

Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat Major, Op. 73

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Written: 1809

Movements: Three

Style: Romantic

Duration: 40 minutes

These days, the key that a piece is written in makes little difference to many concertgoers. Our ears, inundated with music from elevators, smart-phones and concert halls, are probably less discriminating than those of Beethoven's audiences. He often used the key of E-flat major for music of noble character. Perhaps the dedication on the score to "His Imperial Highness, the Arch Duke of Austria" is why the *Piano Concerto No. 5* has the subtitle "*Emperor*," but Beethoven never called it that. True to its key, it is a noble piece.

Beethoven wrote this concerto while Vienna was under siege by Napoleon's armies. "What a disturbing, wild life all around me," Beethoven wrote to his publisher, "nothing but drums, cannons, men, misery of all sorts." When Friedrich Schneider premiered the concerto in 1810, audiences expected music with a certain martial character. It amply fulfilled their expectations.

In the first movement of this concerto, after a surprising initial solo cadenza for the piano, the orchestra remains completely in the key of E-flat for its presentation of the various themes. Only when the piano enters do we get any relief from this tonal monotony, with explorations into the very unusual keys of B minor and C-flat major. Another unusual aspect of this massive movement is that Beethoven explicitly wrote out the cadenza, denying the performer the usual custom of improvising a cadenza. The great pianist Hans von Bülow boasted that when he performed the *Emperor Concerto* he always had applause after the cadenza. (Applause *during* a performance was typical during the nineteenth century. "Silence is not what we artists wish," Beethoven declared. "We want applause.")

Two themes make up the second movement. The first is a beautiful and devout melody heard in the strings at its beginning; the second is the quiet meditative one played by the piano. Both themes go through a series of "quasi-variations." The movement leads directly into the third, a rondo. This is no light and bouncy rondo, no mere succession of lively tunes. Instead, it has been called the "most spacious and triumphant of concerto rondos."

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Symphony No. 5 in C-sharp Minor

Gustav Mahler (1860–1911)

Written: 1901–02

Movements: Five (in three parts)

Style: Romantic

Duration: 75 minutes

When Gustav Mahler conducted the first performance of his *Fifth Symphony* in 1904, it was described as “the giant symphony.” And it is, indeed, a “giant” in terms of the demands placed upon the orchestra. It also represents a turning point in Mahler’s style. While it retains many characteristics of Mahler’s earlier symphonies, the *Fifth* marks a conscious movement away from an important feature of the first four symphonies: it doesn’t tell a “story.” And there isn’t any sung text. His complex interweaving of independent melodic lines was also a new approach. Those changes didn’t seem to come easily to Mahler; he essentially re-worked the symphony every time he conducted it.

The first movement is a sort of funeral march. It begins with a single trumpet announcing the main theme. The entire orchestra eventually takes up this theme, building to a powerful climax before yielding to a more lyrical, plaintive melody. Mahler develops those two themes at length until the opening fanfare reappears and eventually dies away, the final repetition played by a solo flute. The frantic and vehement second movement is linked to the first in both mood and theme. The third movement (which begins the second part) is a scherzo that prominently features the horn. Here the sadness of the first part gives way to a joyous Viennese waltz. In this movement, Mahler exercises his “totally new musical message,” with its complex treatment of the themes. A solo horn interrupts this new music briefly, serving to remind us of the sorrow that proceeds the scherzo. Eventually, the lighthearted waltz crashes its way back in and struggles with the darker theme, prevailing triumphantly at the end.

The beautiful fourth movement, scored for strings and harp alone, acts as a slow introduction to the third part of the symphony. It leads directly into the finale, signaled again by the solo horn. This movement, marked “*Fresh*,” continues the symphony’s overall progression from sorrow to joy, though the themes of the first movement (now in a major mode) are still recognizable amid the glee. Fans of Mahler’s music always look for the tremendous climax in the last movement, and there is no disappointment in this symphony. However, Mahler abruptly interrupts the climax with a whimsical coda that eventually brings the symphony to an equally whimsical conclusion.