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Program Notes: Two Works of Ludwig van Beethoven

The famous composer whose works you will hear tonight, Ludwig van Beethoven, was born into the world 250 years ago in Bonn, Germany. This will therefore be a 250-year anniversary concert. We almost do not need to tell you who this composer is. For, whether you have listened to much classical music before, only a little, or even none at all (though highly unlikely), you have probably heard of Beethoven. For, as the author William Kinderman remarks, “No composer occupies a more central position in musical life than Beethoven.”<sup>1</sup>

Beethoven began playing the piano, harpsichord, and violin when he was quite young.<sup>2</sup> His “father was Ludwig’s first music teacher. His methods were harsh and often senseless. He compelled his son to practice for hours at the harpsichord. When he returned home drunk late at night, he would pull the child out of bed and have him practice until dawn. Ludwig confessed later that, exposed to the repressive methods of his father, he had often thought of giving up the study of music.”<sup>3</sup> Luckily, Beethoven persisted in the study of music and grew up to compose the wonderful music that we are still able to listen to today.

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<sup>1</sup> William Kinderman, *Beethoven*, paperback ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1, <https://archive.org/stream/beethoven0000kind#mode/2up>.

<sup>2</sup> Gino Pugnetti, *Beethoven*, trans. Laila Pauk (Long Island City, New York: Elite Publishing Corporation, 1967), 4-8, <https://archive.org/stream/beethoven0000pugn#mode/2up>.

<sup>3</sup> Pugnetti, *Beethoven*, 4.

In 1792, Beethoven moved from Bonn to Vienna, Austria.<sup>4</sup> According to Kinderman, “During his first Vienna years Beethoven composed primarily for solo piano or combinations of instruments including piano. He devoted attention as well to the medium of the string trio.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Beethoven wrote many piano sonatas. In that respect, he was like Mozart and Haydn. However, Beethoven’s piano sonatas were different. Beethoven built on and altered the piano sonata of Mozart and Haydn.<sup>6</sup> Beethoven died in 1827, during a thunderstorm.<sup>7</sup>

Beethoven’s *Sonata Pathétique* is his eighth piano sonata. It was composed in the year 1799.<sup>8</sup> The work has three movements, as do most sonatas. This sonata, taken as a whole, displays a wide breadth of moods and expression. As Joshua D. Albrecht says, referring to the *Pathétique*, “The expressive power of the sonata was immediately recognized by its contemporaries and it has remained a perennial favorite.”<sup>9</sup>

Instead of immediately calling for the fast tempo which characterizes the first movement of the classical sonata, Beethoven begins the first movement of the *Pathétique* with a slow introduction. This introduction begins with a dramatic accented chord in the tonic key of C minor, played in both hands. This is followed by a sudden dynamic change from *forte* to *piano* and a short motif, which rises slightly in a scale like movement and then descends a whole step to rest on the leading tone. This is the basic motif of the introduction, which itself reappears in part

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<sup>4</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, 28.

<sup>5</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, 29.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Riezler, *Beethoven*, trans. G. D. H. Pidcock, unabridged republication (New York: Vienna House, [1938] 1972), 88-109, <https://archive.org/stream/beethoven0000riez#mode/2up>.

<sup>7</sup> Pugnetti, *Beethoven*, 73-75.

<sup>8</sup> Pugnetti, *Beethoven*, 75.

<sup>9</sup> Joshua D. Albrecht, “Expressive Meaning and the Empirical Analysis of Musical Gesture: The Progressive Exposure Method and the Second Movement of Beethoven’s Pathétique Sonata,” *Music Theory Online* 24, no. 3 (September 2018): 119, doi:10.30535/mto.24.3.1.

multiple times in the movement. Comparing this sonata with the previous sonata, no. 7, Kinderman points out that “in the introductory Grave of this sonata, like the Largo e mesto of op. 10 no. 3, Beethoven stresses the contrast between an aspiring, transparent lyricism and darker, dissonant chords in the bass. But in the *Pathétique* these aspects are merged at the outset; the sense of resistance implied in the upward melodic unfolding is pitted against the leaden weight of the C minor tonality, with its emphasis on diminished-seventh chords.”<sup>10</sup> After this introductory section, there is a change to a faster tempo, and the main theme of the movement commences. This main theme is reminiscent to the author of these program notes of the third movement of Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata*, because, although it is definitely different, it shares the same quality of rapid turmoil. The main theme of the *Pathétique*, though, feels somehow gentler, in part due to the slow beginning of the movement and the return of that slow section at later times in the piece. This is in contrast to the last movement of the *Moonlight Sonata*, which begins in haste.

