

Watermark for Piano and Orchestra

(NCS Co-Commission)

CAROLINE SHAW

BORN August 1, 1982, in Greenville, North Carolina

PREMIERE Composed 2018-2019; first performance January 31, 2019, Seattle Symphony, Ludovic Morlot conducting, with Jonathan Biss as soloist

OVERVIEW

Caroline Shaw made one of the most dramatic entries of any American composer into the consciousness of the music world — in 2013, at age 30, she won the Pulitzer Prize for Music for her *Partita for 8 Voices*, the youngest person ever to receive that award, one of the music world's most prestigious honors. As with most “overnight success,” however, Shaw had worked diligently and productively since childhood, studying violin as a youngster in her native North Carolina, composing from age ten (at first, imitations of chamber music by Mozart and Brahms), earning bachelor's (Rice University, 2004) and master's degrees (Yale, 2007) in violin, and working on a doctorate in composition at Princeton. She firmly established herself on the New York music scene as a violinist adept in a wide range of styles; vocalist with the remarkable *a cappella* ensemble Roomful of Teeth (for whom she wrote *Partita*, which also received a Grammy nomination for Best Classical Composition); backup singer and violinist on *Saturday Night Live* (with Paul McCartney), *The Late Show with David Letterman* (with The National), and *The Tonight Show* (with The Roots); and collaborator on an album with rapper Kanye West. Shaw was the inaugural Musician-in-Residence at Dumbarton Oaks (2014-2015) and Resident Composer with Vancouver's Music on Main (2014-2016). In addition to her Pulitzer Prize, Shaw has been a Rice Goliard Fellow (busking and fiddling in Sweden), a Yale Baroque Ensemble Fellow, and a recipient of the Thomas J. Watson Fellowship (which “empowers students to expand their vision, test and develop their

potential”), during which she studied historical formal gardens and lived out of a backpack for a year. “Caroline,” according to her website, “loves the color yellow, avocados, otters, salted chocolate, kayaking, Beethoven Opus 74 [the ‘Harp’ Quartet], Mozart opera, the smell of rosemary, and the sound of a janky mandolin.”

Shaw’s new work, co-commissioned by the North Carolina Symphony, is part of a project originated by pianist Jonathan Biss, who is among his generation’s foremost interpreters of Beethoven. He has performed the concertos and solo sonatas in concert throughout his career, and is now nearing the end of a nine-year project to record all the sonatas for Onyx Classics, an effort he has supplemented with a book titled *Beethoven’s Shadow*, about the joys and challenges of the undertaking, and an online course *Exploring Beethoven’s Piano Sonatas*, which is offered by the Curtis Institute of Music, where he studied and now teaches.

“One of the central tasks for any musician, whether composer or performer,” Biss said, “is to come to terms with Beethoven. What this means is that any serious composer will have plenty to ‘say’ on the subject of Beethoven. That is why the idea of asking composers to write a piece that, in some way, responds to Beethoven excited me. In 2015, I asked five very different composers to address this question. The project, *Beethoven/5*, done in association with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, takes five different compositional voices — from different parts of the world and different musical traditions — and asks each of them to write a work which, in whatever way they see fit, responds to one of the Beethoven piano concertos.” The commissions were awarded to Timo Andres (United States, paired with Beethoven’s Concerto No. 2), Sally Beamish (England, No. 1), Salvatore Sciarrino (Italy, No. 4), Brett Dean (Australia, No. 5), and Caroline Shaw (No. 3).

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

In her piano concerto, *Watermark*, Shaw did not try to arrange or re-write or imitate or paraphrase Beethoven, but rather filtered elements of the Third Concerto — its three-movement, fast–slow–fast form; its chamber-size orchestra; many details of texture, scoring, tone color, and harmonic effect; ways of building structure through repetition, contrast, and variation — through her own 21st-century sensibility. “It was a process of deep dive,” she explained, “deep absorption, listening intuitively, some score study, but mostly hearing different recordings, becoming aware of certain harmonic shifts and details of orchestration.” She quoted Beethoven’s concerto hardly at all (though there are “little hidden Easter eggs all over,” she admitted), but rather “imagined it differently, the music twisting in new directions. I thought, what if instead of going through one door, it went through door number two, or door number 26... as if blending the worlds of Beethoven and 2019. It was fun starting with this piece I love and imagining it differently.”

Watermark, the concerto’s title and an indication of a concept that courses throughout Shaw’s compositions, refers to the faint design impressed into a sheet of paper identifying the maker and other information, sometimes indicating the date of production. Extensive research has been done into the watermarks in the papers Beethoven used and has often helped in dating his works, letters, and other writings, including the Third Concerto. Shaw took the watermark as a symbol of the “memory of an older piece within something new” and finds “the stamp — the watermark — of Beethoven” in her concerto.

INSTRUMENTATION

Solo piano, two flutes, two oboes, clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon, contrabassoon, two horns, two trumpets, percussion, strings

Piano Concerto No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 37

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

BORN December 16, 1770, in Bonn; died March 26, 1827, in Vienna

PREMIERE Composed 1800-1803; first performance April 4, 1803, Vienna, Theater-
ander-Wien, with the composer as soloist

OVERVIEW

In 1803, Emanuel Schickaneder, the colorful character who figured so prominently in the closing pages of Mozart's life as the librettist and producer of *The Magic Flute*, took over the management of Vienna's Theater-an-der-Wien. His house was locked in a fierce competitive battle with the court-subsidized Kärntnertortheater, run by Baron Peter von Braun. When von Braun hired the distinguished Luigi Cherubini as resident composer, Schickaneder felt obliged to counter with his own music master, and he approached Beethoven with an offer. Beethoven had felt the need to write for the stage for some time and accepted gladly — especially since the job carried free lodgings in the theater as part of the compensation. He and Schickaneder dutifully plowed through a small library of possibilities for an operatic subject, but none inspired Beethoven until he took up work on *Fidelio* late in 1803.

