

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

## Ludwig van Beethoven

Let us be silent about this work! No matter how frequently heard, whether at home or in the concert hall, this symphony invariably wields its power over people of every age like those great phenomena of nature that fill us with fear and admiration at all times, no matter how frequently we may experience them.

So said Robert Schumann of Ludwig van Beethoven's Symphony No. 5. One is truly tempted to heed Schumann's advice and say nothing about this work, which everyone knows and of which everything has already been said. Probably no work in the orchestral canon has been analyzed and discussed as exhaustively as has the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

Here one may imagine catching a glimpse of Beethoven's state of mind during the period in which he wrote this piece, or at least some facet of the complicated prism of his being. He had tasted more than his fair share of disarray and anguish. As early as October 1802, when he penned his heartrending Heiligenstadt Testament, he was losing his hearing — an adversity for anyone, but a catastrophe for a musician. In the ensuing six years, his deafness had increased dramatically. What's more, in March 1808 a raging infection threatened the loss of a finger, which would have spelled further disaster for a composer who was greatly attached to the keyboard. He was surrounded by a nervous political climate: Vienna had been occupied by Napoleon's troops since November 1805, and the civic uneasiness would erupt into violence within months of the Fifth Symphony's premiere. On the home front, Beethoven's brother Caspar, who had essentially served as his secretary, had gotten married on

May 25, 1806, leaving the composer a bit at sea in his affairs. At the end of 1807 he found himself rejected in love, and not for the first time. Whatever confusion these circumstances engendered in Beethoven's personal life could only have been exacerbated by his habit of constantly moving from one lodging to another. In the course of 1808 alone — the year when the Fifth Symphony was completed and premiered — he hung his hat at no fewer than four addresses.

This biographical turmoil did not, however, represent the totality of Beethoven's life at the time, any more than the Fifth Symphony represents the totality of his music. He frequently escaped the hustle and bustle of Vienna to spend time in the suburban parks and countryside; that's where one imagines the composer when listening to his Sixth Symphony, the *Pastoral*, which was roughly

---

## IN SHORT

**Born:** probably December 16, 1770, since he was baptized on the 17th, in Bonn, Germany

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

**Work composed:** sketches begun in early 1804, score completed in early 1808; dedicated to Prince Franz Joseph Maximilian von Lobkowitz and Count Andreas Kirillovich Razumovsky

**World premiere:** December 22, 1808, at the Theater an der Wien, Vienna

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** December 7, 1842, Ureli Corelli Hill, conductor

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** December 14, 2016, at the United Nations General Assembly, Alan Gilbert, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 31 minutes

coeval to the Fifth. For that matter, Beethoven wrote his entire Fourth Symphony while he was engaged in his Fifth, and there is little in that score to suggest the troubled soul glimpsed in the Fifth. It's not necessarily wrong to imagine that biographical overtones reside in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, but when all is said and done, this is a unique work, just as all of Beethoven's masterpieces are, a vehicle in which the com-

poser explores and works out strictly aesthetic challenges that he has set for himself.

The all-Beethoven marathon concert at which Beethoven's Fifth and Sixth Symphonies were premiered was a disaster. (Also on the program: his concert scena "Ah! perfido," the Gloria and Sanctus from the C-major Mass, the Piano Concerto No. 4, a piano fantasy improvised by Beethoven, and the Choral Fantasy.) Vienna was experiencing

---

## In the Beginning

The New York Philharmonic's long history with Beethoven's Fifth Symphony began with its very first concert. The performance on December 7, 1842, led off with what was identified as the Grand Symphony in C Minor, sending a signal that this new ensemble was intent on establishing a high standard of musical excellence. The symphony was played in its entirety, vs. the then common practice of extracting single movements, and was conducted by Orchestra Founder Ureli Corelli Hill.

Unlike most of his European-born counterparts in the new Orchestra, Hill was American, a New England native, born in 1802 (exact location indeterminate), who had arrived in New York City in his 20s to make his way as a violinist, conductor, and teacher. His ambition was apparent as he conducted the first complete performance in the city of Handel's *Messiah* in 1831. An ensuing trip to Europe for study with Louis Spohr introduced him to the standards and organizational principles of orchestras in Europe; upon his return, Hill began talks with musicians in New York about the possibility of forming a permanent orchestra, of which none existed at the time.

A review of that first concert in *The Albion* reported that Beethoven's Fifth Symphony was played "with a precision and care which gave evident proof of the anxiety of every artist there, to promote the good cause and do honour to his own talents."

Since that launch, the Philharmonic has gone on to perform Beethoven's Fifth Symphony more than 500 times, in locations from Central Park to Beijing, China, through to the most recent performance, at the United Nations General Assembly, in December 2016, as part of ceremonies honoring departing Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and his successor, António Guterres.

— The Editors

*Ureli Corelli Hill in 1840*



a particularly unpleasant cold spell just then, and after expenses for the hall and the musicians, there was not enough money left to apply to such niceties as heat. Sitting through the four-hour concert was more than most audience members could endure. The composer Johann Friedrich Reichardt, installed next to Beethoven's patron Prince Lobkowitz in the aristocrat's box, regretfully reported:

There we held out in the bitterest cold from half-past six until half-past ten, and experienced the fact that one can easily have too much of a good — and even more of a strong — thing.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings.

---

## Listen for ... Silence Before the Thunder

Beethoven's Fifth Symphony opens with what must be the most famous four notes in history:



In fact, three of them are identical: eighth notes on the pitch of G. Even if those three notes were heard alone, out of context, 99 out of 100 listeners — no, probably the whole hundred — would chime in to punctuate them with the half-note E-flat extended by a fermata.

Of course, music is made up of more than just notes. It's also composed of silences, which in their way are every bit as important as the sounds themselves. Beethoven's Fifth actually opens with a silence, an eighth note rest that, in retrospect, is as palpable as the eighth-note Gs that follow it. Anton Schindler, Beethoven's sometime amanuensis, whose reminiscences, however welcome, were often highly embroidered, claimed that the composer once pointed to this motif in his score and proclaimed, "Thus Destiny knocks at the door!" Whether it happened or not, it has become so thoroughly entrenched in Beethovenian lore that most people choose to hear it that way.