In his book *The Unconscious Beethoven*, published in 1927 to mark the 100th anniversary of the composer’s death, the English critic Ernest Newman wrote that the justification for a centenary only matters if the mere fact of its subject’s survival is held in many quarters to be the reason for revisiting their hits and turning a blind eye to their misses.

Since Newman’s day, Beethoven scholars have gone into overdrive. Now we’ve reached Beethoven 2020 knowing more about him, it seems invidious to divide his works into the good and the bad, even the downright unlovely. His greatest towers of sound, their beauty, strength, expressions of tragic heroism and powerful intimations of freedom, are part of a broadly defined humanist endeavour in which the so-called ‘minor works’ also have a place. But there’s a snag. A lot of the music, including lesser-known works, is now on YouTube and played every year the world over. What can be so special about an anniversary? Has everything been played, said, stored away? Is it all long since safely behind glass?

Today’s reconstruction by the Philharmonia of a truly extraordinary evening in Beethoven’s life is an opportunity to find out.

On a cold Thursday in December 1808 just before Christmas, a benefit concert (Akademie) organised and conducted by Beethoven took place in Vienna at the Theater an der Wien. It was the 22nd of the month, a merry time in the city’s calendar, and a few days after Beethoven’s 38th birthday. Intended initially as the usual kind of event composers in those days liked to arrange to show off their latest works, it turned into a plan for a festive event to end all festive events: inordinately long with plentiful servings of C major (the festive key par excellence) and a veritable feast of hitherto unfamiliar music.

Conceived as a gigantic celebration, it fell flat with the critics. In the event, the dismal temperature – the theatre’s heating decided to take the night off – was less at fault than the delivery of the music. Johann Nepomuk Chotek, a finicky connoisseur aristocrat with ministerial rank, wrote in his diary that the premiere of the *Pastoral* Symphony, the first item on the programme, went down like a lead balloon. The “frog-croaking” (there are no frogs in the *Pastoral* – Chotek must have been high on something) and “cuckooing” in the second movement were “badly awry”. Other witnesses also damned the mishaps. The *Choral Fantasy*, the final item, even broke down entirely and in front of everyone Beethoven had to shout to the orchestra to start all over again. His musicians were not pleased. In a letter to his publisher two weeks later, Beethoven objected that everyone had reacted “enthusiastically” to everything. Never mind the “scribblers” and their foul responses. Obstacles were put in his way from “every direction to do with music,” especially “Herr Salieri”, still a boss of musical Vienna and the conductor of a rival concert at the other end of town. Antonio Salieri had attracted the best musicians and threatened every one of them with immediate dismissal if they were tempted to go and play for Beethoven. (An *Amadeus* sequel anyone? A tale of two concerts on a chilly winter evening in Vienna?) In the same letter Beethoven announced that, because of all the chicanery, he was deserting the city. The offer of a permanent position in Kassel from Napoleon’s brother Jérôme Bonaparte, King of Westphalia, had already been on the table for months and he’d decided to accept it. Was the evening of 22 December therefore intended all along as a goodbye to Vienna?
That would explain the massive programme. Never one to steal out of the tradesman’s entrance unnoticed, Beethoven Hero, as the eminent scholar Scott Burnham has called him, intended to leave town in a conspicuous cloud of dust – or rather a welter of notes. To call it two concerts in one (as often happens) is to miss the point. In fact, it is a gigantic work of art in its own right, carefully arranged in two thematically interrelated sections to leave as much room as possible for Beethoven’s latest ideas to unfold and to make their mark once and for all. It even has its own finale, the Choral Fantasy, composed specially for the occasion, and not unlike a summation of belief at the end of a fervent letter addressed to the entire world.

