head and a heart in his breast—otherwise, even with the most impressive preparation and technique, the best things in the work will be left behind.
Those are wise words, particularly from a man working in a field that to this day expects sound judgments on new music heard cold. What no critic could predict is that this concerto, rooted in the previous century and a pioneer in its own, would continue to speak as strongly and directly to the centuries that followed.

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