

## **Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D major, Op.61 (42')**

**– Ludwig van Beethoven**

Born December 16, 1770 in Bonn, Germany

Died March 26, 1827 in Vienna, Austria

*The work was premiered on December 23, 1806, by violinist Franz Clement and the orchestra of Vienna's Theater-an-der-Wien, with Beethoven conducting. It is scored for flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.*

Ludwig van Beethoven, one of the great pianists of his day, considered the violin to be his second instrument, having seriously studied it early in his career. By the time he was 20, he had composed many works that included the violin – among them two Romances for violin with orchestra, and an early failed attempt at composing a concerto. By 1806, when he completed his mature violin concerto, he was considered one of the leading composers in Vienna, and had many professional connections. Among these was the 22-year-old violinist Franz Clement, a child prodigy who had toured Europe and, like Mozart, had performed for many important musical and political figures. Beethoven had first met Clement in 1794 when the prodigy was 10. As the years progressed, the violinist performed much of Beethoven's music as conductor and concertmaster of the Theater-an-der-Wien.

The premiere of the Violin Concerto was not met with cheers and adulation. Instead Beethoven had been so rushed to complete the work that he finished it only two days before the premiere, giving no time for the soloist to prepare. Not only did Clement sight-read the work at the premiere, but also he added his own Fantasia between the first two movements, performing the unexpected addition on one string while holding his violin upside down. Probably because of the fiasco, Beethoven's Violin Concerto never quite caught on as a major concert work until Felix Mendelssohn performed it with Joseph Joachim in 1844 –38 years after its premiere.

This masterpiece is not your usual concerto. Although it has its share of virtuoso content, it relies more heavily on specific intonation, expression, and delicacy. It is a concerto requiring a deep sense of musicality. In one of the most unusual opening gestures ever used in a lyrical solo piece, Beethoven begins with four understated timpani notes. An introspective woodwind melody follows, after which the violins play the four timpani notes as an accompanimental figure to the second theme. The soloist enters with one of the rare soloistic flourishes in the first movement. After this dazzling entry the violin becomes more of a decorative element than a thematic one. It is the combination of the violin's commentary and the brilliant orchestral writing that suffuses this movement with its irresistible energy. An extended cadenza ends the movement.

The second movement is a set of variations on a chorale theme. Unlike most theme-and-variations movements, the melody is always present in the original form in each subsequent variation. Again the violin provides a diaphanous veil of filigree

passage work (the "variation") over the ever-present melody (the theme). The result is a pastoral portrait of contemplation in music. A violin trill links to the final movement.

Soloist and cellos collaborate in the jaunty first theme of the rondo-form finale. Encouraged by the energy, the full orchestra enters with its restatement. Beethoven finally provides a more typical and technical display of virtuosity. Quick arpeggios and brilliant melodic statements are found throughout the soloist's part. This is the jolly and festive Beethoven at his most extroverted. After a sparkling cadenza, the final coda gives the listener a few delightful surprises.

### **Symphony No.2 in E Minor, Op. 27 (60')**

– **Sergei Rachmaninoff**

Born March 20, 1873 in Oneg, Russia

Died March 28, 1943 in Beverly Hills, California

*The work was given its earliest performances in February of 1908 in Moscow and St. Petersburg, with Rachmaninoff conducting. It is scored piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, and strings.*

Rachmaninoff's Symphony No.1 (1897) was a complete failure. Despite his great promise as the most likely leader of a new generation of Russian composers, the harsh reception could not have been more brutal. Cesar Cui declared that the work sounded like the product of "a conservatory in Hell." The depression that ensued caused an unusual dry period in Rachmaninoff's compositional output.

After three years, he decided to seek help, eventually settling on hypnosis. The composer received considerable relief with Dr. Nicolai Dahl, and was so grateful he dedicated the Second Piano Concerto to the hypnotist. However, the idea of composing another symphony simply terrified Rachmaninoff.

Balancing this fear with the void he felt by not composing for orchestra, Rachmaninoff decided on another approach to restore his creative flow – seclusion. In 1906, he left his conducting position with the Bolshoi Opera and moved to Germany. In an isolated house near Dresden, he immersed himself in composition. Surprisingly, the first work he wrote was the Second Symphony. The premieres in St. Petersburg and Moscow in February of 1908 (accounts differ as to which was given first), both conducted by the composer, met with great popular and critical acclaim. He had finally overcome the horrors of 1897.

The Second Symphony is exemplary Rachmaninoff – almost a caricature of the lush strings, soaring melodies, and powerful brass that listeners associate with the composer. It is *the* Rachmaninoff symphony to many people. The first movement begins with a cascading string figure that builds, each entrance overlapping the previous one, into exquisite textures that cradle the listener in a comfortable cushion of sound. The entire tightly woven movement is built from those yearning opening notes. The second

movement, a lively *scherzo*, is a spirited march featuring soaring horns and propulsive rhythmic motion. The simpering *adagio* is Rachmaninoff at his most passionate. Beginning with a theme that is a crown jewel of the clarinet repertoire, the rapturous movement surges forward in waves of languid beauty. The final Rondo shows Rachmaninoff's underrated orchestrational skill, and recalls several themes from earlier in the symphony.

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