Steven Whiting demonstrated in the late 1980s how the musical dynamics of the Choral Fantasy referred back to moments heard earlier in the evening. For me it feels now like an allegorical painting in a medieval church. Figures – musical ones – point to encoded religious meanings that highlight the structure of the building. The thanks to God streaming forth from the power of nature in the finale of the Pastoral Symphony at the start of the first half parallel the cosmic battle between darkness and light in the Fifth Symphony at the beginning of the second. The ‘Sanctus’ from the Mass in C follows, matching the concluding brilliance of the Fifth with the radiance of the six-winged angelic seraphim standing in awe of the Lord’s divine presence. That in turn links back beautifully to the ‘Gloria’ from the Mass at the centre of the first half with the angels singing over the fields of Bethlehem to announce the good news of Christ’s birth – an auspicious moment during a concert just before Christmas. As if in response, the Fourth Piano Concerto follows with a profoundly meditative opening. But the plaintive rhetoric of the second movement abruptly changes the mood. This is where ancient myth and religion in Beethoven’s world meet, as they already have in the concert aria Ah! Perfido!, the second item on the programme. In the aria the soprano calls upon the gods to punish her unfaithful lover, only to change her mind in a moment of almost Christian forgiveness. In the concerto the exchange between piano and orchestra re-enacts Orpheus’s confrontation with Hades in the Underworld and his failed attempt to bring Euridice back from death into the light. The Christian celebration of light in the preceding ‘Gloria’ is effectively reversed.

Beethoven never did leave Vienna. He withdrew his acceptance of Jérôme Bonaparte’s offer, but only after he’d made everyone aware of how serious he was about going. Everyone was appalled at the prospect of losing such a treasure to, of all people, the brother of the man who had been plaguing Vienna militarily for years. Three of Beethoven’s wealthiest supporters – who had spent the evening of 22 December at the Theater an der Wien – cobbled together a counteroffer he couldn’t refuse. Perhaps the evening wasn’t such a failure after all. With outrageous enthusiasm considering his personal and financial difficulties – and in our world overshadowed by climate change and political discontent we could probably do with a dose of it – he continued writing masterpieces. And the 1808 Akademie was the model for one of the finest of them, the Ninth Symphony, a statement in music about overcoming adversity to find true freedom the world isn’t likely to forget.

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SYMPHONY NO. 6 IN F, PASTORAL,
OP. 68 (1808)
(40mins)

The popularity of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 6 owes much to its drama, humour and melodic charm, but its *joie de vivre* belies its complex position in musical history. In comparison with the weightier achievements of some of Beethoven’s other works, the Sixth Symphony could be dismissed all too easily as charming but lightweight. On closer inspection, however, one realises that this symphony, for all its captivating ease, was revolutionary: it is the first major work to have a clear programme (descriptive text) attached to the score, with corresponding musical material, and it is in an expansive five-movement structure instead of the usual four.

Beethoven said that he preferred trees to people, and the Sixth Symphony reflects this sensibility with its celebration of the beauty, power and rustic eccentricity of the countryside. Beethoven himself added the subtitle *Pastoral* to the symphony, which is in F major, the traditional choice for pastoral music. Beethoven argued that this work is “a matter more of feeling than of painting in sounds,” suggesting a more impressionistic than literal approach to his subject-matter.

The first movement, ‘Awakening of happy feelings upon arriving in the country’, opens with a warm, shapely theme, interrupted by a gently insistently wind motif, giving way to a spacious secondary melody. The lilting second movement, ‘Scene by the brook’, includes woodwind solos depicting birdsong, as explained by Beethoven in the score: the nightingale is represented by the flute, the quail by the oboe and the cuckoo by the clarinet.

The comedic third movement is based on Beethoven’s observation of increasingly drunken folk musicians; the bucolic dance frequently gets out of hand, and Beethoven subverts the musical conventions of the night with incomplete phrases and untidy rhythms. This merriment is curtailed by the intervention of the ‘Thunderstorm’, with its timpani-rolls of thunder and sharp stabs of lightning. The drama is short-lived and, here at least, Nature is kind, eliciting from the composer a devotional, hymn-like finale: ‘Shepherds’ song, happiness and thanksgiving after the storm’.

