

Baroque Elements and Specific Orchestral Functions in Beethoven's Triple Concerto Op. 56

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Abstract

This paper discusses the uniqueness, in style and genre, of Beethoven's use of the orchestra in the Triple Concerto. The orchestration of the Triple Concerto is characterised by its reliance on tutti, the limited role of orchestral soloists (unlike in Beethoven's other concertos), and infrequent alternations between instrumental groups. This is closely linked to an element of the Baroque (indicated through the concept of the concerto, which derives from the Italian verb *concertare* "to agree", the triple concerto model, and the choice of soloists) in the Classical concerto (indicated through the use of sonata form, the manner of presenting the material, and the instrumentation). The orchestra acts as a genre-creating factor as a result of the undisclosed competition between the Baroque concerto grosso, the Classical solo concerto, and chamber trio models. The orchestra becomes a form-defining factor thanks to its use to mark the boundaries between the sections of sonata form, here smaller than is usual in the Classical sonata, a fact which occasionally makes the succession of episodes similar to ritornello form; furthermore, it is the orchestra that is significantly associated with a surprising synergy of Classical and Baroque elements to form a hybrid model of the concerto.

Historically, Ludwig van Beethoven's Triple Concerto for Piano, Violin and Cello with Orchestra Op. 56 lies beyond the mainstream of research and "remains Beethoven's least-known concerto" (Dean 1971: 323). Although these words were written 50 years ago, they are as relevant as ever. This is surprising, given that the Concerto was written during the years of Beethoven's particular creative activity around 1803–1804. The Concerto is thus a contemporary of such masterpieces as the "Eroica" symphony (it is worth mentioning Michael Thomas Roeder's statement that "Beethoven interrupted work on the most radical of that period's works, the 'Eroica' symphony, to concentrate on the Triple Concerto" (Roeder 1994: 195)), the Fourth Piano Concerto, the Razumovsky Quartets Op. 59, the Kreutzer Sonata for violin and piano, and the opera *Fidelio*. The exact dates of the Triple Concerto's composition are unknown. According to Levy Hammer, "[t]he first reference to a concerto for piano, violin, and cello is in the letter of 14th October 1803 from the composer's brother Carl, acting as a secretary, to the publisher Breitkopf & Härtel. It is not known whether Carl refers to a discarded concerto in D for the same instruments or to the surviving Opus 56" (Hammer 2006: 2). The same information is provided by Michael Steinberg (Steinberg 1998: 76). Hammer suggests that the famous performance by Archduke Rudolph (piano), Ferdinand Seidler (violin), and Anton Kraft (cello), which took place in 1808, was not the first performance of the

Concerto. He writes that the Concerto's première took place in the palace of Prince Lobkowitz in 1804, and that the composer was at the piano (Hammer 2006: 4).

The first obstacle to understanding the significance of the Concerto is its relatively few performances. Hammer emphasizes that in the 2005–2006 season, among 677 scheduled performances of works by Beethoven in the USA, only 7 of these were of the Triple Concerto (compared to 60 scheduled performances of the Fifth Piano Concerto and 55 of the Violin Concerto) (Hammer 2006: 5). It is clear that this is due not only to some of the work's musical qualities, but also to the difficulty of getting three first-class soloists on one stage.

There are probably two more reasons for the relatively scant attention paid to the Triple Concerto (which "remains the least popular and probably the most enigmatic of all Beethoven's concertos"; Kirillina 2007: 325) by researchers and listeners. It is very common to think about the artistic qualities of Concerto as mediocre compared to the composer's other works in the concerto genre. Leon Plantinga considers the Concerto "overly high minded" (Plantinga 1999: 161); it seems to him that the composer's "ideas never quite manage to come clear" (Plantinga 1999: 166). Antony Hopkins suggests that the Triple Concerto is "a lowering of his [Beethoven's] high standards" (Hopkins 1996: 87). Abraham Veinus states that the Triple Concerto is one of