

# Symphony No. 5 in C minor, op. 67

Ludwig van Beethoven

*Born in Bonn, baptized December 17, 1770; died in Vienna, March 26, 1827*

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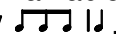
The immense popularity of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony has dulled our senses to the boldness and originality of the work, which initially caused a certain resistance. The great Goethe could not appreciate it, remarking that "it is merely astonishing and grandiose." Even in 1843, thirty-five years after its premiere, a critic wrote of the celebrated transition from the scherzo to the finale: "There is a strange melody, which, combined with an even stranger harmony of a double pedal point in the bass on G and C, produces a sort of odious meowing, and discords to shatter the least sensitive ear." (See Example 1.) Equally astonishing were the "oboe cadenza" in the first movement, the addition of piccolo, contrabassoon, and three trombones to the finale, and the return of the scherzo in the finale.

Many features have contributed to the eventual superstar status of "the Fifth." The opening motive, which Beethoven reportedly explained to his friend and biographer Anton Schindler as "Thus Fate knocks at the door!," has provided dramatic associations to generations of listeners. In World War II, for example, it was used as a symbol of resistance to fascism. Though Beethoven left no programmatic explanations linking his Symphony to political events of the early nineteenth century, the work is a product of his heroic style—his patriotic and anti-Napoleonic sentiments had reached their height at this time. The patriotism expressed in his music resonated within people of many different historical periods and nations, even the very forces Beethoven saw as the oppressor. A veteran of Napoleon's army hearing the work in 1828 is said to have exclaimed at the beginning of the finale: "*Mais c'est l'Empereur!*" (But it's the Emperor!) (See Example 2.)

The Fifth has also aroused certain unnamed terrors in its listeners, an aspect already sensed by Goethe and Romantic writer E.T.A. Hoffmann. Robert Schumann reported that a child whose hand he was holding during a performance of the Fifth whispered "*J'ai peur*" (I'm afraid) at the chilling transition from the scherzo to the finale. (Refer back to Example 1.) Hector Berlioz commented on the "stunning" effect of this transition saying it would be impossible to surpass it in what follows. Yet the allaying of the terrors by the triumph of the C major finale has gained the Symphony almost as many admirers as the opening motive.

Like many of Beethoven's works, the Fifth had a long gestation period: sketches from early 1804 appear amid those for the Fourth Piano Concerto and the first act of *Leonore* (later titled *Fidelio*); more sketches appeared later in 1804, and by 1806 advanced sketches for all the movements took shape near those for the Violin Concerto and Cello Sonata in A major. Beethoven then interrupted work on the Fifth for another symphony, the Fourth, commissioned by Count Oppersdorf. The Fifth occupied the composer in 1807, and he finally completed it in the spring of 1808. Count Oppersdorf apparently expected this dedication too, but Beethoven dedicated the Fifth to two other patrons, Prince Lobkowitz and Count Razumovsky.

The Fifth Symphony was first performed on that historic, more-than-four-hour concert at the Theater-an-der-Wien on December 22, 1808—an all-Beethoven program consisting mainly of newly composed works: the Fifth and Sixth symphonies conducted by the composer, the Fourth Piano Concerto in which Beethoven performed the solo part, the aria "Ah! perfido" (1795–96), three numbers from his Mass in C major, op. 86, his own improvisations, and the quickly composed Choral Fantasy, op. 80. By all accounts the preparations for this concert had been extremely problematic, Beethoven himself contributing a large share of the difficulties; the concert consequently produced mixed results.

The Fifth Symphony has been performed countless times since then, and its influence cannot be underestimated. But no matter how many times we may have heard the work, it continues to surprise and delight. The first movement is remarkable for its concentrated rhythmic development, based on the opening rhythm, short-short-short-long: ♩ . This rhythm appears in more than half of the movement's measures, with captivating, ingenious transformations. Beethoven unified the entire Symphony with further developments of the same rhythm. We hear it in the second theme of the slow movement and in the fortissimo horn call that answers the haunted opening of the scherzo. It recurs in the further development of the "call," including its insistence in the famous transition to the last movement, and reappears in the finale's development section and the ensuing recall of the scherzo.

The slow movement provides a certain relaxation from the heroic style, but even here the dotted rhythms can sound martial and the ending of the first phrase receives a heroic stress. Even more striking is the valiant blaze of C major into which Beethoven has modulated during the course of the second theme. (See Example 3.) The double variation form—two alternating sections, each varied, plus coda—is remarkable for its move from literal variation to a free, more improvisatory style of variation.

The scherzo contains the aforementioned stealthy and heroic elements in its first section, followed by an energetic trio in fugato (imitative) style and a shadowy, abbreviated return to the scherzo section. After the suspense of the transition, the finale bursts forth triumphantly. Beethoven had originally intended for the trio and scherzo to be repeated as in the Fourth Symphony (scherzo-trio-scherzo-trio-scherzo) rather than to follow the conventional scherzo-trio-scherzo layout, but scholars have concluded that the latter represents his “final version,” perhaps justified in the larger scheme by the formal integration with the last movement.

The addition of piccolo, contrabassoon, and trombones—for the first time in symphonic history—contributes to the triumphal character of the finale. The use of sonata form here shows Beethoven’s continued concern for giving his last movement equal weight with his first. The unexpected return of the scherzo in this movement gives Beethoven another chance to show transcendence over adversity, symbolized by the recapitulation grandly banishing the stealthy strains. Further it gave him a good reason—that of balance—to include a prolonged affirmation of the major home key in the coda. Symphonic thought had entered a new era.

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Ex. 1: Transition to Finale

“I am afraid”  
m. 339 violin I

sempre *pp* violin II (doubled by viola in octaves)  
timpani  
bassi

Ex. 2: “Mais c’est l’Empereur”

Allegro

*ff*

Ex. 3: Modulation to “heroic” C major in slow movement

violin I

(m. 26) *pp* violin II & viola *tutti*  
clarinets *ff*