Concert aria, *Ah! Perfido!*,
OP. 65 (1796)
(14mins)

*Ah! Perfido!* (Ah! Deceiver!) is a stand-alone concert aria composed in Prague. It was first performed in Leipzig on 21 November 1796. For the 1808 benefit concert, the 17-year-old soprano Josephine Schultz-Killitschky, sister-in-law of Beethoven’s friend, violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, performed the aria at short notice after Beethoven quarrelled with the intended soprano, Anna Milder-Hauptmann. The understudy was too young and under-rehearsed to do the aria justice, and her performance was greeted with a muted response from the audience.

The text for *Ah! Perfido!* was adapted from Pietro Metastasio’s operatic libretto, *Achille in Sciro*, and describes the heartbreak caused by a lover’s betrayal. The work begins with a *scena* in which the soprano unfolds a passage of recitative (when the voice follows speech patterns), followed by the creamy lyricism of the main aria itself.

**PLEASE NOTE:** English surtitles by Jonathan Burton will be displayed during all the vocal/choral works in this concert.
In a letter dated 26 July 1807, Beethoven wrote to Haydn’s patron, Prince Nikolaus Esterházy II, apologising for the delay in completing a Mass commissioned by the Prince for his wife’s name-day in September. Beethoven was nervous: he was inexperienced at writing sacred music, and was acutely aware that Haydn, his former teacher, had produced several impressive precedents—a hard act to follow. Beethoven worked on the Mass during the summer in Baden, and the premiere took place on 13 September at Eisenstadt. The Prince’s response was indifferent, but Beethoven was proud of the work. Soon after completing the Mass, Beethoven finished writing the Fifth Symphony. Sacred music was banned in Viennese theatres, so the inclusion of these Mass movements was not advertised before the 1808 benefit concert. The audience must have been surprised at these additions to an already ambitious programme!

Beethoven conceived his Piano Concerto No. 4 in early 1804, when he sketched five bars of the work. This short passage would prove crucial to the concerto’s composition, remaining largely unchanged in the final version and generating a significant amount of material as well as establishing the piece’s lyrical nature. Beethoven worked on the Fourth Piano Concerto in 1805 and completed it during 1806. Its first performances were given privately, with Beethoven as soloist, before he gave the public premiere at the 1808 concert. The Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung pronounced it to be “the most admirable, singular, artistic and complex Beethoven concerto”.

This concerto is characterised by an original approach to the linking of different sections; its five-bar phrase structure reappears in the main theme of the second movement, and is transformed into a phrase of ten bars in the third. The opening was unprecedented, the usual orchestral introduction supplanted by music for piano alone. This innovation establishes a deep intimacy between soloist and orchestra; the soloist’s phrases can be heard growing out of the orchestral texture, and in the slow movement the piano seems to lead with the forceful ensemble. This movement flows seamlessly into the final rondo, which continues the work’s tussle between power and lyricism. During the final bars, twinkling piano writing sustains a sense of fragility until the last moment, when a crescendo for both soloist and orchestra unfurls a final, joyful flourish.

The rhythm of the first movement’s ‘Fate’ motif is audible in the ‘Scherzo’, the mysterious opening of which Beethoven worked at for some time, and with some difficulty. After a lively, intricate ‘Trio’, the reprise of the ‘Scherzo’ undergoes an extraordinary transformation, fading almost to nothingness, a repeatedly drummed C underpinning the shift from C minor to C major, heralding the finale, into which the music flows without a break. The effect is stunning: into an eerie, shadowy world suddenly shines a blaze of dazzling light. Beethoven was not the first composer to shift the weight of a symphony from first movement to last, as he does here: Mozart had already set that precedent in his Jupiter Symphony, No. 41. Yet Beethoven’s instrumentation was new, with the addition of piccolo and three trombones, and further prominent use of timpani. Beethoven developed the blurring of boundaries and cross-referencing he had used in his Fourth Symphony by unifying the Fifth’s movements; he refers back to the ghostly rendition of the ‘Scherzo’ just before the finale’s final section, which concludes with a vitality that is nothing short of overwhelming.

