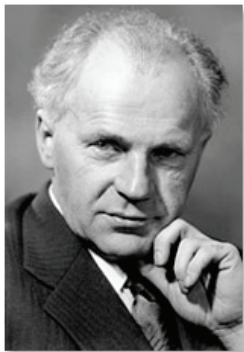


Wilhelm Backhaus was born in Leipzig, Germany, on March 26, 1884. He made a concert debut there at the age of eight, and studied at the Leipzig Conservatory with Reckendorf. In 1899 he left Leipzig to study with Eugène d'Albert in Frankfurt am Main. He made a major debut tour in 1900 and quickly gained a fine reputation as a player and as a teacher. His American debut was on January 5, 1912, in New York, playing the Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 5 with Walter Damrosch and the New York Symphony Orchestra. In 1930 he moved to Lugano and acquired Swiss citizenship. Backhaus established a teaching career there and continued to make concert tours throughout his long life. His last U.S. appearance was in New York in 1962, at age 78; reviews judged that his powers were undiminished. He died on July 5, 1969, in Villach, Austria, where he had gone to make a concert appearance.



Especially during the later phase of his career, he had a remarkably high reputation as a pianist whose devotion to the composer's intentions was total and unselfish. His performances were in the classic line of those that strove to present the music in one broadly viewed arc of concept and logic, embracing not just single movements but entire works. His recorded output ranges from Mozart through the main Classical and Romantic repertoire. It is not surprising that his work was particularly excellent when he encountered those composers who built large-scale, logically constructed classical works, such as Beethoven and Brahms; in reference to his recordings of such works, terms like "magisterial," "exemplary," and "direct" have often been employed by reviewers. Late in his life he came to be regarded as a Beethoven specialist, and he recorded virtually the entire corpus of keyboard works of that master, as well as extensive groups of Brahms and Mozart, and works by Schumann, Grieg, Chopin, and Liszt, including concertos and solo works. He also made some chamber music recordings, notably of Brahms' cello sonatas with Pierre Fournier, and a notable account of the Schubert "Trout" Quintet.

Beethoven

Piano Concerto No. 4 In G Major

Wilhelm Backhaus

Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra
Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt



Beethoven's famously copious notebooks confirm that he only composed after an indeterminate period of inspiration, followed by a period of experimentation, followed by a period of gestation: in other words, an evolutionary process. While we know in most cases when works were premiered and published, we don't know when exactly he conceived them, or what chain of change preceded their first public performance. We remain in the dark, for example, on what days of which months -- or for that matter in what year -- he concentrated on the Fourth Piano Concerto to the exclusion of all else.

Not that we need to know. It suffices to recognize its revolutionary (as well as evolutionary) nature, beginning with the very first chord. No concerto before, by Beethoven or anyone else, began as the G major does, with the solo instrument playing unaccompanied -- not only that but playing both dolce and softly! The miracle, however, is that Beethoven introduces the main theme and rhythm of the entire first movement within five sweet, soft, solo measures ending on a D major (dominant) chord, which the orchestra answers in B major before modulating to the tonic G. There is none of Beethoven's characteristic vehemence, not even at a crescendo to forte with sforzando punctuation in measures 20-22, although he composed the Fourth Concerto and Appassionata Sonata concurrently, all the while the Fifth Symphony was incubating in his other-consciousness.

Fascinatingly, principal themes in the opening movements of the Fourth Concerto and Fifth Symphony share a rhythmic motto: three short notes of equal value followed by a longer fourth note. (In the concerto, all of these are the same note; in the symphony, the last one is a third lower.) Noteworthy, too, was the premiere of both works on the same Vienna program -- that

storied four-hour marathon of December 22, 1808, in the unheated Theater an der Wien, which also introduced the Pastoral Symphony and "Chorale" Fantasie with an orchestra that refused to rehearse with the composer present. Apropos of the G major Concerto: while a traditional double-exposition follows its trailblazing start, Beethoven's instrumental textures, tonal weight, subtleties of harmony, and especially the illusion he creates of improvisation were seven-league strides.

The slow movement is even more revolutionary, despite the brevity of only 72 measures and its indebtedness to the middle, Romanza movement of Mozart's D minor Concerto (K. 466), which Beethoven played publicly with outstanding success. However, in his own concerto, the juxtaposition of implacable strings playing both forte and staccato, and the piano's conciliatory legato response with the "soft" pedal down throughout, was unprecedented. Such palpable confrontation was not the norm in concertos. Neither was the orchestra's eventual capitulation, followed without pause by a rondo-finale marked vivace, whose presto coda is as scintillant as any music Beethoven ever wrote.

Even so, solo pianists and their audiences were slower to take up the Fourth than Beethoven's other concertos. But Mendelssohn -- a general who savored caviar -- loved it best, and played it at his last London concert, in 1846: a program that also featured his own music for A Midsummer Night's Dream and the Scottish Symphony.

Beethoven

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1. Allegro Moderato 17:25

2. Andante Con Moto 4:55

3. Rondo - Vivace 9:59

Total Time: 32:19

Recording Info: Producer Erik Smith Engineer: Alan Abel
16-22 Apr 1958 Sofiensaal, Vienna recorded by Decca



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