SYMPHONY NO. 5 IN C MINOR, OP. 67
LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
Born December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany
Died March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

It had to be one of the most amazing concerts of all time: December 22, 1808. Beethoven had been given the free use of the Theater-an-der-Wien for a concert of his own. The event, lasting some five hours in an unheated theater, offered a marathon parade of new works to an audience that remained spellbound (though tested on a Herculean scale) for the evening of "new music." The program featured premieres of Beethoven's Symphony No. 6, followed by the aria *Ah! Perfido*, two movements from the Mass in C Major, the fourth piano concerto, Symphony No. 5, and the entire "Choral Fantasy." An unrehearsed orchestra, a soprano trembling with stage fright and freezing temperatures could not dampen the wonder of the music.

Beethoven worked on several works simultaneously, and as it happened, all of these were at the starting gate. It was the fifth symphony that jolted the audience to attention with its shockingly wild drive and tension incorporated in unrelenting vehemence. Reviewers, however, gave relatively short shrift to No. 5. The poet Goethe said that "it is merely astounding, grandiose." A year later, the romantic novelist E. T. A. Hoffman, in *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, hoisted the flag and gave his florid viewpoint: "Radiant beams shoot through the deep night of this region, and we become aware of gigantic shadows which, rocking back and forth, close in on us and destroy all within us except the pain of endless longing – a longing in which every pleasure that rose up amid jubilant tones sinks and succumbs. Only through this pain, which, while consuming but not destroying love, hope and joy, tries to burst our breasts with a full- voiced general cry from all the passions, do we live on as captivated beholders of the spirits."

The fifth symphony was completed in 1808, although sketches appear as early as 1800 and more frequently in the composer's notebooks between 1804-1806. After completion, Beethoven wrote to his patron, Count Franz von Oppersdorff, "Your symphony is, at last, ready, but in case you do not want it, let me know … I am not well, and I am being treated for an injured finger. Things are going badly with me. The cost is 300 florins and the balance is due."

1808 was a terrible time for Beethoven. Impending deafness frightened him to the core, the Emperor Napoleon was marching over his homeland, and his brother had married a wretched woman whom he called "Queen of the Night." Money was short. Music alone made life bearable, and through music, he became a master of his destiny. That journey is reflected in the iconic fifth. And through this, Beethoven comprehensively speaks for and to us all.

The opening begins with a thunderclap: the famous four-note motto theme, three quick Gs and a long E flat, proclaimed *fortissimo*. Momentum generated by the repetition of the first three notes is dramatically halted in an extended fourth tone. The composer holds us breathless and then insistently repeats the three notes on a lower tone and again holds us tight on the fourth. After this unbelievable introduction, Beethoven unleashes a movement unlike any other in his time. From the opening kernel, he developed a symphonic masterpiece, demonstrating a new symphonic principal: the potential of a single gesture to generate an enormous piece. Rhythms are torrential, but the single focus on the motto insists upon that underlying idea. Sometimes the idea screams, sometimes whispers or pants in the depths of the orchestra, but it is unstoppable. A lyrical second

theme introduced by French horn is beautiful but overwhelmed by the rage and insistence of the opening grip. A turbulent development continues the obsession with the opening motto, not uttered in tight integration. Within a traditional recapitulation, Beethoven stops the action with an expressive oboe *cadenza*, and then he moves us into a long coda, hammering the motto again and again into our soul. "This is one of the most powerfully integrated movements in all symphonic literature." (Edward Downes)

His second movement, *Andante con moto*, spins a series of four variations on two main ideas. Violas and cellos first sing a richly declaimed song before clarinets, flute and bassoons chant a sturdier, more assertive idea. Although writing double variations on these two ideas, Beethoven cannot resist allowing rhythmic allusions to the opening cell to persist.

The third movement, *Allegro*, is a *scherzo* rather than a traditional minuet and trio. Ominously, hushed cellos and basses restlessly stir the first musical ideas before French horns emerge with a strong theme, again referencing the opening idea. Themes spar back and forth. A dramatic pianissimo section, underscored by muttering timpani, charges the atmosphere before an extended *crescendo* moves directly to the brilliant finale.

The fourth movement ratchets up instrumental color by the addition of piccolo, contrabassoon and three trombones. (This was the first time trombones appeared in a symphony orchestra.) A panoply of themes occupies the enlarged canvas and palette. Trombones are invoked to lead the extroverted march-like theme, which sets the stage for the greater dimensions. While the contrabassoon adds depth, the piccolo provides glitter. Within the exuberant mood, Beethoven leads us to his triumphant coda, now stressing the light of C Major for 54 measures. Michael Steinberg has written, "This victory symphony was a new kind of symphony, and Beethoven's invention here of a path from strife to triumph became a model for symphonic writing to the present day."

The fifth spoke a musical language no one had heard before. Paul Bekker noted, "In Beethoven, a composer arose who completely understood the possibilities of the art. He knew the secret forces of his spiritual kingdom…. He was artist enough to enforce his will." The musical mission lay far beyond entertainment. We are also provided a window into what was yet to come from the Beethoven sound, as well as his conviction that music was a critical and elevating force for life. "Beethoven broke all the rules and turned out pieces of breathtaking rightness. He had the real goods, the stuff from Heaven, the power to make you feel at the finish: Something is right with the world." (Leonard Bernstein)

The orchestra's last performances of Symphony No. 5 were in January 2007, with Giancarlo Guerrero conducting.