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PROGRAMME NOTES

‘Sanctus’ and ‘Benedictus’ from Mass in C, Op. 86 (1807)
(10mins)

Beethoven could be an astute businessman, as the circumstances leading up to his 1808 benefit concert show, but he was so proud of the Mass in C that he offered it to his publisher for free. He wrote: “I think that I have treated the text in a manner in which it has rarely been treated.” Even so, the manuscript remained unpublished until 1812. E T A Hoffmann reviewed the Mass in the following year, arguing that, to his surprise, “the entire Mass expresses a childlike optimism that by its very purity devoutly trusts in God’s grace” but that the work was “entirely worthy of the great master”.

In the concise, reverential ‘Sanctus’, timpani strokes are used to emphasise the solemn nature of the text. The ‘Osanna’ section builds to a triumphant conclusion, after which the ‘Benedictus’ starts with the solo quartet singing a capella (unaccompanied). This was different from many contemporary Viennese mass settings, which often included long introductions as well as elaborate wind writing.

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Fantasia for piano in G minor, Op. 77 (1809)
(10mins)

Within the already vast programme of the 1808 concert, Beethoven set himself the challenge of improvising at the piano, an art in which he was highly experienced. Viennese salons had long enjoyed Beethoven’s improvisations; after writing out some Mozart variations in 1793, Beethoven acknowledged: “I should never have written down this kind of piece, had I not already noticed fairly often how some people in Vienna after hearing me extemporise one evening would next day note down several peculiarities of my style and palm them off with pride as their own.”

The Fantasia, Op. 77, was written in October 1809, but its dramatic gestures and virtuosic flourishes offer as close an idea as we have to what Beethoven might have played during the previous year’s benefit concert. The Fantasia was commissioned and published by fellow composer, Muzio Clementi, whose publication of the work in 1810 was followed two months later by its release in Leipzig by Breitkopf & Härtel, whom Beethoven, shrewd as ever, had approached with the score.

Choral Fantasy, Op. 80 for piano, vocal soloists, chorus and orchestra (1808)
(19mins)

The text of the Choral Fantasy was written in praise of music itself, and was hastily produced; the identity of its author remains uncertain. There is an audible relationship between the Choral Fantasy and the finale of the later Symphony No. 9; Beethoven himself compared the two works in his correspondence with Schott in 1824, in which he described the symphony as being “in the manner of my Piano Fantasia with Chorus, yet much more grand in conception.” Both are sets of variations in which the choral forces are used to climactic effect, and there are notable similarities between their themes. The theme used in the Choral Fantasy comes from Beethoven’s early song, Gegenliebe (1794 or 1795).

The Choral Fantasy opens with an extended improvisatory piano solo (originally extemporised by Beethoven at the 1808 concert) after which the orchestra joins in with its own introductory material. The pianist then states the main theme, which is treated to a series of simple variations. These build to a full orchestral section rounded off by a coda (concluding section). There is a march and two further variations, after which the music subsides to create space for the entrance of the chorus, an effect Beethoven intended to achieve as naturally as possible, without artifice. His solution to this challenge was to bridge the gap with recitative-like (conversational) writing for the piano. Beethoven’s essentially chordal treatment of the voices is almost instrumental, and the soprano line is particularly demanding during the final ‘Presto’. Beethoven omits the voices at the very end of the work so that it concludes with triumphant flourishes from piano and orchestra.

The Choral Fantasy’s text provides us with a summary of the profound pleasure of music and, in the context of Beethoven’s 250th anniversary year, this composer’s extraordinary creative powers:

When music’s enchantment reigns,
And sacred words are spoken,
Beauty takes form;
Night and storms turn into light...

Programme notes by Joanna Wyld
© Philharmonia Orchestra/Joanna Wyld

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