LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58
Born: December 16, 1770, in Bonn
Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna
Work composed: 1806
World premiere: December 22, 1808; Beethoven as soloist and conducting from the piano

Between 1798 and 1808, Beethoven completed five concertos for piano and orchestra. The last of these, known as the “Emperor” Concerto, is the most famous. But if the Fifth is an emperor, the Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major is the queen among Beethoven’s concertos. Its opening, while not so demonstrative as that of the Fifth, is no less regal in character, and its music as a whole combines grace and depth of feeling befitting a sovereign.

Beethoven completed this concerto in 1806, a year of intense productivity. (Among his other works from this annus mirabilis are the Fourth Symphony, the Violin Concerto, the three “Razoumovsky” Quartets, the third version of the Leonore Overture and revisions to the opera Fidelio.) The composer played the solo part in the work’s first public performance, which took place at a concert of his music given at the Theater-an-der-Wien in Vienna on December 22, 1808. That event — whose program included also the premieres of the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies; the concert aria Ah, perfido!; portions of the Mass in C; and the initial performance of the Choral Fantasia, Opus 80, for solo piano, orchestra and chorus — proved a famous disaster. The under-rehearsed orchestra was no match for the long and almost entirely new program, nor for Beethoven’s idiosyncratic and temperamental conducting. Frigid temperatures in the unheated theater made matters even more difficult. Contemporary notices of the concert describe a general debacle but make no specific mention of the G major Piano Concerto. It cannot have scored any great success, for it was not performed again during Beethoven’s lifetime.

The work deserved a better fate. Although not as sweeping or heroic in tone as either the composer’s Third or Fifth Piano Concertos, the Fourth is every bit as beautiful and in several respects more original. Its unorthodox opening measures and the casting of the slow movement as a dramatic dialogue were virtually unprecedented when the work appeared, and the extensions of its thematic material are accomplished with an ingenuity characteristic of Beethoven’s best music.

Instead of an orchestral opening, which until this work had been the customary starting point for any concerto, Beethoven begins with a brief meditation by the piano alone. Its statement, growing out of a series of repeated notes, is answered at once by the orchestra. Only upon the conclusion of that phrase does Beethoven launch into the full and proper exposition of his thematic material. The first subject is built on the repeated-note figure of the soloist’s opening soliloquy, but this motif yields more than just the movement’s principal theme. It provides its own counterpoint, echoing in close imitation among different instruments; it is woven against the second theme, a broad, minor-key melody given out by the violins; and it forms a bridge to the re-entry of the piano.

The close weaving of piano and orchestral music that marks the first movement gives way in the second to a kind of dramatic encounter unique in Beethoven’s output. In each of his other concertos, the middle movement offers hymn-like music of deep serenity. Here the piano responds lyrically to the stern statements of the orchestra, their exchanges growing increasingly
urgent and eloquent. The Romantic tradition linking this music with the mythic scene of Orpheus taming the Furies of the underworld with his song seems entirely apt. A feeling of classical tragedy prevails, and the movement ends on a note of sorrowful resignation.

The concluding rondo finds Beethoven’s spirits restored. This is the most elegant of the composer’s concerto finales, for although quite exuberant, it does not convey the earthy humor that generally marks his closing movements. Rather, its delights are of a more refined sort and often surprise us, as when the violas unexpectedly emerge from the orchestral texture to sing a lyrical melody based on the recurring principal theme.

**What to Listen For**
The concerto’s unusual opening, a phrase for the piano alone, establishes a motif that pervades the first movement. A dramatic dialogue between orchestra and piano forms the second movement. The finale begins with a rhythmic tattoo that recurs through much of the movement.

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