

CONCERTO NO. 5 IN E-FLAT MAJOR FOR PIANO AND ORCHESTRA, OP. 73 ("EMPEROR")  
LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

*Born December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany*

*Died March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria*

Ludwig van Beethoven had written his four previous piano concertos as his musical calling card, premiering them himself to adoring, curious audiences. In this case, Beethoven was too deaf to do the honors, a condition exacerbated by Napoleon's roaring bombardment and occupation of Vienna. Covering his ears with pillows, the composer tried to save what little hearing he had, but to no avail. At this point, he was reduced to communication with slate chalkboards in order to be heard. After the French entered the city, they visited Beethoven in his home, appalled by the "dirty man in a foul temper, living in squalor with un-emptied chamber pots."

Two years after completion of the work, Friedrich Schneider introduced Op. 73 on November 28, 1811, in Leipzig. Reception was rapturous; immediately *Die Allegemeine Musick Zeitung* of January 1812 wrote, "It is without doubt one of the most original, imaginative, most effective but also one of the most difficult of all existing concertos."

Viennese audiences heard it on February 12, 1812, with Beethoven's student, Carl Czerny, at the helm. This time audience reaction was poor. "He can be understood and appreciated only by connoisseurs," the magazine *Thalia* assessed. One member of the audience, a French army officer, claimed it was "the emperor of concertos," hence the sobriquet. (At least, that is the story....) In any case, as the years passed and pianists, as well as pianos improved, the concerto was heard more and more frequently.

The first movement opens with a huge chord, followed by a piano flourish. Again, the orchestra sounds more chords, and the pianist again responds enthusiastically with passionate quasi-improvisatory responses. Only after all of this does Beethoven bring in his sturdy first theme, followed by a set of subsidiary ideas. One of these is a soft theme in a Minor key, which is immediately picked up by a pair of French horns (*dolce*) singing it in the Major in a swaying melodic line, moving in simple tonic/dominant progressions in chorale texture. Afterwards, the pianist enters, echoing those same ideas with elaboration and then offers a solo third theme of its own. Steadily the music churns into turbulent development and recapitulation. At the usual point of a *cadenza*, Beethoven, trusting no one to invent one, wrote, "Do not play a *cadenza* but attack immediately the following," which is the composer's own version of a proper *cadenza* for the first movement. A significant coda follows.

Beethoven's second movement, *Adagio un poco mosso*, opens with muted violins and pianistic ornamentation of the main melody. Zery, the theme, was based on an Austrian hymn. Three variations follow before all falls silent as bassoons cling to a B natural, sinking quietly to a B flat, a tone that powers the subsequent rondo, which follows without a break. The piano offers *arpeggios* "out of nowhere," tentatively and gaining in strength before falling in inevitability into the next movement.

The Rondo (in seven parts) wakes up the nocturne-like mood with a jaunty, energetic theme, running upward at a fast clip. Beethoven creates a hybrid *sonata*-rondo structure for his thematic participants. There is a tiny *sonata* encapsulated within the structure: its “first idea” given out by piano solo in one episode, another episode brings in the development, etc. The development itself is an even more petite rondo. Beethoven’s form is fascinating, but emphasis must be kept on the exhilarating overall effect of his giant and final concerto.

Barry Douglas was both conductor and soloist for the orchestra’s last performances of Beethoven’s fifth concerto in August 2007.