Franz Clement was a talented violinist contemporary of Beethoven. He was a wonder child, performing and directing at the age of 9. Uncontested fame of a virtuoso, together with the position of the Director of the Orchestra at the Vienna Theatre, gave him a rare privilege of being the person, who organised yearly benefit concertos, during which he could present the music of his choice.

In November 1806 Clement decided to organize one of these benefit concertos, called “academies”, during Christmas time. He chose the orchestra, made up of his colleagues and friends, and the programme, consisting of the works of Mozart, Cherubini and Haendel.

But something was still missing; something that would turn that concert into a show, which could thrill the audience in the approaching festive season.

Thus Clement asked his friend Beethoven to compose for him a violin concerto. Beethoven agreed. There wasn’t much time left. The work began at the end of November and progressed with ease.

It was finalised several hours before the start of the academy.

Officially it is claimed that Clement, famous for his remarkable memory and outstanding technique, just looked through the whole composition and that was enough for him to play it flawlessly during the performance. Well, Clement paid much attention to his image, but the truth is banal. Clement had often visited Beethoven when the work was in progress, looked at and compared different

fragments of the composition.

The first two parts are lyrical and melodious, and not so much technique. The opposite is true in regard to the third part – it requires high capability from the violinist. The possibility of playing it right after just one look at the notes doesn't seem plausible.

Beethoven - Violin Concerto in D Major

The premiere took place on 23 December 1806. Clement had confirmed with Beethoven that after the first part of the concerto *intermission* would be played, and only after that the remaining part would be performed. It may seem odd to us these days, but it was a normal practice at that time.

Intermission was meant to create an element of marvel with its virtuosity. Clement performed his own fantasy, during which he did violin equilibristics, moving the bow in different directions, turning the instrument while playing. It was supposed to electrify the audience and it did.

After the concerto he received standing ovation.

The reaction of the critics was the opposite. They used words such as “tiring” and “trivial” to describe the concerto.

Stereotypical statement found in many popular music guides, claiming that the concerto has been one of the standard points in the worldwide repertoire, is incorrect. Anton Schindler, Beethoven’s first biographer, wrote directly that the Violin Concerto had been received without acclaim - „*ohne allen Beifall*”, and the next performance in the following year, although a little more successful, it nevertheless didn’t overcome prejudices towards the piece.

Some time later Beethoven extensively revised the composition and modified it, creating the

final version published in 1808.

From today's perspective talking about reservations towards this masterpiece of the classical music seems outlandish, but for the contemporary audience the music was too complicated and musicians were discouraged by the technical difficulties. It was even claimed that the concert was unplayable.

The breakthrough in its perception occurred only after the composer's death in May 1844, when **Joseph Joachim**, a three-year-old child prodigy, who enchanted the audience playing the Concerto with the members of the London Philharmonic directed by **Felix Mendelssohn**. Later, as an accomplished artist Joachim composed excellent, stylish cadenzas for the Concerto. They are still very appreciated and often played.
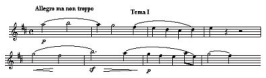


Joseph Joachim

Contrary to the claims about the Concerto being too difficult to perform, at present Ludwig van Beethoven's Violin Concerto in D major Op. 61 is not thought to require virtuosity. The role of the violin is rather *primus inter pares*, participating in the entire symphonic discourse, equally with other instruments.

An important element, which brings together different and seemingly unrelated themes, is not the violin, but rather the timpani. They open the composition and their hidden, inconspicuous motive is pulsing under the surface until the end.
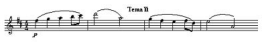
Graceful andante, allowing the performer to improvise, is not an antagonistic confrontation in the brilliant style, but a lyrical conversation, an attentive dialogue of the soloist and the orchestra.

The first part **Allegro ma non troppo** is played by the orchestra with its main theme then continued by the soloist.
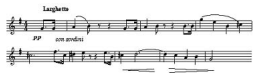


Part I Theme I

After a while the violin plays the next theme:



Part I Theme II

Part II **Larghetto** is based on a very lyrical and melodious theme, which is believed by some experts to have come from Russia:



Part II

Part III **Rondo** begins suddenly and harshly with a theme taken up by the soloist. The changeover from Part II passes without a pause.



Part III

Beethoven did not write a cadence, allowing the performer to improvise and show off technique according to ability. He wasn't a violinist himself and he relied on consultations with Clement, while composing the concerto.

Cadenzas were written by many famous violinists, beside Joachim. The one which is played most often is the cadenza created by **Fritz Kreisler**. A modern-sounding cadenza was written by a composer Alfred Schnittke. This controversial twentieth century styled cadenza was played by a virtuoso Gidon Kremer.

An orchestra, which is typical for Beethoven, involves strings, two oboes, clarinets, bassoons, trumpets, English horns.

Beethoven's Violin Concert is a classical masterpiece in two ways. It is the purest form of 'classical style' belonging to the specific period in the history of Western European music, the

era of so-called Vienna Classicism. From a wider perspective it is also a classical, harmonious and perfectly balanced masterpiece, independently of the particular style of its time.



Ludvig van Beethoven

A form in a violin concert is genuinely ‘symphonic’ in scope. Inconspicuous motive of a sound repeated four times, arising in the beginning in timpani, then returns repeatedly and goes on to be an important form generic element.

Despite clear – and innovative at the time - tendency to symphonication of the genre, the primary role of the solo instrument is preserved. The smoothness of violin part in a creation of a composer, who was a pianist, as well as the proportion of sound between naturally quieter violin and the orchestra, are both striking.

Clement’s excellent technical ability, which Beethoven was well aware of, influenced the shape of the concerto – among others the bold use of playing in high positions, which was said to be his speciality.

Clement had a vibrant temperament and a bent for freedom and a gypsy lifestyle, but Beethoven genuinely liked him, as a jokingly worded note on the script shows: „*Concerto par Clemenza pour Clement, direttore al theatro a Vienna*
". However, he did not include it in the print, dedicating the Violin Concerto instead to Stephan von Breuning, one of his closest and most loyal friends.

Beethoven's Violin Concerto in D major has been recorded numerous times in the last few decades with the participation of the greatest masters of violin: Stern, Perlman, Menuhin, Mutter, Ojstrach, Kremer and Kyung Wha Chung.

The Concerto stands high in my ranking of instrumental compositions.

In the music box Jascha Heifetz and Yehudi Menuhin.