

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 73, "Emperor"

BORN: Bonn, December 16, 1770

DIED: March 26, 1827, in Vienna

WORK COMPOSED: 1809

WORLD PREMIERE: November 28, 1811, in the Leipzig Gewandhaus. Friedrich Schneider performed as soloist, and Johann Schulz conducted the famed Gewandhaus Orchestra.

Beethoven establishes the lordly character of his "Emperor" Concerto in its opening moments, as three sonorous orchestral chords each give way to cadenza-like flourishes from the piano. This serves as a prelude to the usual orchestral paragraph, one of the grandest and longest in any concerto. A deeply expressive slow movement proceeds to the finale by way of an ingenious transition.

The title "Emperor," by which Beethoven's Fifth Piano Concerto has been known since the early 19th century, probably stems from one of the many apocryphal anecdotes that have come to us concerning the composer. According to this story, a French army officer stationed in Vienna attended the first performance of the work in the Austrian capital and was so moved by the grandeur of Beethoven's music that he cried out: "*C'est l'Empereur!*" ("It is the Emperor!")

Even if this story were true, and even if Beethoven was able to hear the exclamation — he was, by this time, nearly deaf — the comparison with Napoleon would hardly have flattered the composer. Once an ardent admirer of Bonaparte, Beethoven had become bitterly disenchanted as the French ruler's ambition revealed itself. The most famous evidence of this change of heart is the well-known account of how the composer, after hearing that Napoleon had assumed the throne, changed the title of his Third Symphony from its original homage, *Buonapart*, to the anonymous *Sinfonia eroica* ("Heroic Symphony").

But despite the unfortunate political connotation, "Emperor" does not seem an inappropriate title for the E-flat Piano Concerto. In 1809, when Beethoven composed it, this work far surpassed all other concertos in its expression of majesty and heroism. During the first decade of the 19th century, Beethoven transformed the piano concerto as thoroughly as he had the symphony. His first two keyboard concertos, like his First Symphony, were cast along classical lines defined by Haydn and Mozart. These were attractive, skillfully constructed compositions, but they spoke the relatively restrained musical language of the previous generation. In his Third and Fourth Piano Concertos, however, Beethoven created works more sweeping in scope and more grand in sonority than any previous concerto. The Fifth, his final piano concerto, crowned his endeavors in this field, and it retains an imperious position among compositions in its genre even today.

Ironically, this composition, which is today so widely admired, began its career on a decidedly inauspicious note. Of its first performance, which took place in Leipzig in 1811, little is known. The Vienna premiere was given two years later. Contemporary reviews report the concerto's poor reception. One journalist observed that "Beethoven, full of proud confidence in himself, never writes for the multitude; he demands understanding and feeling, [which] he can receive only at the hands of the knowing." A public sufficiently "knowing" to appreciate this work did not emerge until the middle of the 19th century, and the piece was played publicly only once more during Beethoven's lifetime. Only thanks to pianists like Clara Schumann and Franz Liszt, who made a point of performing Beethoven's final concerto, did it finally receive proper recognition.

While this work follows the traditional concerto format of three movements in a fast–slow–fast pattern, Beethoven introduces several formal innovations. The first comes at the very outset, with the thrice-stated gesture of a grand orchestral chord that seems to propel the piano into a flight of virtuoso fancy. The orchestra then presents the initial theme of the first movement. Its quasi-martial character places the music in the Classical-period tradition of “military concerto” openings, a tradition to which several of Mozart’s keyboard concertos and Beethoven’s earlier Piano Concerto in C, Op. 15, also belong. We have not heard the last of the magisterial flourishes that opened the concerto, however. They sound again late in the movement at a key juncture: the return to the tonic key of E-flat major, following much harmonic peregrination and an inventive, at times turbulent, development of the proud main subject.

The *Adagio* second movement is a serene and devout meditation, one of Beethoven’s most beautiful and tender creations. It concludes with a final musing by the piano that evolves magically into the principal theme of the third movement. (This transition, another formal innovation, recalls the similar passage linking the scherzo and finale of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony.) The music that follows fits the description of the eminent English conductor and commentator Donald Francis Tovey, who extolled “this most spacious and triumphant of concerto [finale]s.”

Scored for solo piano; pairs of woodwinds, horns and trumpets; timpani; strings.

© 2018 Paul Schiavo