



Symphony No. 5

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon; 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones; timpani; strings

Performance time: 31 minutes

Background

Can you remember when you first heard the words “to be or not to be,” or saw an image of the Mona Lisa’s enigmatic smile? The thundering opening bars of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony are like that: iconic. Those four introductory notes are known everywhere. And, conveniently enough, they conform to the rhythm of the phrase “Beethoven’s Fifth.” According to musicologist Richard E. Rodda, this is “the most famous beginning in all of classical music.” Pounded out once and then repeated a whole step down, this motif really does sound like “fate knocking at the door,” a phrase that has stuck to it ever since Beethoven’s students Anton Schindler and Ferdinand Ries circulated the story.

Rodda, for one, has his doubts about whether this idea really originated with Beethoven. But does it matter? Scholars agree that this symphony is a landmark in music, combining the refinement and formal perfection of the Classical period with the philosophical and emotional urgency of the Romantic age. Beethoven partisans consider him the colossus who fulfilled the promise of one style while defining the challenges of the next—the father of musical Romanticism. His Symphony No. 5 probably makes the strongest case for this idea. He wrote it from 1804 through 1808, a period that also gave us the Fourth and Sixth symphonies, his Piano Concerto No. 4, the Violin Concerto in D, and three major piano sonatas. But not many of his comments regarding the Fifth Symphony survive from these productive years; in one note, he says there “begins in my head the working-out in breadth, height and depth. Since I am aware of what I want, the fundamental idea never leaves me. It mounts, it grows. I see before my mind the picture in its whole extent, as if in a single grasp.” To some listeners, this supports the idea that Beethoven built his magnificent four-movement work on four fateful notes.

What to Listen For

From the first movement, with its remarkable alternation between exclamation and contemplation, we move to a movement marked *andante con moto*, built on two themes that Beethoven develops separately; after the tension of the first movement, the second seems spontaneous and almost meandering. But it leads us to a scherzo—fairly common as a third-movement framework in symphonies, but unusually intense in this one. Soon we realize that the symphony has led us into radiance: rather than ending conventionally, it builds over thundering timpani to resolve in a triumphant finale. It ends in the sun-filled key of C-major, after traversing an unusual route through the symphony’s predominant C-minor key.

This symphony quickly took on the reputation of a maverick work that challenged the conventions of symphonic structure. Even so, the opening movement—which opens so unforgettably with its iconic motif, a rhyming pair of four-note bars—is developed in sonata allegro form. But from the beginning it startles us, and we know something different from the usual is happening. Few moments in music have given rise to such controversy and varying interpretations, and the entire movement—indeed, the entire symphony—is based on this aural jolt. It proceeds in the kind of development that listeners grew accustomed to in the symphonies of Haydn and Mozart, taking the theme through a development that modulates through many keys and dynamic patterns to reach its capitulation. It is the novelty of the theme itself that keeps the movement fresh in its sound, with a sense of portentous drama.

In the second movement, marked *andante con moto*, the tension relaxes with a series of lyrical variations on a theme we first hear in the violas and cellos, underlined by the double-basses. A second theme brings other orchestral voices into play, clarinets and bassoons, along with the ever-present violin choir. After a variation on the initial theme is introduced, a third theme offers an unexpectedly dynamic interplay between orchestral forces, leading to a resolution that is somehow louder and more emphatic than we might have expected. The stakes have been raised, reminding us of the symphony’s ominous opening.

In the third movement, built on a scherzo and a trio, we return to the symphony’s opening key of C minor. This movement leads without interruption to the fourth movement, which unites the elements that followed the first movement with the themes of the movements that came later.

Having transitioned to C major, the symphony closes with an unusually long sequence of C major chords—40 by some counts. (It depends upon where you start counting, which is a matter of some controversy among musicologists—as is everything else about this symphony.) But there is no dispute that to Beethoven and his predecessors, the key of C major represented light and order. An especially familiar example comes in the Genesis section of Haydn’s oratorio *The Creation*; Haydn was a teacher of Beethoven’s. Some musicologists cite Beethoven’s high regard for the composer Luigi Cherubini, who ended many compositions in this way, as a possible influence; others believe it’s simply needed as the most emphatic and unmistakable way to confirm the immensity of the dramatic journey that Beethoven has taken us through, or as a kind of release valve for the tension that has built up in it. This is the interpretation of the esteemed musicologists Friedrich Kerst and Henry Krehbiel in translating Beethoven’s own comment on the finale: “Many assert that every minor piece must end in the minor. But I say no! ... Joy follows sorrow, sunshine—rain.” As he does so often, Beethoven has taken us from darkness to light.