In the meantime, Beethoven took advantage of his theatrical connection to put some of his instrumental works on display. Since opera was forbidden in Catholic countries during Lent at that time, the Theater-an-der-Wien was available for concerts in the early spring, and Beethoven scheduled such an event during April 1803. It had been fully three years since he last presented a concert entirely of his own music, and he had several scores that were awaiting their first presentations, including the Second Symphony, the oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives* and this Third Piano Concerto. He programmed all of these, and, for good measure, tossed in the First Symphony, which had been premiered at his concert three years earlier. When word of this performance

reached Baron von Braun at the Kärntnertortheater, he thought that the same night would be an appropriate one on which to present Haydn's *The Creation*, then the most popular composer and music in Europe. He immediately engaged a double orchestra of Vienna's best performers and printed posters to announce the event. He beat Beethoven and Schickaneder to the punch. When they went to hire orchestral players, they found the ones they wanted were already committed to von Braun, and had to settle for a pick-up ensemble of second-rate musicians.

Beethoven proceeded enthusiastically with plans for the concert, working right up to the last minute putting finishing touches on the new compositions. (His pupil Ferdinand Ries found him in bed writing trombone parts for the oratorio only three hours before the rehearsal began.) He had only a single rehearsal on the concert day for this wealth of unfamiliar music, and, with his less-than-adept players, it is little wonder that it went poorly. The rehearsal began at eight in the morning and, Ries recalled, "It was a terrible one, lasting six and a half hours and leaving Beethoven more or less discontented. [At 2:30, his patron] the Prince Karl Lichnowsky, who had been present from the beginning, ordered large baskets of bread and butter, cold meat and wine to be brought in. He invited in a friendly manner everyone to partake, and all helped themselves with both hands. As a result everybody grew good-humored." The rehearsal was able to continue, and ended only shortly before the concert began at 6:00. The public and critical response to the concert was lukewarm, undoubtedly due in large part to the inadequate performance. Beethoven, however, was delighted to have played his music for the Viennese public, and he was well on his way to becoming recognized more for his ability as a composer than as a pianist.

Ignaz von Seyfried, composer of light operas and conductor at the Theater-ander-Wien, participated in the premiere of the Third Concerto as page-turner for Beethoven, who was the soloist. Von Seyfried reported, "He invited me to turn pages for him during the playing of his concerto, but — heavens! — this was more easily said than done. I

saw almost completely empty sheets, at the most on some pages a few Egyptian hieroglyphics scribbled down to serve him as guides, but entirely unintelligible to me; for he played almost the whole solo part from memory since, as usual, he lacked the time to write it down. Thus, he only gave me a furtive sign when he reached the end of an invisible passage. My scarcely concealed anxiety lest I miss this decisive moment amused him a good deal, and during our common, merry supper [after the concert] he split his sides laughing about it." The piano part was apparently not written down until more than a year after the premiere, when Beethoven finally transcribed it from his head onto paper for its performance at an Augarten concert in July 1804.

The score of the Third Concerto is inscribed, "Concerto 1800 da L.v. Beethoven." The year 1800 also saw the composition of the First Symphony, the E-flat Septet, the Op. 18 quartets, the Op. 22 Piano Sonata and the oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives*. It is especially in the concerto, however, that a new, deeper mode of expression in Beethoven's music became evident. The key of C minor (the same as that of the Fifth Symphony), the complete integration of piano and orchestra, and the enriched texture all point toward the great masterpieces which were soon to come from his pen.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement opens with the longest introductory orchestral *tutti* in Beethoven's concertos, virtually a full symphonic exposition in itself. The strings in unison present immediately the main theme, "a group of pregnant figures," assessed Tovey, "which nobody but Beethoven could have invented." The lyrical second theme is sung by violins and clarinet in a contrasting major mode. After this extended preface, the piano joins the orchestra in elaborating the themes in Beethoven's inimitable processes of transformation and expansion. The closely reasoned development section grows inexorably from thematic fragments heard in the exposition. The recapitulation begins with a forceful restatement of the main theme by the full orchestra. The second theme

and other melodic materials follow, always given a heightened emotional weight over their initial appearances, and lead to a cadenza written by Beethoven that takes on the character of a development section for the soloist. The orchestra re-enters, at first accompanied by quiet, ethereal chords in the piano but soon rising to a stern climax which draws the movement to a close.

The second movement is a nocturne of tender sentiments and quiet moods. Though analysis reveals its form to be a three-part structure, it is in spirit simply an extended song — a marvelous juxtaposition of hymnal tranquility and sensuous operatic love scene. The gossamer filigree from the piano in the wondrous central section, the boundless calm of the harmonic structure and the richness of the orchestral palette make this one of the most Romantic pieces Beethoven ever composed.

The traditional, Classical rondo was a form of simple, high spirits meant to send the audience away in a bubbling mood. Mozart, in his incomparable late concertos, had begun to explore the emotional depth possible with the rondo, and in this Third Concerto Beethoven continued that search. (Mozart's Concerto No. 24 in C Minor, K. 491 was an important model for Beethoven's work.) Beethoven incorporated elements of sonata design into the finale to lend it additional weight, even inserting a fugal passage in the second episode. Only in the closing pages is the dark world of C minor abandoned for a vivacious romp through C major to close this wonderful work.

The Third Piano Concerto is among the first of Beethoven's mature masterworks. Of it Scott Goddard wrote, "He had learned all his teachers could give him. In this year 1800 he was expressing with absolute clarity and often with astonishing force and cogency a unique individuality."

INSTRUMENTATION

Solo piano, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, strings