

A detective's view on Ludwig van Beethoven's Violin Concerto in D Major, Opus 61

By Patricia Kopatchinskaja

I am pleased to share my interpretation of Beethoven's violin concerto with SPCO audiences this week and want to take this opportunity to share my perspective on this piece. In the 209 years since it was written, a standard range of interpretation of this concerto has become common; one that I find lacks the improvisatory spirit that was customary in Beethoven's time. I am seeking to illuminate Beethoven's multiple intentions for the work, drawing from the many improvisatory variants written out in the original manuscript, as well as the performance style of the violinist for whom the piece was written. While it is a departure from the interpretations that have become common today, I do not believe it is a departure from Beethoven's conception of the work. He was an inveterate improviser and tinkerer, and it is in that spirit that I approach this greatest of all violin concerti.

Beethoven's violin concerto was commissioned in 1806 by the virtuoso Franz Clement (1780-1842), who was also a composer himself. Beethoven's concerto has many structural similarities with a violin concerto written by Clement two years before which Beethoven must have known because he conducted one of his symphonies on the same program in which Clement's concerto premiered.

The manuscript for Beethoven's violin concerto is preserved in the Austrian National Library and there is also an excellent facsimile edition in color. The first and last movements of the manuscript contain numerous modifications by Beethoven's own hand, which are inserted in lines below the staves of the orchestral score. The manuscript was evidently written in a hurry, and with its many deletions, alterations and alternative versions, it gives the impression of an exuberant written improvisation, an impression which I also try to translate into my interpretation.

One series of alterations is written with the same ink as the original manuscript and the corresponding parts in the first version are crossed out. These are evidently definitive modifications. But another series of alterations is again written outside the staves but with a darker ink than the original and the corresponding parts in the first version are not deleted, small crosses showing where to insert the modifications. For some passages there are even three different versions. Perhaps these were Clement's suggestions, or they could have been meant for the transcription of the violin concerto into a piano concerto authorized by Beethoven sometime after the violin concerto premiered. We have no certainty. A third series of additions is also written with pencil, these clearly for the left hand of the piano version.

We do not know who prepared the printed version of the piece (as opposed to the manuscript) and if Beethoven approved it. However, the printed score mostly chose the versions that are easiest to play. Maybe the publisher wanted something he could sell!

Taking into account that improvisation in performance was a common practice at the time and that the printed version has already been recorded perhaps a hundred times, I believe it adds interest to use Beethoven's own variants-exemplifying Beethoven's own **improvisatory** approach to the composition of this piece. This is ultimately not a departure from Beethoven's written text and rather shows the freedom of his thought. I was encouraged to do this by Professor Robin Stowell at the University of Cardiff, probably today's foremost expert on the Beethoven concerto.

Concerning **dynamics**, it is not clear from most interpretations and recordings how soft and very soft the violin has to play in this concerto. We know from contemporary descriptions that Franz Clement could not play loudly. He came from an older school from a time before Viotti and Rode had introduced the techniques to produce a more powerful sound. Despite the fact that Clement's weak sound was criticised during his later years, contemporary reviewers described his playing as elegant and delicate, with a very touching sound of "indescribable tenderness." Therefore, since Beethoven wrote the work with Clement's performing style in mind, one has to take it very seriously if Beethoven asks for low dynamics. For example, the very first solo in the first movement begins *piano* and returns to *piano* after only four bars. Nothing of the radiating "Here come I" attitude that one normally hears. There are many other *piano* and even *pianissimo* passages in the first movement (bars 288-297, 330-363, 523-530). In other passages, Beethoven writes "dolce" which also cannot be loud because they often are followed by a crescendo into *forte*.

In the Larghetto slow movement, the most moving passages are bars 45-53 in the *pianissimo* followed by "sempre perdendosi" (vanishing) and bars 71-88, which begin in *pianissimo*, leading down to *ppp*. In my view, this is a completely internalized and sacred meditation. But the traditional interpretation mostly offers a rich and "beautiful" sound with an excited vibrato. Accordingly, reviewers have repeatedly uttered critical remarks about my "poor sound" in the Larghetto, as it differs from what they are accustomed to hearing.

One has also to mention the balance between orchestra and solo violin. Especially in recordings, the solo violin is often intrusively put into the foreground. This might be acceptable for concertos by Paganini or Mendelssohn, where indeed the violin is the hero accompanied by humble escorts. But in Beethoven's concerto, the main musical thoughts are mostly in the orchestra and the solo violin plays around them in an improvisatory way. In this concerto I often feel like a small bird flying over a majestic landscape. I take my twists and turns and sometimes even disappear between the clouds. In fact, this concerto is a symphony for orchestra and improvising violin. The bassoon soli of the last movement provide a fine example. These are not accompaniment, rather they are the leading solo material, and it is the solo violin who accompanies them with elfin lightness, even sometimes vanishing into the background.

Now for the tempi. There are metronome marks for many of Beethoven's works, some by himself, others by his devoted pupil Carl Czerny, who wrote a famous book outlining metronome markings for every piece of Beethoven's output. While some doubt the accuracy of Beethoven's markings, and the accuracy of the metronome Beethoven used, Sir Roger Norrington and his London Classical Players, as well as many contemporary orchestras, have realized them in the symphonies in a most convincing way. For the keyboard version of the violin concerto, Czerny gives the tempo marking of quarter note = 126 for the first movement. The early recording (1929) of Josef Wolfsthal with the Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Manfred Gurlitt is only a shade slower at 120-124, and Hubermann's recording from 1934 has a similar tempo. The initial timpani beats thereby get the character of a fast heartbeat or of a brisk marching rhythm. The melodies have to be thought in halves. Professor Stowell showed with convincing arguments that Beethoven's first movement is written in the spirit of French Revolutionary music, using simple melodies that could be sung along a forward pushing march rhythm. If we take the prototype of a revolutionary march - the Marseillaise - it is until now sung in a tempo of 126, exactly the tempo that Czerny gives for Beethoven's first movement.

The Finale with Czerny's tempo of 100 really takes off, becomes light and virtuosic, reminding one of the best compositions of Mendelssohn. Many of today's interpretations have forgotten all this and the concerto is blown up to a slow, massive and overweight structure without charm or seduction.

Cadenzas were composed by Beethoven for the keyboard version of his concerto. I have taken the liberty of transcribing them for two violins and celli. In the cadenza of the first movement Beethoven also uses timpani. In the middle of this cadenza, a trumpet signal similar to the trumpet signal in Beethoven's opera "Fidelio" appears, followed by a march motif giving the timpani an aggressive and martial character. In a slow tempo, this passage would not make any sense. Therefore, Beethoven's own cadenza confirms the other arguments for a fast tempo in the first movement. The timpani originally came into occidental music from the Turkish military music and until the end of the 18th century was perceived as being threatening and aggressive. Considering this, the initial timpani beats of the first movement can be felt as quite menacing, a striking contrast to the idyllic melodies.

It gives me pleasure to share these ideas about our most famous violin concerto and I hope you enjoy the performance.

References:

- (1) Beethoven Violinkonzert, Faksimileausgabe mit Kommentar von Franz Grasberger, Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt Graz, 1979
- (2) Robin Stowell, Beethoven Violin Concerto (Cambridge Music Handbooks), Cambridge University Press, 1998, ISBN: 0521451590
- (3) Carl Czerny: Über den richtigen Vortrag der sämtlichen Beethovenschen Klavierwerke, 1842, Nachdruck Universal-Edition, 1963, S. 116-117.