Beethoven’s Violin Concerto
Program Notes
November 11 - 13, 2011

Israel Nestyev headed the chapter of his biography of Prokofiev dealing with the composer’s life from 1945 to 1948, “The Difficult Years.” In January 1945, Prokofiev conducted the premiere of the Fifth Symphony with great success, and it seemed that, at age 53, he had many years of untroubled service to Soviet music in his future. Such was not to be the case. Only two weeks after the Fifth Symphony was introduced, Prokofiev was leaving a friend’s Moscow flat when he was suddenly stricken with a minor heart attack. He lost consciousness, fell down a flight of stairs, and was taken to the hospital, where his heart condition and a concussion were diagnosed. From that moment, his vigorous life style and busy social and musical schedules became things of the past. “Almost everything that made his life worth living was taken away,” wrote Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson in their study of the composer. “He was forbidden to smoke, to drink wine, to play chess, to drive a car, to walk fast or far, to play the piano in public, to conduct, to stay up late, to excite himself by much conversation, to travel more than a few miles.” He spent the rest of his life — he died in 1953, on the same day as Joseph Stalin — in and out of hospitals, constantly taking precautions against a relapse.

Late in the spring of 1945, Prokofiev went to the country retreat at Ivanova provided by the government for Russia’s professional composers, and began there his Sixth Symphony in glad response to the end of the Second World War. He suffered almost daily from blinding headaches, and was further troubled by bitter frustration over his semi-invalid state. “Nevertheless,” recalled the composer Dmitri Kabalevsky, who was also then residing at the Ivanova compound, “Prokofiev did not give up, did not lose his optimism, his joy of life, his courage and youthful cheerfulness, and a phenomenal capacity for concentration on his work.... His whole existence, all his energies, his entire mode of life were directed to one aim, of saving for his works all the strength he had left. At times it seemed as if he knew that his malady would defeat him in the end and was deliberately hurrying to get all his ideas down on paper before it was too late.” He guarded his health jealously, with one exception. While in the hospital and under orders not to do any work, he would post any trusted visitor at his door as guard and scribble a theme into the notebook he kept hidden under his pillow.

Prokofiev went back to his beloved Moscow in the fall, continuing work on the new Symphony. He was too ill, however, to participate in the bustling artistic and social life of the capital, and his condition was so severe that it even prevented him from attending the premiere of his opera *Betrothal in a Monastery* at the Kirov Theater and a production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Bolshoi. The commotion of Moscow proved too much for his fragile health. Early in 1946, he moved to Nikolina Gora, a country village outside the city, and it was there a year later that he completed the Sixth Symphony. He found strength enough to travel to Leningrad for the premiere, one of his few public appearances after the onset of his illness. Initial reaction to the new work was favorable, and most saw the music as a continuation of the epic grandeur of the Fifth Symphony. Only four months after the premiere, however, Prokofiev along with Shostakovich and other prominent Russian composers were vehemently condemned for writing what the government abstrusely called “formalistic” music. Positive critical evaluations of the Sixth Symphony

were hastily withdrawn, "corrected" judgments issued, and the work was assigned to temporary oblivion. The Russian public, however, continued to look upon Prokofiev as one of the country's greatest creative artists, and showed a steadfast interest in the man and in performances of his music. Officialdom was forced to back away from its denunciation to such a degree that Prokofiev was awarded the Stalin Prize in 1951, only three years after he had been told the most adventurous aspects of his music "must be liquidated."

Several stylistic streams flow into the Sixth Symphony. Israel V. Nestyev wrote, "It seems as though the two Prokofievs, old and new, were engaged in a struggle with each other, revealing in the course of this struggle both powerful, genuine lyricism and sudden outbursts of unrestrained expressionism." The composer offered a vague clue to the underlying meaning of juxtaposing such differing moods: "Yes, we are rejoicing in our magnificent victory [that ended the War], but thousands of us have been left with wounds that can't be healed — health ruined for life, dear ones gone forever. We must not forget this." (In the Symphony's jubilant finale, he said he brought back the sombre music of the opening movement to remind those who listened that thankfulness for the victory must be tempered by thoughts of the price paid to achieve it.) Nestyev felt that the Symphony showed Prokofiev's "desire to carry on the tradition of lofty intellectualism and profound tragedy that characterized Beethoven's later works." Indeed, Prokofiev thought at one time about dedicating the score to the earlier master, since fortune decreed that its opus number — 111 — was the same as that of Beethoven's last piano sonata, one of the Russian composer's favorite pieces.

