

On the 17th of December, 1808, an announcement appeared in a Vienna newspaper. It told the public that Ludwig van Beethoven would give a concert, at the Theater an der Wien, in five days. It said, among other things:

*All the pieces are of his own composition, entirely new, and not yet heard in public.*

It was a really long concert - four hours - which took place in a very cold concert hall. Another composer, J. F. Reichardt, attended. He later recalled:

*There we sat from 6:30 till 10:30 in the most bitter cold, and found by experience that one might have too much even of a good thing.*

Things did not go at all smoothly that night. Phillip Huscher, program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, tells us why:

*Beethoven had so annoyed the members of the Theater an der Wien orchestra the previous month that they now insisted that he sit in the anteroom whenever he wasn't needed at the keyboard and wait for the concertmaster to check with him between movements. Beethoven was so desperate to see this concert take place that he agreed. (It promised him both wide exposure and a nice profit.)*

...

*When Beethoven first stepped out on stage the night of December 22, 1808, it was to play this concerto in G major, and surely most members of the audience were surprised that he went straight to the keyboard and started to play. Anyone who troubled to buy a ticket to this concert would have known that a concerto begins with a long orchestral exposition that gives you all the tunes before the soloist begins.*

But ... Beethoven wasn't interested in conventional composition. He was examining every convention he'd inherited, to rethink every choice a composer could make. He realized that the only way to call greater attention to the soloist's first line was to do something unexpected.

It's a brilliant trick - so perfectly handled that it has hardly ever been imitated - and Beethoven quickly follows one masterstroke with another. The orchestra enters six bars later in the unexpected key of B major.

Commenting on the concert in general, Reichardt also remembered how Beethoven had played his work. It was, he said, a "new pianoforte concerto of immense difficulty, which Beethoven executed astonishingly well in the most rapid tempos."

In this clip, recorded in 1989, we see Krystian Zimerman performing Beethoven's 4th Piano Concerto with Leonard Bernstein conducting the Wiener Philharmoniker.

Twelve years later, Krystian Zimerman experienced a tragedy after arriving in America.

Flying to the States for a concert at Carnegie Hall, shortly after the events of September 11, Zimerman and his specially made Steinway piano arrived at New York City's JFK International Airport. Officials from the U.S. Customs Agency thought the glue of Zimerman's piano smelled strange. Thinking the glue contained explosives, those officials ordered Zimerman's piano to be destroyed. And ... it was.

Credits:

Video clip, from a 1989 concert, in which Krystian Zimerman performs Beethoven's 4th Piano Concerto with Leonard Bernstein conducting the Wiener Philharmoniker (Vienna Philharmonic).

Quoted passage, on the original performance of the concert, [from Phillip Huscher](#), program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

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