One of the twentieth century's most important pianists, Wilhelm Kempff found warmth in Beethoven where many others discovered only stress and passion. Concentrating on the composers of the late Classical and early-to-middle Romantic periods, Kempff achieved graceful, amiable results while not neglecting the sterner core of this music. His nobility of purpose was everywhere evident, made manifest through lucid textures, an adherence to a flowing legato, and tonal shading. In addition, he was a composer whose oeuvre included two symphonies, four operas, songs, and solo piano works.

 Trained first by his Lutheran church musician father, Kempff studied privately before entering Berlin's Hochschule für Musik at age 9. In 1914, he traveled to Potsdam for further studies at the Viktoriagymnasium before returning to Berlin to finish his work at the Hochschule and enroll at the university. At age 20, Kempff served as organist and pianist on a tour of Germany and Scandinavia by the Berlin Cathedral Choir. A success-ful 1917 piano recital at the Berlin Singakademie led to an engagement the following year with the Berlin Philharmonic, the first of innumerable collaborations with that august ensemble. During the 1920s and 1930s, he toured South America and Japan, as well as many parts of Europe, adding to his reputation for uncompromising musicianship and personable interpretation. At the same time, he taught, serving first as director at the Stuttgart Musikhochschule from 1924 to 1929 and, later, as piano instructor at Potsdam's Mamorpalais for the decade before WWII. The war kept his activities confined to Germany, but with its end, Kempff once more resumed a busy performance schedule.

 England and America heard Kempff only later. In London, the public, including a large number of German émigrés, applauded him upon his first appearance there in 1951. Not until 1964 did New York hear the pianist in person, although by then his many Deutsche Grammophon recordings had already established his stature for Americans. Indeed, Kempff's long and fruitful relationship with that label had brought to the market a long list of desirable recordings, among them the complete Beethoven piano concerti; the sonatas; a relaxed, but rewarding survey with Wolfgang Schneiderhan of the Beethoven violin sonatas; and various collections of Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, and Brahms.

Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 2 & 3
Wilhelm Kempff
Ferdinand Leitner - Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra

The Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 19, by Ludwig van Beethoven was composed primarily between 1787 and 1789, although it did not attain the form in which it was published until 1795. Beethoven did write a second finale for it in 1798 for performance in Prague, but that is not the finale that was published. It was used by the composer as a vehicle for his own performances as a young virtuoso, initially intended with the Bonn Hofkapelle. It was published in 1801 following Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 1 in C major, which actually had been composed well after this piece in 1796 and 1797.

 The B-flat major Piano Concerto became an important display piece for the young Beethoven as he sought to establish himself after moving from Bonn to Vienna. He was the soloist at its premiere on 29 March 1795, at Vienna's Burgtheater in a concert marking his public debut. Prior to that, he had performed only in the private salons of the Viennese nobility. While the work as a whole is very much in the concerto style of Mozart, there is a sense of drama and contrast that would be present in many of Beethoven's later works. Beethoven himself apparently did not rate this work particularly highly, remarking to the publisher Franz Anton Hoffmeister that, along with the Piano Concerto No. 1, it was "not one of my best." The version that he premiered in 1795 is the version that is performed and recorded today.

 The Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Op. 37Beethoven composed this work in 1799-1800, and introduced it at Vienna on April 5, 1803. The first sketches go back to 1797 -- after he'd composed the B flat Piano Concerto (published as No. 2), but before composition of the C major Concerto (in 1798, published as No. 1). Although Beethoven played the first performance of No. 3 in 1803 from a short score -- no one was going to steal it from him! - he'd actually completed the music prior to April 1800, apart from a few last-minute adjustments. In other words, before he wrote the Second Symphony (Op. 36), the Moonlight Piano Sonata (Op. 27/2), or the Op. 31 triptych for keyboard.

 The model for this startlingly dramatic concerto was Mozart's C minor (K. 491), which Beethoven played in public concerts. But "model" does not mean he merely imitated; indeed, the orchestra's traditional first exposition is so extensively developed that the soloist's repetition risks sounding anticlimactic. Otherwise, as Charles Rosen has written with formidable insight in The Classical Style, "There are many passages in the first movement, Allegro con brio, which allude to Mozart's concerto in the same key…particularly the role of the piano after the cadenza. But the striking development section, with new melody half-recitative half-aria, is entirely original, as is the new sense of weight to the form." Beethoven wrote down that cadenza several years later, to preserve the work's character and momentum, when implacable deafness seriously disadvantaged his public appearances at the keyboard.

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Concerto For Piano Concerto No 2 In B Flat Major, Op 19
1 Allegro Con Brio 13:05
2 Adagio 8:54
3 Rondo: Molto Allegro 6:14

Concerto For Piano And Orchestra No. 3 In C Minor, Op. 37
4 Allegro Con Brio 16:03
5 Largo 8:52
6 Rondo: Allegro 9:22

Recorded by DGG 1962
Engineer – Werner Wolf   Recording Supervisor – Otto Gerdes

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