Prokofiev had only a terse comment about the musical nature of his Sixth Symphony: "The first movement is agitated, at times lyrical, at times austere; the second movement, *Largo*, is brighter and more tuneful; the finale, rapid and in a major key, is close in character to my Fifth Symphony, save for reminiscences of the austere passages from the first movement." The main theme of the first movement is ambivalent in character, a curious blend of slow march and lugubrious lyricism. The second theme (Prokofiev's "austere" music), presented by the oboes in stark octaves, is more flowing and melancholy than the opening melody. One of Prokofiev's distinctive ticking, motoric constructions occupies the central portion of the movement. The recapitulation of the main theme, here given an extensive developmental treatment, culminates in searing unison blasts from the horns. The second theme is recalled by the solo horn before a coda based on the rocking rhythms of the main theme draws this darkly powerful music to a close.

The second movement is steeped in the same expansive atmosphere as is Prokofiev's magnificent ballet *Romeo and Juliet*. Its structure comprises several sections which are arranged in a symmetrical, arch form whose central portions are marked by a strident passage for full orchestra (note the entry of the woodblock) followed by a bittersweet tune for the horn choir. The finale is based on two themes: the first is a raucous ditty strutted out by the violins; the second, initiated by the solo bassoon above a skeletal string accompaniment, is filled with long-sustained notes and quick leaps. These two moods — the bumptious and the lyrical — are juxtaposed and combined for most of the remainder of the movement. In the closing pages, the oboes recall the "austere" theme of the first movement to inject a moment of thoughtful remembrance into the joyous finale. The tempo freshens, the finale's theme returns, and the Sixth Symphony is brought to a rousing conclusion by a brief, whirling coda.

* * *

In 1794, two years after he moved to Vienna from Bonn, Beethoven attended a concert by an Austrian violin prodigy named Franz Clement. To Clement, then fourteen years old, the young composer wrote, "Dear Clement! Go forth on the way which you hitherto have travelled so beautifully, so magnificently. Nature and art vie with each other in making you a great artist. Follow both and, never fear, you will reach the great — the greatest — goal possible to an artist here on earth. All wishes for your happiness, dear youth; and return soon, that I may again hear your dear, magnificent playing. Entirely your friend, L. v. Beethoven."

Beethoven's wish was soon granted. Clement was appointed conductor and concertmaster of the Theater-an-der-Wien in Vienna in 1802, where he was closely associated with Beethoven in the production of *Fidelio* and as the conductor of the premiere of the Third Symphony. Clement, highly esteemed by his contemporaries as a violinist, musician and composer for his instrument, was also noted for his fabulous memory. One tale relates that Clement, after participating in a single performance of Haydn's *The Creation*, wrote out a score for the entire work from memory, which he then submitted to the composer for corrections. So few were needed that the incredulous Haydn was convinced Clement had copied the score, though that was quite impossible since it had not yet been published. Of Clement's style of violin performance, Boris Schwarz wrote, "His playing was graceful rather than vigorous, his tone small but expressive, and he possessed unfailing assurance and purity in high positions and exposed entrances." It was for Clement that Beethoven produced his only Violin Concerto.

