

Although Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven seem as though they come from very different points in history, their lives overlapped in many ways. Just as Mozart was a child prodigy, so was Beethoven's musical talent obvious early in life. Indeed, in an effort to capitalize on this association, Beethoven's father claimed that he was six, rather than seven, on the posters for his first public piano performance in 1779. Shortly thereafter, Beethoven started working with the court organist Christian Gottlob Neefe, who also began teaching him composition. By 1783 the soon-to-be famous composer—and newly minted teenager—had produced his first published work, a set of keyboard variations, and his first three piano sonatas nicknamed “Elector” after their dedication to the Elector Maximilian Frederick. By 1784, Beethoven was a paid employee of the court in his own right. Recognizing his student's formidable skills, Neefe encouraged Beethoven to travel to Vienna and study with Mozart, and in 1787, only two years after Mozart penned his Piano Concerto No. 20 in D Minor, Beethoven spent two weeks in the city. It is not clear whether Mozart and Beethoven actually met. Mozart's friend Anton Stadler claimed that they did not, but Beethoven's contemporary biographers report otherwise. According to Ferdinand von Ries, Beethoven did receive “some instruction” from Mozart, but Mozart “never played for him.” Carl Czerny reported that Beethoven had indeed heard Mozart perform: he “had a fine but choppy way of playing, no legato.”

Whether or not Mozart and Beethoven actually met, Beethoven eventually received the longed-for Viennese tutelage. Upon moving to Vienna a year after Mozart's death, Beethoven studied with Franz Joseph Haydn for a year. (The busy Haydn, sandwiching Beethoven in between trips to London, was apparently less than conscientious about his lessons, however, and their relationship remained distant up until Haydn's death in 1809.) While his musical beginnings are deeply rooted in the classical era, the trajectory of Beethoven's career exemplifies the transition from classical to romantic ideals—a shift echoed in the circumstances of each composer's death. In contrast to Mozart's ignominious end in a pauper's grave, destitute and already somewhat forgotten, Beethoven's funeral drew literally thousands of mourners. The notion that came to

define the romantic period—the composer as a divinely inspired artist, rather than a servant bound to commissions and institutional posts—had truly come into its own.

### **Beethoven: *Coriolan* Overture**

While Beethoven composed only one opera, *Fidelio*, during his career, he did write music for ballet (*Ritterballet* and *The Creatures of Prometheus*) and for several plays largely unknown today (*Egmont*, *Coriolan*, *King Stephen*, *The Ruins of Athens*, *Tarpeja*, and *Leonore Prohaska*). First performed in Vienna on November 24, 1802, *Coriolan* was written by Court Secretary Heinrich Joseph von Collin, who was striving to merge German romanticism and classic tragedy. Inspired after attending its premiere, which featured a score cobbled together from Mozart's *Idomeneo*—Beethoven set to work composing new incidental music for *Coriolan*. In Collin's play, the general Coriolan finds himself banished from Rome despite years of public service, and in an effort to get revenge, leads an opposing army against his native city. When the Romans send his own mother and wife to persuade him to withdraw, however, he chooses suicide instead. Richard Wagner described the protagonist in an essay about Beethoven's music as a “man of force untamable, unfitted for a hypocrite's humility.”

The *Coriolan* Overture premiered in early 1807 as part of a subscription concert that is nearly impossible to imagine attending today—the program also included Beethoven's first four symphonies, his Fourth Piano Concerto, and excerpts from his opera *Leonore* (an early version of what would evolve into *Fidelio*). In April 1807, Collin's play was revived – perhaps simply for the purpose of performing Beethoven's music in its rightful place. The *Coriolan* Overture was popular from the start. In 1808, the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* of Leipzig described the work as “Beethoven's most recent grand overture to Collin's *Coriolan* (in C minor), full of inner, powerful life, original harmonic twists and turns, and with a truly tragic effect (but difficult to perform well).” Four years later, the critic E.T.A. Hoffmann wrote that while he felt the work overwhelmed the “predominantly reflective poetry” of the play, “apart from those expectations that will be aroused only in a few connoisseurs who truly comprehend Beethoven's music, the

composition is completely suited to awaken the specific idea that a great, tragic event will be the content of the play that follows.... No common tragedy can be performed after this overture, but specifically an elevated one, in which heroes rise up and are defeated.”

### **Mozart: Piano Concerto No. 20 in D Minor, K. 466**

When it came to the piano concerto, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart surpassed all of his contemporaries. Two of his most popular contributions to the genre—the Concerto No. 20 in D Minor, K. 466, and the Concerto No. 21 in C Major, K. 467—were composed during a two-month period early in 1785. Mozart’s father Leopold described the first performance of the D Minor Concerto in a letter to his daughter on February 14, 1785, in which he wrote of “an excellent clavier concerto [K. 466] by Wolfgang . . .When we arrived the copyist was still copying it out, which left your brother no time to play over the rondo even once, because he had to revise the copies.” The D Minor Concerto was especially popular with composers in the romantic period; Beethoven wrote the cadenzas most frequently played today, and Johannes Brahms—who actually owned the manuscript for several years—also composed a set. (Unless the solo part was being played by someone other than himself, Mozart rarely notated his cadenzas, preferring to improvise his own on the spot).

