

# Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

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## **Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 19** **Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67**

### **Ludwig van Beethoven**

It is customary to point out that Ludwig van Beethoven's **Piano Concerto No. 2** was really his Piano Concerto No. 1. That is true only to a degree. There is no question that the so-called Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, performed tonight, occupied Beethoven sporadically through the decade of the 1790s, and that he may have premiered it as early as March 29, 1795; the so-called Piano Concerto No. 1 in C major appears to date entirely from 1795 and to have been premiered on December 18 of that year. They were issued by different publishing houses in different cities, and both were probably revised immediately before they were engraved. The C-major Concerto was brought out in print in March 1801 and the B-flat-major not until that December, with the result that the C-major was identified as the composer's Piano Concerto No. 1 and the B-flat-major, though composed earlier, was labeled his Second.

But putting a fine point on details of chronology, one might as well observe that the B-flat-major Concerto really was, in a sense, Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 2. In 1784, when he was only 13 years old, Beethoven produced a Piano Concerto in E-flat major; its historical interest outshines its musical value by several orders of magnitude.

Beethoven was already an adept keyboard player by the time he embarked on that early concerto. He had filled in as deputy court organist in Bonn in June 1782, and nine months later his teacher, Christian Gottlob Neefe, contributed a glowing report of his 11-year-old pupil to Cramer's *Magazine der Musik*, noting that

he plays the piano very skillfully and with power, reads at sight very well, and ...

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### **In Short**

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

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

**Works composed and premiered:** Piano Concerto No. 2, sketched as early as 1788, provisionally completed in 1794–95, revised in 1798 and again just prior to publication in 1801; dedicated to Prince Carl Nicklas von Nickelsberg, a bureaucrat in the Austrian Commerce Department; premiered perhaps March 29, 1795, at Vienna's Burgtheater, with the composer as soloist and conductor. Symphony No. 5, sketches begun in early 1804, score completed in early 1808; dedicated to Prince Franz Joseph Maximilian von Lobkowitz and Count Andreas Kirillovich Razumovsky; premiered December 22, 1808, at the Theater an der Wien, Vienna

**New York Philharmonic premieres and most recent performances:** Piano Concerto No. 2, February 17, 1920, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which merged with the New York Philharmonic in 1928), Alfred Cortot, soloist; most recent performance, July 20, 2019, at Bravo! Vail in Colorado, Jaap van Zweden, conductor, Conrad Tao, soloist. Symphony No. 5, premiered on the Orchestra's first concert, December 7, 1842, Ureli Corelli Hill, conductor; most recent performance, July 26, 2018, at Bravo! Vail in Colorado, Joshua Weilerstein, conductor

**Estimated durations:** Piano Concerto No. 2, ca. 29 minutes; Symphony No. 5, ca. 31 minutes

would surely become a second Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart if he were to continue as he has begun.

In 1787 Beethoven visited Vienna, where it seems certain that he met Mozart and may have taken piano lessons from him. In November 1792 he finally moved to Vienna, which would be his home for the rest of his life. In his baggage was the preliminary work he had done on his Piano Concerto in B-flat major.

A high-profile event came Beethoven's way on March 29, 1795, when he was featured as both composer and pianist at a charity concert at Vienna's Burgtheater, held for the benefit of the Vienna Composers Society, which looked after the welfare of musicians' widows and orphans. It is widely assumed

that he seized this occasion to premiere his B-flat-major Concerto, although it is conceivable that the "new concerto of his invention" that was included on the program may have been the C-major instead.

Anyone writing a piano concerto in Vienna at that time did so in the shadow of the late lamented Mozart. Beethoven knew at least some of Mozart's concertos intimately, and in this piece he employs an orchestra identical to that required by four of Mozart's piano concertos of 1784. In general structure he also sticks to a Mozartian norm: three movements, of which the first is a sonata form with an orchestral exposition, the second a lyrical slow movement, and the third a rondo. In addition, the texture is truly orchestral, following

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## Off the Cuff

The slow movement (*Adagio*) of Beethoven's **Piano Concerto No. 2** offers a lyrical, rather solemn melody that becomes increasingly embroidered as the movement progresses. This would have provided Beethoven-the-pianist with an opportunity to show off his skill as an improviser. It seems unlikely that he would have constrained himself literally to the score as it is known, especially since he hadn't gotten around to actually writing it down by the time of the premiere.



In fact, he probably didn't set much of the concerto down on the page for another six years after the first performance. The composer wrote to the concerto's eventual publisher, Hoffmeister and Kühnel in Leipzig (which would become known as C.F. Peters after 1814), in a letter dated April 22, 1801:

As is usual with me, the pianoforte part in the concerto was not written out in the score, and only now have I done so, hence, because of the haste you will receive that part in my own illegible manuscript.

*A depiction of Beethoven by Carl Schloesser, 1890*

the Mozartian ideal of an integrated texture in which the piano plays the role of *primus inter pares*. Nonetheless, within this idealized scoring the soloist has plenty to keep him or her busy; and if the fingerwork sounds not quite Mozartian, the fact remains that the apple has not fallen far from the tree.

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 wrote composer Robert Schumann of 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 composition in the orchestral canon has been analyzed and discussed as exhaustively as has the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth.

Here one may imagine catching a glimpse of Beethoven's state of mind as he was writing it, or at least one facet of the complicated prism of his being. He had tasted more than his fair share of disarray and anguish. He began losing his hearing as early as October 1802 — an adversity for anyone, but a catastrophe for a musician. In the six years since, 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

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## Listen for . . . the Rondo

It is ironic that in the last portion of his **Piano Concerto No. 2**, the rollicking *Rondo* that Beethoven seems to have tossed off just days before the premiere, should be the movement that remains the most memorable. It almost certainly was a replacement for what Beethoven initially conceived as the finale, which survives as the stand-alone *Rondo for Piano and Orchestra* in B-flat major (WoO 6 — WoO referring to the catalogue of works to which the composer did not assign opus numbers). Both of the preceding movements in this concerto are beautifully composed and filled with interesting ideas and imaginative working-out. But the *Rondo* theme, an infectious little tune in compound time, is blessed with short-long rhythms — colloquially known as “Scotch snaps” — that have a way of sticking in the ear:



The *Rondo* refrain appears four times in the course of the movement, and the interludes provide delightful contrast, including a foray in the direction of what late-18th-century listeners would have taken to be Gypsy music.

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 Carl had gotten married in May of 1806, leaving him a bit at sea in his affairs, since the brother had essentially served as the composer's secretary until then. 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

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## The New York Philharmonic Connection

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, since 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, as well as 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

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 surrounding Vienna, which conjures his Sixth Symphony, the *Pastoral*, which was roughly 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 spied in the Fifth. When all is said and done, this is a unique work, just as all of Beethoven's masterpieces are, a vehicle in which the composer 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 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 in the theater was more than most concertgoers 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:** Piano Concerto No. 2 calls for flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, and strings, in addition to the solo piano. Symphony No. 5 employs two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, and timpani.

**Cadenza:** Piano Concerto No. 2, by Beethoven

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## 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 that happened or not, it has become so thoroughly entrenched in Beethovenian lore that most people choose to hear it that way.