The second movement of this sonata is incredibly beautiful and moving. Opening right up with the main theme, the accompaniment becomes more complex each time that theme is repeated. The theme itself is a melody which rises and falls in an almost singing fashion. The accompaniment at the beginning is made up of two voices. The bottom voice consists of single quarter and eighth notes, while the middle voice has faster moving sixteenth notes. The somewhat stormy middle section is less lyrical and more solemn, but just as beautiful. The repeated triplets in the accompaniment provide a feeling not only of movement, but also of continuity, as the triplets will remain in the accompaniment during the recapitulation with the

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<sup>10</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, 46.

return of the main theme. The movement ends with a softly played final cadence, which provides the perfect gentle ending to this second movement.

The third movement has a tempo of *allegro*, which contrasts with the slower second movement, as well as the slow introduction to the first. It appears to be in a rondo like form, with the main theme returning several times during the movement. This movement has a lovely and mournful quality to it. It almost feels like a lullaby at times, but then a section of turmoil arrives and unsettles that feeling. Just when the dissonance starts to feel oppressive, though, the lovely theme returns and relieves the dissonance, putting its consonance in place of the previous dissonance. At the end of the movement, there is a sudden moment of quiet, with the music becoming first *piano*, and then *pianissimo*. However, the music suddenly becomes *fortissimo* and ends with a dramatic descending run down to the final chord, which is marked as *fortississimo*, although, as the author Kenneth Drake points out, the piano of Beethoven's time was not able to reach the same level of "loudness" as the piano of our time can.<sup>11</sup>

Beethoven's *Romance for Violin and Orchestra No. 2 in F major, Op. 50* is a single movement piece featuring the violin. It was composed, along with the *Romance in G major*, in the year 1802, just a few years after the *Pathétique*.<sup>12</sup> In this piece, we get to hear how different the violin is from the piano. Right away at the beginning of this composition, we hear the soloist introduce the main theme, just as the main theme is introduced at the beginning of the second and third movements, and after the introduction to the first movement, in the *Sonata Pathétique* by the pianist. In this case, however, it is the singing violin that introduces the theme. The timbre

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<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Drake, *The Sonatas of Beethoven: as He Played and Taught Them*, ed. Frank S. Stillings (Cincinnati, OH: Music Teachers National Association, Inc., 1972), 7-9, <https://archive.org/stream/sonatasofbeethov0000drak#mode/2up>.

<sup>12</sup> Riezler, *Beethoven*, 294-95.

of the violin and orchestra in this composition is one of sustained pitches and singing qualities, different from the hammered sound of the piano.

Also quite unlike the piano sonata we just heard, this romance has elements of the classical concerto. The violin is clearly the leader, with the orchestra accompanying and developing what this leader plays. There are sections in which the orchestra plays while the violin is silent, and there are sections in which the violin gets to take the stage, with the violinist playing improvisatory like passages and playing rapidly up and down the instrument's register. Indeed, if this piece contained three movements, it might almost be indistinguishable from a violin concerto. Again, the author of this program feels a likeness to some other aspect of the classical repertoire. In this case, it is Mozart's violin concertos. At times, this piece has a feel akin, again in the author's opinion, to Mozart's lovely melodic second movements. At other times, it feels like the virtuosic solo sections of Mozart's first movements. However, it is indeed a romance. And, if you listen, you will almost certainly feel that this is a fitting title. The piece almost sounds like a lovely song. The violin almost sounds like it is singing, creating a beautiful melody with a touch of mournfulness, which only adds to the beauty of the piece.

In the mode of some more formal analysis (which this piece surely deserves), as this piece begins, the soloist immediately takes the lead with a solo section—the main theme of the piece. The main theme is exposited, beginning with the tonic note of F. After this short exposition is played by the soloist, the orchestra plays a short interlude of sorts, while the soloist rests silently. Although the soloist is taking a break, however, the strings are leading the orchestra, making the change not at all abrupt, but rather, making this change fit in perfectly with the music. When the soloist begins to play again, it is in order to take up a true solo part, in order to play rapid passages up and down the scale, in a very conjunct manner. This exchange between the

violin and the orchestra continues throughout the composition. At the end, the soloist almost gets to end the piece, but it is actually the orchestra that gets the last word, playing the final five notes.

And, with these final five notes, we conclude our short program tonight. Although Beethoven was born 250 years ago, we still enjoy his music, and we hope you have enjoyed listening to these compositions as well. We sincerely hope that Beethoven and his music, as represented by the *Sonata Pathétique* and the *Romance for Violin and Orchestra No. 2*, will inspire you and that you will gain a deeper appreciation of this great composer and his work, of which these two pieces are only a small sampling. For, while they are a small sampling, they give a great taste and, hopefully, leave you longing and searching for more.

## Bibliography

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