

GENIUS OF BEETHOVEN

Maggie Ayotte *Human Skin* (2019)

Human Skin is inspired by the feeling of touch, and the information transmitted through the skin. The piece begins with an oboe solo in a section called “Velvet Hand.” The oboe is carried by a warm accompaniment of strings, but interspersed with different acts. These interruptions attempt to charm the sound of the oboe and appropriate its melody with tender, blunt or sneaky ingenuity. After a brief lamentation from the oboe, the orchestra settles into a malicious character. Following a return to calm, and another oboe intervention ensconced by a dense chord, a second section arrives, this one named “The Flesh.” This section begins with an insistent rhythm followed by a new theme representing desire brought on by the unchaste clarinets. These rapidly lead the entire orchestra. The final section, “Hair Follicle,” is made up of long glissandi as well as a final complaint from the oboe.

Maggie Ayotte

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) *Violin Concerto* (1806); *Symphony No.8 in F major* (1811-12)

Both of the works by Beethoven in tonight’s concert are from the second and most productive period of the composer’s life, from 1803 to 1814. By any artistic standard, it was a time of astounding creativity across a range of musical genres—symphonies, concertos, overtures, chamber and solo instrumental music, choral music and opera. This degree of productivity and its consistent quality and originality are all the more amazing when we recall that these are the same years in which Beethoven slid inexorably into profound deafness. A man of music utterly deprived of sound. We know he considered suicide. We know from his Fifth Symphony (1804-08) among other works, that he found the courage to confront his disability. And we can hear in the prevailing good nature, jocundity, even humour, that characterize both of tonight’s works, the extent to which he found the will to embrace life fully once more.

***Violin Concerto* (1806)**

For us, Beethoven’s reputation as a composer rests almost as much on his concertos as on his symphonies. There are seven of them written over a period of 14 years, the five for piano, a triple concerto for violin, cello and piano, and this solo violin concerto. It was almost his last concerto work; only the ‘Emperor,’ Piano Concerto No.5 (1809), came later.

The composition of the *Violin Concerto* is closely tied to one individual, a friend of Beethoven, the notable violin virtuoso, Franz Clement. Ten years younger than Beethoven, Clement had been a child prodigy, had toured extensively in Europe, and now was an orchestra leader, conductor and composer, in addition to his solo career. It is Clement who commissioned Beethoven, some time in 1805-6, to compose a new show-piece for his skills.

Interestingly, some of the stylistic qualities of Beethoven’s concerto may be the indirect result of Clement’s influence—both as a performer and as a composer. At a subscription concert in Vienna in April 1805, Clement had led the orchestra in the public premiere of Beethoven’s *Symphony No.3 ‘Eroica,’* and at the same concert had premiered his own violin concerto. Thus Beethoven was familiar not only with Clement’s playing style but also that of his composing, both of which tend more toward refinement and delicacy rather than dazzling virtuosic display.

Beethoven appears to have completed his concerto swiftly, in a three week period, yet it seems it was so close to the concert deadline that Clement had little or no time to rehearse, and the word is that he essentially sight-read the solo part in the performance. It doesn't seem possible to most of us. However, as with many musical prodigies, there are contemporary reports of Clement's extraordinary technical abilities, for example, playing a sonata on one string with the violin upside-down, but especially of his musical memory and sightreading ability. If true, these reports do give some credence for the "legend."

The Violin Concerto is a secure fixture in the concerto repertoire today, and yet, although warmly applauded, it was not altogether embraced after its premiere or even for several decades after. "The Kettledrum Concerto" some detractors scathingly named it, and you will see the origin of that name at the start of and throughout the first movement. It was not until 1844, at a performance in London by another prodigy, twelve-year-old Joseph Joachim, with Mendelssohn conducting, that the concerto's appeal became more firmly established. Thereafter, it became a staple in Joachim's repertoire as it has with other violinists to the present day.

Symphony No.8 in F major (1811-12)

Beethoven himself referred to this symphony as "my little symphony in F." In this way he clearly distinguished it from its immediate predecessor, the powerful, rhythmically charged Symphony No.7, the one that Wagner later characterized as "the apotheosis of the dance" (performed by the KSO in March 2018). His label for this symphony also distinguishes it from his other symphony in F, the much longer five movement Symphony No.6 "Pastoral" (KSO performance February 2017), from which it is indeed quite different, and not just in length. He had begun work on it over a year earlier, but brought it to completion in the summer of 1812 while out of Vienna on holiday.

Well, it was part holiday and part unpleasant family business. The holiday took him to the spa at Teplitz where he finally got to meet the famous German poet Goethe whom Beethoven admired as a fellow democratic voice. Goethe, it turns out, was more impressed with Beethoven than the composer was with the sixty-three-year-old poet who seemed to him to be now a spent force (and, truth be told, Goethe did find Beethoven somewhat intense and boorish). As for the family matter, that required him to intervene in his younger brother Johann's love life. Ludwig thoroughly disapproved of Johann's involvement with his housekeeper, on both social and moral grounds. Interfering didn't work, however—they got married later in 1812.

These distractions notwithstanding, Beethoven completed his Symphony No. 8, his shortest symphony except for No.1. Its good nature, lyrical enthusiasm and humour seem quite distant from the messy details of life. As your ear will tell you, its four movements are all built from the traditional classical forms of which Beethoven was now a mature master: the first and last movements are fast, the second somewhat slower, and the third an old style minuet and trio. But in all this be prepared for a few musical distractions.

The second movement (the shortest in any of Beethoven's symphonies) is of interest in connection with the chronometer, forerunner of the metronome, a device which had only recently been invented (or improved) by a friend of Beethoven's, Johann Maelzel. Among other things, Maelzel made ear trumpets for Beethoven's deafness that worked well—for a while. Some think this second movement may be a public tribute to this useful new device; others think Beethoven may be making fun of its mechanical

rigidity. A few years later the two of them had a falling out over another musical matter; Maelzel left for America, but drowned en route.

Beethoven arranged (and conducted) the premiere of his Eighth Symphony in Vienna in February 1814. He programmed the masterful new No.8 between, on one side, the already acclaimed Symphony No. 7 which he had premiered two months earlier, and, on the other, another new work, the politically charged Wellington's Victory (The Battle of Vittoria). The patriotic audience revelled in the latter, demanded an encore of the famous second movement of Symphony No. 7, but were pretty much non-committal about the new Symphony No. 8. Deafness rendered Beethoven's conducting rather unreliable, and on this occasion his programming instincts clearly were not good. On tonight's programme, however, we hear this symphony matched with a work with which it is entirely compatible in tone and spirit.