The Violin Concerto was written during the most productive period of Beethoven's life: the Fourth and Fifth Symphonies, the Fourth Piano Concerto, the *Coriolan* Overture, the three Op. 59 Quartets, and numerous other works clustered within a few months of its composition in 1806. So busy was Beethoven that he was able to finish the Concerto only on the day of the concert, making orchestral rehearsals for the premiere impossible. Clement, who had probably been following the progress of the work as Beethoven was composing it, must have carried the day, however, because the concert proved to be at least a partial success. Johann Nepomuk Möser provided a review of the performance that was typical of many notices Beethoven received during his lifetime: "The judgment of connoisseurs about Beethoven's music is unanimous; they acknowledge some beautiful passages in it, but they admit that the work frequently seems to lack coherence and that the endless repetitions of some trite passages tend to be tiring.... There is some fear that Beethoven, by persisting in this, will do serious harm to himself and to the public.... On the whole," Möser added, "the audience liked this concerto and Clement's fantasias very much." The "fantasias" put on display by Clement that evening were his own works, and probably accounted in no small part for the audience's good response to the concert. Clement was apparently as adept a showman as he was a virtuoso, and he played these pieces, which he programmed between the first two movements of Beethoven's Concerto, with the instrument turned upside-down, virtually assuring a success. The Viennese public knew a master when they saw one.

Such topsy-turvy histrionics were an accepted (and expected) facet of early 19th-century concert life, and Clement seems, in sum, to have been a fine musician. Certainly the Concerto that he inspired from Beethoven, one of that master's most endearingly beautiful compositions, is unsurpassed by any other in

the entire literature for the violin. Of the seemingly contradictory qualities of grandeur and intimacy in this work, Sir Donald Tovey commented, “Beethoven’s Violin Concerto is gigantic, one of the most spacious concertos ever written, but so quiet that when it was a novelty most people complained quite as much of its insignificance as of its length. All its most famous strokes of genius are not only mysteriously quiet, but mysterious in radiantly happy surroundings. The whole gigantic scheme is serene.” It is not surprising that such an introspective work failed to gain immediate popularity in the age of flamboyant virtuosity that was the 19th-century concert circuit. The Concerto enjoyed very few hearings until another child prodigy, Joseph Joachim, at the age of thirteen, took it up in 1844, and included it in his programs all over Europe. To give it yet another lease on life, Muzio Clementi, the piano virtuoso and music publisher, convinced Beethoven to arrange the score as a Concerto for Piano and Orchestra. The most interesting aspect of this transcription was Beethoven’s inclusion of a kettledrum accompaniment for one of the cadenzas.

The sweet, lyrical nature and wide compass of the solo part of this Concerto were influenced by the polished style of Clement’s playing. The five soft taps on the timpani that open the work not only serve to establish the key and the rhythm of the movement, but also recur as a unifying phrase throughout. The main theme is introduced in the second measure by the woodwinds in a chorale-like setting that emphasizes the smooth contours of this lovely melody. A transition, with rising scales in the winds and quicker rhythmic figures in the strings, accumulates a certain intensity before it quiets to usher in the second theme, another legato strophe entrusted to the woodwinds. Immediately after its entry, the violin soars into its highest register, where it presents a touching obbligato spun around the main thematic material of the orchestral introduction. The development section is largely given over to wide-ranging figurations for the soloist. The recapitulation begins with a recall of the five drum strokes of the opening, here spread across the full orchestra sounding in unison. The themes from the exposition return with more elaborate embellishment from the soloist. Following the cadenza, the second theme serves as a coda.

“In the slow movement,” wrote Tovey, “we have one of the cases of sublime inaction achieved by Beethoven and by no one else except in certain lyrics and masterpieces of choral music.” The comparison to vocal music is certainly appropriate for this hymnal movement. Though it is technically a theme and variations, it seems less like some earth-bound form than it does a floating constellation of ethereal tones, polished and hung against a velvet night sky with infinite care and flawless precision. Music of such limited dramatic contrast cannot be brought to a satisfactory conclusion in this context, and so here it leads without pause into the vivacious rondo-finale. The solo violin trots out the principal theme before it is taken over by the full orchestra. This jaunty tune returns three times, the last appearance forming a large coda. The intervening episodes allow for a flashing virtuoso display from the soloist and even a touch of melancholy in one of the few minor-mode sections of the Concerto.

To learn more about the music, please attend the Pre-Concert Conversations one hour before each Masterworks concert.

©2011 Dr. Richard E. Rodda