

Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 73, Emperor

Ludwig van Beethoven

Ludwig van Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5 was born into troubled times, with the Napoleonic Wars coursing to full tide across Europe. When the composer's *Leonore* (the opera that would eventually morph into *Fidelio*) was premiered, on November 20, 1805, French armies were closing in on Vienna, and by the time the first 15,000 of Napoleon's troops entered the city, on November 13, most of the town's noble or otherwise upper-class citizens had fled.

The aftermath was not good for Austria or its allies — Great Britain, Russia, Sweden, and some German states. Prussia grew nervous and within a year it joined the alliance. Napoleon quickly redeployed his troops, captured the Prussian capital of Berlin, and in late 1806 — at the zenith of his career — made his move toward Russia. In 1807 he also decided to subjugate Portugal and Spain as a way to cut off British supply routes. Austria had been reorganizing its army and, in the spring of 1809, in alliance with Britain, it took advantage of Napoleon's distraction with the Peninsular War to launch an attack on French strongholds in Bavaria. Napoleon's armies descended on Vienna again, but this time they met far more resistance than they had three and a half years earlier. Ferocious and costly fighting ensued between April and July until the Battle of Wagram swung the balance of victory to Napoleon, who appeared yet again to be invincible.

Monetary inflation swerved out of control and people were fleeing Vienna in droves. The Empress left, and with her the Archduke Rudolph, who was her brother-in-law and Beethoven's piano pupil. That July, Beethoven wrote to his publisher in Leipzig:

We have been suffering misery in a most concentrated form. What a destructive and

disorderly life I see and hear around me, nothing but drums, cannons, human misery in every form.

Through it all he had been writing a piano concerto, and it is marvelous to think that anything so uplifting and inspiring could emerge from such dismal surroundings. When it finally received its Vienna premiere two years later, a French officer in the audience had the audacity to shout out “C'est l'Empereur!” — at least so the tale is told. The name stuck, with the ironic result that throughout history this transcendent concerto, Beethoven's last, has been shackled with a nickname relating to the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, the same Napoleon in whom Beethoven had once placed so much humanitarian hope but whose name he had scratched from the title page of his Third Symphony, *Sinfonia eroica*, enraged upon learning that the French general had crowned himself Emperor.

IN SHORT

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

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna

Work composed: 1809

World premiere: November 28, 1811, in Leipzig, by the Gewandhaus Orchestra, Johann Philipp Christian Schulz, conductor, Friedrich Schneider, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: March 10, 1855, Henry C. Timm, conductor, Gustave Setter, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: January 14, 2017, Alan Gilbert, conductor, Stephen Hough, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 39 minutes

Uniquely among Beethoven's five piano concertos, this one was not premiered by its composer. By the time it was introduced, in 1811, he was substantially deaf and no longer felt comfortable performing publicly at the keyboard (although he would still do so, very occasionally, until 1815). The world premiere, which took place in Leipzig, was accordingly entrusted to Friedrich Schneider, of whom little is known, other than that he had a friendly visit with Beethoven in 1819 when he passed through Vienna giving organ recitals. The Vienna premiere — the one at which the

piece apparently got its nickname — took place only on February 12, 1812, on which occasion the soloist was Beethoven's pupil Carl Czerny, remembered chiefly for the unavoidable finger exercises he penned to bedevil piano students into eternity.

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings, in addition to the solo piano.

Cadenzas: by Beethoven

A Career Move Not Taken

As Napoleon's power increased throughout Europe, he began to ensconce his relatives at the helm of regional governments: his brother was given the Kingdom of Spain, his brother-in-law the Kingdom of Naples, his stepson the Viceroyalty of the Kingdom of Italy. Various German principalities were assembled together to create the Kingdom of Westphalia, centered in Kassel, and that went to Napoleon's youngest brother, Jérôme Bonaparte.

Jérôme began to set up a governing structure that reflected his brother's somewhat utopian vision for Westphalia, which was to be a land devoid of social rank in which cultural achievements were officially and enthusiastically appreciated. In order to shore up the latter goal, in the autumn of 1808 Jérôme reached out to Beethoven, to whom he offered the position of Kapellmeister (music director) at the substantial salary of 400 gold ducats. By the beginning of 1809 it seemed that Beethoven had decided to accept the job, less out of particular fervor for the Westphalian ideal than for the fact that he was flattered to have his ego stroked in this or any other way.

This was the specific impetus for the extraordinary counteroffer he received from his Viennese patrons Prince Lobkowitz and Prince Kinsky, along with Archduke Rudolph, who didn't want to lose their favorite composer to Kassel. On March 1, 1809, they and Beethoven agreed to a contract whereby the composer would receive an annuity of 4,000 florins for life so long as he remained in Vienna or "another city in the hereditary lands of his Austrian-Imperial Majesty." The agreement allowed that Beethoven could move only if he received a job that paid more than what the Princes were promising; and since that never happened, Beethoven remained in Vienna for the rest of his years.



Jérôme Bonaparte, King of Westphalia, with Queen Catharina