

Music Professor Reconstructs Beethoven's Earliest Piano Concerto



Jon Ceander Mitchell, professor of music, is immersed in multiple projects on Beethoven, including a recent reconstruction of the composer's earliest piano concerto. (Photo by Harry Brett)

By Anne-Marie Kent

The Chamber Orchestra, directed by Professor Jon Ceander Mitchell of the Music Department, made history on May 7 in St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Brookline, as they made music, beautiful music in the form of Beethoven's Piano Concerto in E Flat, W.o.O.4. The performance was the world premiere of Mitchell's reconstruction of the orchestration for this, Beethoven's earliest piano concerto. "It was the 'world premiere' of a 220-year old work," said Mitchell.

Sitting in his McCormack Hall office, he slid a tape of the new composition into a stereo and clicked it on. "I found out about this piece a long time ago when I was in college," he said. "This is a piece for a small orchestra, and so I thought: this would suit us really well, so I ordered a copy of the score. To my delight, it included the 1890 print of the published solo part as an appendix," he said.

Mitchell's original intention was to have the Chamber Orchestra play Hess's version. Then he realized Hess's version took "too many liberties." Spreading out the music, pointing to the individual parts of the concerto, Mitchell indicated that, when the piano solo is not playing, we know what the orchestra should be doing. However, when the piano solo is playing, we don't know what Beethoven intended for the orchestra to do.

"In 1943, Willy Hess wrote a reasonably full orchestra version," explained Mitchell. "The trouble with Hess's version is that it's a product of its time. In 1943, not as much attention was paid to historical accuracy." Flipping pages, Mitchell indicated the differences between Beethoven's original piece and the Hess piece. He explained, "Hess changed the endings of the second and third movements. He ignored certain thematic things. He

created a piece for his time."

Mitchell reconstructed the piece using material from the concerto itself. "I extracted things and moved them around a little bit to the forms Beethoven would have known. I tried to make the accompaniment in the style of Beethoven's first two numbered piano concertos," said Mitchell. Pausing, he pointed to the stereo, still playing in the corner of his office. "Do you hear that? That horn doesn't exist in the Hess version. He puts in his own themes. This, I took from the concerto itself."

Mitchell arranged with Centaur Records to record this work in February with the Bohuslav Martinu Philharmonic of Zlin, Czech Republic. He has two other endeavors relating to Beethoven. One project, he says, was dropped into his lap by a UMass Boston student whose hobbies include rummaging through used-book stores; it is a score of the first four Beethoven symphonies that bears all sorts of marking by Erich Leinsdorf, conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra (BSO) from 1962 to 1969. "I have been able to confirm his markings by visiting his daughter and the BSO archives. I am in the midst of writing a book about Leinsdorf, Beethoven, and this score," said Mitchell.

Also, last month, he and Music Department colleague Linnea Bardarson had their CD *Beethoven: Piano Concerto Movement in D, K. Anh 7, and Piano Concerto in D, Op. 61*, released by Centaur Records.