SYMPHONY NO. 1 IN C MINOR, OP. 68
JOHANNES BRAHMS
Born May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany
Died April 3, 1897, in Vienna, Austria

When he was 21, Johannes Brahms heard Ludwig van Beethoven's ninth symphony. He was awed and intimidated: "I shall never write a symphony. You have no idea how the likes of us feel when we

hear the tramp of a giant like HIM behind us." Twenty-two years later, in 1876, the composer finally unveiled the first of four magnificent symphonies. The completion of Op. 68 was a tremendous psychological and genre breakthrough for the composer. At last, he was freed from the self-imposed Beethoven barrier.

Coming to this point had been years in the making; the correspondence of Clara Schumann as early as June 1862 references Brahms' first symphony. At that time, she wrote to the violinist Joseph Joachim, "Johannes sent me, the other day – imagine the surprise! – the first movement of a symphony … the movement is full of wonderful beauties and the themes are treated with a mastery which is becoming more and more characteristic of him. It is all interwoven in a most interesting fashion, and at the same time, it bursts forth absolutely spontaneously; one enjoys it in great draughts, without being reminded of all the work there is in it." Little did she know that these thoughts had begun seven years previously!

Early performances were enthusiastically received. The critic Eduard Hanslick wrote, "Even the layman will immediately recognize it as one of the most individual and magnificent works of the symphonic literature. In the first movement, the listener is held by fervent emotional expression, by Faustian conflicts and by a contrapuntal art as rich as it is severe. The *Andante* softens this mood with a noble song…. The *scherzo* strikes me as inferior to the other movements…. The abrupt close is utterly inappropriate. The fourth movement begins most significantly with an *Adagio* before the song of the woodland horn rises clear and sweet above the tremolo of the violins. …(irrespective of my few reservations), this new symphony of Brahms is a possession of which the nation may be proud, an inexhaustible fountain of sincere pleasure and fruitful study." When general listeners commented that the big Finale reminded them of Beethoven's ninth, Brahms quipped, "Any fool can see that!" Influenced by Beethoven, yes; derivative of Beethoven, no. Brahms fully recognized the implications of Beethoven's symphonies, but infused this first venture with his own identity and style, writing melodies that were Brahmsian to the core and replacing the third movement *scherzo* with an *intermezzo*. The musicologist D. Kern Holoman summarized the Beethoven connection, saying, "A more fitting tribute to the Beethovenian ideal of the symphony as struggle and resolution is difficult to imagine." Not all critics were favorable; one even suggested posting signs saying "Exit in case of Brahms."

The first movement opens in C Minor, a key that for Brahms signified "hard, pitiless struggle, demoniac supernatural shapes, sinister defiance, steely energy and dramatic intensity of passion." A dignified 37-measure introduction in 6/8 meter prefaces the unfolding of a vast musical canvas. Timpani beat steady undertones while snippets of melody steadily coalesce into the bounding, rebounding first *allegro* theme. The melody takes wing, growing and intensifying, subsiding momentarily when a poignant tune surfaces in the winds. A storming development roars into position, filled with conflict, complex polyrhythmic passages, extravagantly utilizing all the forces of the orchestra. Brahms then balances his titanic structure with a traditional recapitulation and a summarizing coda ending in the Major. Romantic as the tensions and unleashed violence had been, Brahms controlled this display, mindful of classical architecture and German tradition.

All storms subside in the second movement, *Andante sostenuto*. There were three versions of this movement before Brahms found his final choice. Herein, Brahms moves his thought to E Major, a distant tonal site from C Minor, creating a totally new, fresh setting. Orchestration is lightened, and there is greater use of middle and high registers. A melancholy, long-lined theme emerges from the

violins, followed by an oboe solo. Strings and winds engage in contemplative dialogue before violins lead into a reverberating climax. The close returns to the ruminative beginning.

The *intermezzo* third movement is terse, yet playful. Brahms gives us an easy-going, relaxed interlude. A clarinet dances a simple tune over *pizzicato* (plucked) accompaniment, winds sing a response, and finally the strings bring the music to conclusion.

Ten years separated the first three movements from the finale. Possibly because of this time span, the last movement is similar to a typical first movement in its enormous proportions. It seems that Brahms is "beginning again." A long, poetic introduction embracing the main ideas sets the stage. This is followed by low *pizzicato* rumblings inciting an agitated mood throughout the entire orchestra, climaxed by a crashing drum roll. A solo horn melody, later shared by flute, calms the activity. On a postcard to Clara Schumann dated September 12, 1868, Brahms wrote out this horn topic and appended the text, "High on the mountain, Deep in the valley, I greet you many thousand times." A soft brass chorale is the last component of the introduction.

The first major theme is marked *allegro non troppo, ma con brio*. Amid a surging *crescendo*, a sturdy, swinging melody emerges, clearly reminiscent of the hymn in Beethoven's ninth. Subsidiary themes add to the extensive content. The tumult eventually resumes, alternating with quiet episodes. The hymn tune asserts its significance, gains enormous strength, grows to Herculean proportions, culminating in a stunning climax of fortissimo brass. The symphony concludes in a joyous rushing *stretto* (compression).

Once he started to write symphonies, Brahms found his stride, gained confidence, and within one year produced his highly contrasting second symphony.

Mario Venzago conducted the orchestra's last performances of Brahms' Symphony No. 1 in June 2006.