

Clarinet Concerto No. 1 in F minor, Op. 73 (J. 114), 1st movement

.....Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826)

Armed with experiences of his father's travelling theatre company, a melodic gift fueled by German national folk styles, and a pioneering flair for dramatic orchestration, Weber ousted the Italian influence and thereby earned the famous legend, "Father of German Opera". When set against the magnitude of this operatic achievement, his concert works can seem a bit pale. However, viewed in their own light, they nevertheless appear as finely crafted, intelligent music, expanding on the exemplary models of his "cousin-in-law", Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

Impressed by the Clarinet Concertino, King Maximilian I of Bavaria commissioned the two Clarinet Concertos, which Weber wrote specifically for performance by his friend, Heinrich Joseph Bärmann. All three works were written for and dedicated to him, and show a complete understanding of the capabilities of the instrument. Weber is clearly a master of the Romantic orchestra, and his writing for the soloists is supremely skillful throughout. Written in 1811, Weber's *Clarinet Concerto No. 1* is distinctly different from the earlier concertino: where the earlier work is lightly playful and lyrically expressive, the Concerto No. 1 is deeply serious and dramatically, almost operatically, expressive. It is considered a gem of the instrument's repertoire. The piece follows the standard *fast-slow-fast* pattern of three movements. The first two movements breathe operatic air: an orchestra ever-alive to dramatic opportunities supports a virtuoso "vocalist" with an amazing range. The first movement (Allegro) is not in typical sonata form. Orchestra and soloist play a subject apiece, cadenza and coda appear midway through the movement, and there's no literal recapitulation, all apparently to clear the decks for a stunning ending. This movement was very innovative for its time, with some stylistic aspects characteristic of later composers like Mendelssohn. The normal output for this time was material such as Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 5* from the same year as this composition, 1811. The Weber starts with the cellos playing the main theme, followed with an explosion by the whole orchestra. The violins pick up the melody which eventually progresses, subsides, and clears the stage for the solo clarinet. The soloist begins with a painful song marked "con duolo". The clarinetist performs variants on that source, which later results in a determined run played by the solo instrument. After that climax, the music dies off with the clarinet mourning a line marked "morendo". Then there is a grand pause, which provides the transition for the return of the cellos stating the main theme, but this time in the key of D-flat major rather than F minor. The soloist enters shortly afterward with a sweet response. The clarinet keeps playing a delicate melody, then descends towards the lower tones with a marking of "perdendosi," which tells the player to decrease in speed and sound. Then the tutti arrives, singing a sweet, innocent melody. The clarinet reenters shortly after, still playing in a lighter mood than the beginning of the piece. Later, the soloist performs

sets of playful triplets. After the triplets, the clarinet begins the Bärmann-Kadenz, which the dedicatee, Heinrich Joseph Bärmann wrote. This is a relatively short, lively, virtuosic passage that is played by most performers. Then the clarinetist encounters a brief cadenza which consists of fast thirty-second notes. After the cadenza, the orchestra bursts in and returns to the minor home key. Then the music calms down, and the cellos prepare for the entrance the clarinet will make. When the clarinet enters, it brings back the same emotions as when the soloist entered for the first time. It seems like the clarinet yearns to play the light, innocent theme heard before. It finally gets its wish, bringing back the melody played earlier. Then, the clarinet starts its triplets as it did before, but this time, it flows towards a stream of agitated, virtuosic sixteenth-notes runs. After that buildup, the clarinet subsides and gives room for the French horns to play a cheerful melody. The solo instrument responds in the same connotation as the horns did but then sneaks back to the dark theme the soloist first played. It intensifies and then the soloist whirls up and down in sixteenth notes until the tutti arrives with vengeance. The orchestra ends its phrase with dotted chords which give cue for the soloist to perform its next ordeal, featuring rising chromatic scale runs which flow into a river of sixteenth notes. The sixteenths are followed by a series of determined trills with the last one ending on a high g. The orchestra returns and eventually fades away. The clarinet ends the movement much like how it did before the arrival of the A-flat major key.

--*Stephen Larmore*