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Beethoven, Piano Concerto No. 3 in C Minor, op. 37

For decades it has been thought that Beethoven was likely to have composed his C-minor Piano Concerto in late 1799 and early 1800, some three years before its actual Viennese premiere at the Theater an der Wien on 5 April 1803. In part this “early” dating seems to have been buttressed by a misreading of a scribbled date on the autograph score. Late-twentieth-century scholarship, however, has argued that the written date is not “1800” but “1803,” and Beethoven scholar Leon Plantinga has recently threaded his way through the concerto’s complex history to make a strong case that the composer almost surely sketched it in the last half of 1802 and completed the autograph score in early 1803, shortly before its premiere. In a stroke this new dating recontextualizes our understanding of the work, shifting it out of Beethoven’s first period—apparently contemporaneous with the op. 18 Quartets and the First Symphony—and into the cusp of the middle period, Beethoven’s bold “new way,” flanked by such pieces as the Second Symphony, op. 36, the op. 30 Violin Sonatas, and the op. 31 Piano Sonatas.

The Third Piano Concerto is also a formidable member of a list of famous C-minor works by Beethoven, many of which work out, in the course of their multimovement trajectories, a liberation from the clutches of a negative, “fatalistic” opening into an unclouded C major at or near their ends. From this perspective the concerto may be understood as a detail-packed journey from the tersely-clipped, minor-mode march of the work’s opening—an ominous situation thrust forward to be dealt with—to the exuberant release of the C-major, 6/8 coda, Presto, that brings its finale to an end.

Beethoven laid out the first of the three movements in the grand architectural format characteristic of concertos of that period: a formal opening ritornello for the orchestra alone—in this case providing the initial statements of most of the material treated in the rest of the movement—leads to a solo-led sonata form with orchestral participations and confirmations. Here Beethoven sought an overall effect of breadth and power. The initial “threat” of the opening motto, the minor-mode march, is confronted and refronted as if something ultimate were at stake. One senses early on the gathering of strength for the struggle; the heroic encounter with a monumental problem; the presentation of alternatives. By the movement’s conclusion, however, the minor-mode menace has not yet been vanquished. Following the piano cadenza very near the end, a coda passage restores the severity of the original C minor (and pays homage, surely, to the parallel moment in Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 24 in C Minor, K. 491).

The second movement, *Largo*, could hardly provide a greater contrast to the preceding drama. This is clear even from its opening E-major chord—a new tonic appearing out of “nowhere,” famously unrelated to the grim C-minor solidity of the prior movement’s end—a chord played, moreover, by the soloist alone, as the onset of one of Beethoven’s most remarkable slow-movement themes. This may strike us as the voice from an entirely different world, meditative, hymnic, idyllic—an expansive space of healing or convalescence after the struggles of the first movement.

When the key of C Minor returns with the finale, it is far less threatening than it had been in the first movement. It now underpins an amiable sonata-rondo, grounded in the multiple returns of a square-cut, jaunty tune that shares something of the tongue-in-cheek Viennese parody of “Turkish” style. In the serenity of its confidence, the finale suggests the wisdom of high play—and at the end the C-minor threat of the first movement is completely overturned by the playful C-major coda.

Sibelius: Symphony No. 5 in E-flat Major, op. 82

Originally composed for the Helsinki celebrations surrounding his fiftieth birthday, the triumphalist Fifth Symphony—so different from the dark and pessimistic Fourth—was performed in two strikingly different preliminary versions (1915, 1916) before Sibelius decided on its final shape in 1919. During these final years of his compositional career, Sibelius had in effect withdrawn from the commercial marketplaces of larger Europe. No longer seeking to be a competitor in the race toward certain types of high-dissonant “modernism,” he had retreated to his rustic forest villa, Ainola, outside of Järvenpää, Finland. This psychological withdrawal was reinforced by the isolating conditions of the First World War and the upheaval of the Finnish declaration of independence and subsequent Civil War in 1917-18.

In this onset of the “late period,” the much-troubled and often self-doubting Sibelius committed himself more decisively to a musical nature-mysticism. At least within the sphere of musical practice, he appears to have held the idea that long-dormant spiritual realities inhabit nature, roughly analogous to pagan gods waiting to be reawakened through the concentrated processes of art. More than that, he came to regard both elemental orchestral sound and his obsession with an “organic” form (whose local, moment-to-moment spontaneous linkages, he

once compared with ice-crystals spreading over a winter windowpane) as conduits of that same nature. He now declared that his more recent symphonies were “confessions of faith,” attempts to draw forth the essences of the lonely and ever-changing Finnish forest that surrounded him on a daily basis. Toward that end, the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Symphonies and the tone poem *Tapiola* are interrelated works, four tableaux of a comprehensive vision of the spiritual presences animating the Northern world of an unpeopled nature.

The Fifth’s first movement, in E-flat major, is structurally innovative, a fusion of “first movement” and “scherzo.” (These two had actually been separate movements in the first version of the piece.) It is most easily grasped as a gradually phased *accelerando*. Thus it begins with stillness and near non-motion—the opening “natural” horn call presented as an object for meditation, the evocation of the forest’s essence, then ramifying outward at once into “inevitable” growth, cell-by-cell—and is drawn by degrees into the whirlwind of its final bars, whose intense inner motion implodes into silence at the end.

The generally placid middle movement, in G major, is a set of multiple, varied rotations through a theme first presented by pizzicato strings and flutes. Although the movement is disarmingly simple on the surface, the point of its circular rocking is to beget and nurture the thematic materials for the ensuing finale. The finale’s themes-to-come surface and grow here, almost below our level of normal perception, either as bass lines (first implicit, then explicit) or as rhythmically altered contours here and there in the upper voice.

The whole symphony has been pointing in the direction of its E-flat-major finale as the goal, the point of maximal disclosure. The finale is built from two contrasting themes: an initial perpetual-motion theme finally gains sufficient energy to trigger the second theme—the back-and-forth theme with which this symphony is most commonly identified. We now know that Sibelius identified this second theme with the image of the majestic migrating swans that he saw every year with the thawing of winter into springtime. This “swan-hymn” (as Sibelius’s friend Axel Carpelan called it) is the musical and “nature-mystical” idea into which the entire symphony grows. It was also one of the first ideas for the work that Sibelius jotted down in 1915: its third (and final) appearance in the finale—the climactic version, with its tremblingly stretched intervals, as if the theme were breaking apart, perhaps straining to reveal something even deeper within.