What drew subsequent generations of composers to K. 466 in particular? For one thing, the concerto was the first Mozart had composed in a minor key—and not just any minor key, but that of D minor, which he later used to great effect in the Requiem and *Don Giovanni*. Mozart also challenges convention over the course of the work. In the first movement, the aggressive opening melody is delegated to the orchestra while the piano enters with gentle, more lyrical material. Mozart maintains this separation between solo and orchestral material throughout the movement while simultaneously creating the impression of musical homogeneity throughout. Elegant simplicity permeates the second movement, although Mozart himself may have used melodic repeats as an opportunity to improvise decoration. Most of the closing Rondo is in the minor mode,

giving it a dramatic intensity that contrasts sharply with the playful and lighthearted finales typical of the period Mozart wrenches the piece into the major mode after the piano's final cadenza, satisfying the eighteenth century predilection for a happy ending, but the music's restless urgency makes a lasting impression.

### **Fantasia in C minor for Piano, Chorus, & Orchestra, op.80 (Choral Fantasy)**

Although the Choral Fantasy is most often linked with the Ninth Symphony, it was Beethoven's Mass in C Major—composed in 1807 for the name day of Prince Nicholas II Esterházy's wife—that provided the initial impetus for its composition. Beethoven had been trying for some time to win the Prince's favor, and hoped that the Mass would accomplish the task. Unfortunately, his composition was not well-received. The prince thought the mass was "utterly ridiculous and detestable," and at the reception following the premiere, offended Beethoven deeply by asking, "My dear Beethoven, what is it you have done here?" Apparently undeterred by the Prince's reaction, Beethoven began negotiating to have the Mass published, and also decided to perform it on December 22, 1808, on a public program that also featured the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies and the Fourth Piano Concerto. The Choral Fantasy—a work that begins with piano and then brings in the orchestra, vocal soloists, and finally the chorus—was composed as the event's grand finale. The piece didn't provide quite the climactic ending for which Beethoven had hoped, however; the orchestra apparently got confused, and Beethoven, who was conducting from the piano, had to stop and restart the piece.

Today, we hear the Choral Fantasy as a precursor to the Ninth Symphony—and indeed, there are many parallels. Like the Ninth, the piece begins with an improvisatory-like section; in the Choral Fantasy, in fact, Beethoven actually did improvise the opening on piano, writing it down only when the work was published. (Cues in the soloist part suggest that Beethoven intended the Choral Fantasy to be conducted from the piano, although it is not always performed that way today). Also like the last movement of the Ninth Symphony, the orchestra part consists of an imaginative set of variations. Finally,

the soloists and chorus enter with a melody and text similar in spirit and sound to the famous “Ode to Joy” that concludes Beethoven’s final symphony.

### **Beethoven: Symphony No. 1**

Beethoven's First Symphony was composed towards the end of his “classical” period, the span of time during which he wrote music more aesthetically akin to that of Mozart or Haydn. From the opening chord of the first movement, however—which resolves to an unexpected key—it is hard to imagine that this work was composed in 1800, only five years after Haydn's final Symphony #104, the “London,” which Music of the Baroque performed last year. Although Beethoven had written a fair amount of music by the mid 1790s, he had yet to compose any of his symphonies or string quartets—according to some, because those were the genres in which his teacher Haydn had excelled. Around 1800, however, at the age of nearly 30, Beethoven earned a place next to Mozart and Haydn with his first set of string quartets (the six of Op. 18) and his Symphony No. 1. As a Viennese critic declared in 1806, Beethoven's first symphony is "a masterpiece that does equal honor to his inventiveness and his musical knowledge. Being just as beautiful and distinguished in its design as its execution, there prevails in it such a clear and lucid order, such a flow of the most pleasant melodies, and such a rich, but at the same time never wearisome, instrumentation that this symphony can justly be placed next to Mozart's and Haydn's."

Right from the Adagio opening of the first movement, Beethoven merges Haydnesque musical humor with his own unique intensity. A contemporary critic wrote of the initial chords in the “wrong” key, "No one will censure an ingenious artist like Beethoven for such liberties and peculiarities, but such a beginning is not suitable for the opening of a grand concert in a spacious opera house." After the elegant Andante cantabile con moto comes the traditional Menuetto, but as the tempo marking (*Allegro molto e vivace*) and frenetic energy indicate, the movement is in actuality the scherzo that the composer favored over the older dance form. The final movement opens with a delightful joke: after a unison note in the full orchestra, the first violins slowly work their way up a scale,

hesitating almost as if encountering it for the first time before erupting into the lively melody and energetic tempo that propel the work toward its exhilarating conclusion.