

## **Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 73 (“Emperor”)**

*Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)*

Beethoven’s fifth piano concerto, known as “The Emperor,” was dedicated to his patron and pupil, the Archduke Rudolph, whose chances of ever becoming Emperor were slim indeed since he was the youngest son of Leopold II. It’s known how much Beethoven despised Napoleon Bonaparte, so it was quite unlikely that the composer had any emperor in mind at all. Moreover, it is known that he never applied titles like this to his works. One cannot deny, however, that the *E-flat Concerto* is “an emperor among concertos.”

It was destined to become the last concerto that Beethoven was to write. At thirty-nine years of age, he had already given up playing in public. Courageously he had faced up to his tragedy, and this was a heroic work produced in anguish. Romain Rolland called it a masterpiece “where even the virtuosity is heroic...whole armies of warriors pass by.”

The concerto was written during troubled times for the city of Vienna. The French had occupied the city, the Imperial Household had fled, and Napoleon had ensconced himself in Schönbrunn Palace. It was a wretched period for the composer. A notation by his pupil Ries describes the night of May 11<sup>th</sup> 1809: “At nine o’clock at night the battery of twenty howitzers opened fire. Rich and poor, high and low, young and old at once found themselves crowded indiscriminately in cellars and fireproof vaults...Beethoven took refuge... and spent the greater part of the time in the house of his brother Casper, where he covered his head with a pillow so as not to hear the cannons.” Whether the composer was overcome by fear, trying to save what was left of his hearing, or both, is a matter of conjecture. “What an awful life, with ruins all around us,” wrote Beethoven to his publishers, “nothing but drums, trumpets, and misery everywhere.”

Because of the war, the première of the concerto was delayed two years. It was finally performed at the Leipzig Gewandhaus on Nov. 28, 1811. The orchestra was conducted by Johann Phillip Christian Schultz,

and the soloist was Friedrich Schneider. I was received with enthusiasm by the public, and showered with accolades in the musical press.

Quite the contrary at the Vienna première on Feb. 12, 1812. This concert, sponsored by the Charitable Society of Noble Ladies, had to share honors with an “art exhibit,” a series of tableaux after Raphael and Poussin. Among these “living pictures” were “The Queen of Sheba Doing Homage to King Solomon,” “Esther Fainting before King Ahsueris” and “The Arrest of Haman by Command of Ahasuerus in the Presence of Esther.” Despite the fact that the soloist was Beethoven’s gifted pupil, Carl Czerny, the concerto did not please the Viennese, who accused Beethoven of writing for connoisseurs only.

Beethoven begins this concerto in a new way. A single chord by the full orchestra and the piano follows with a cadenza. There will be a restatement of these introductory passages just before the recapitulation, but now it is the orchestra’s turn to take charge with a formal presentation of all the themes. The piano remains silent throughout the exposition, waiting for the moment to enter quietly with a simple chromatic scale. There is a customary development of themes and recapitulation, upon arrival at the place before the coda where one expects the cadenza, a new directive to the soloist: “Don’t make a cadenza.” Now here is the time and place after the orchestra’s chord of expectation, where the soloist has always been given his prerogative to improvise his own cadenza. But Beethoven, the greatest of all improvisers, decides to brook no near-greats. He writes his own cadenza. A few measures, the orchestra joins in a dialogue with the soloist, and the movement comes to a mighty close.

The Adagio is in sublime contrast to the vigor of the preceding movement. The song-like melody is first given to muted violins, and later embellished with pianist variations. At the end of the movement comes a transition passage, hesitating, and mysterious, foreshadowing the Finale.

A joyous outburst in 6/8 meter, the Finale springs to life and is off on its way, making an exciting return after each contrasting episode.

*By Margery Derdeyn*