

Beethoven's Piano Concertos Nos. 1 & 5

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Ludwig van Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 1 in C Major, Op. 15

Beethoven's First Concerto reminds us that he was a brilliant pianist. The outer movements have a marvelous sense of humor, particularly the finale. The slow movement's dignity and introspection look forward to the depth of Beethoven's late string quartets. And C major, the Viennese key of sunlight, rarely sounds so affirming as it does in this concerto.

Ludwig van Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat Major, Op. 73, "Emperor"

Emperor. The very word conjures up magnificence, pomp, ceremony, power, nobility, majesty. All these qualities are present in Beethoven's Fifth Piano Concerto. His works in E-flat major, including this concerto and the "Eroica" Symphony, are generally characterized by nobility of spirit and grandeur, the stuff of which heroes are made. And the solo part is dazzling!

Ludwig van Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 1 in C Major, Op. 15

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born: December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: 1795; revised 1800

World Premiere: December 18, 1795, in Vienna. The composer was the soloist.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1948–49 season. Ania Dorfman was the soloist; Samuel Antek conducted.

Duration: 36 minutes

Instrumentation: flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, solo piano and strings.

When Beethoven moved from Bonn to Vienna late in 1792, he quickly established himself as a gifted piano virtuoso. Gaining recognition as a composer took a little longer—but not much. By the mid-1790s, the young firebrand had acquired several wealthy patrons and had an enthusiastic following in the imperial capital. He was his own best advertisement for his music. A piano concerto was an essential vehicle for self-promotion.

The C-major concerto was not Beethoven’s first piano concerto, though it *was* the first to be published. He had tried his hand at concerto writing as a teenager in Bonn with an early work in E flat. Better known than that youthful effort is the Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat Major, Op. 19, which was composed in 1795 and appeared on Viennese concert programs in the mid-1790s. The C-major concerto was composed in the late 1790s, possibly as early as 1796 and certainly by 1798. Beethoven played it frequently at this stage of his career, when he had earned a formidable reputation as a pianist.

Many critics have noted the strong imprint of the Mozartean piano concerto on this work. In particular, the ceremonial/military character and tonality of Mozart’s 25th concerto in C Major, K. 503, invite comparison. Less obvious but equally compelling is the parallel in virtuosic figuration patterns with Mozart’s D-major concerto, K.537 (“Coronation”). Clearly Beethoven had studied Mozart’s works carefully.

Beethoven expanded significantly on the Mozartean concerto model. The first movement unfolds over about 17 minutes. The length results in part from Beethoven’s elaborate solo cadenza, but also because of the symphonic treatment of the whole. Despite its unusual duration, the Allegro con brio feels compact. The characteristic reworking of motivic ideas mingles with some surprisingly singable melodies.

The slow movement is an eloquent cantilena in A-flat major, whose rich ornamentation and tranquil spirit anticipate the “Emperor” Concerto. Beethoven’s lovely clarinet solo contributes an intimate, chamber-music-like dialogue. The bubbly finale is among his wittiest movements. Even its subsidiary themes exude rhythmic vitality, fully realizing the scherzando instruction of Beethoven’s subtitle.

Ludwig van Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat Major, Op. 73, “Emperor”

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born: December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: 1809

World Premiere: November 28, 1811, in Leipzig. Friedrich Schneider was the pianist; Johann Philipp Schulz conducted the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1927–28 season. Harold Bauer was the soloist; Philip James conducted.

Duration: 38 minutes

Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs, timpani, solo piano and strings.

Beethoven's piano

Beethoven established his reputation in the 1790s as a pianist before he achieved substantial recognition as a composer. He had the natural affinity for the keyboard that comes from personal understanding of its capabilities. In the “Emperor,” Beethoven anticipated his Hammerklavier’s potential for this expansive music. By 1809, the keyboard had expanded beyond Mozart’s five-octave fortepiano; however, another half-century would elapse before that development culminated in an instrument the size and scope that Inon Barnatan plays for these performances. Beethoven was prescient in his ambition for the piano, writing music so far ahead of its time that the instrument has continued to grow into the music. One feels that he would have been thoroughly delighted with the modern concert grand.

Beethoven's patrons cut him a deal

Beethoven composed the “Emperor” Concerto during a period when Vienna was braced for another onslaught by the French Emperor Napoleon. Ironically, Napoleon’s brother Jerome Bonaparte, King of Westphalia, had recently invited Beethoven to move to Cassel, Germany, to become Kapellmeister. Beethoven was tempted; he was not living particularly well in 1809. Three of his patrons—Prince Lobkowitz, Prince Kinsky and the Archduke Rudolph—persuaded him to remain in Vienna by pooling resources to provide him with an annuity. Devaluation of the Austrian currency the following year compromised the monetary value of their generosity, but the significance of their gesture was not lost on Beethoven.

In any case, Vienna had been home to him for so long that he was unlikely to leave at that point. In light of his strong ties to and reputation in the Austrian capital, it is ironic that the premiere of the “Emperor” did not take place in Vienna, but in Leipzig, where Johann Schneider is said to have performed it in 1810. Beethoven’s pupil Karl Czerny played the first Vienna performance the following year.

Bold statement: Cadenza at the outset

Beethoven tested his boundaries and elasticity of form in this concerto, some of which border on the revolutionary. One experiment was placing the cadenza at the very beginning of the first movement, rather than near the end. Full orchestra intones a resonant, fortissimo E-flat-major chord. Solo piano responds with a series of arpeggios that cede to a trill, then figuration, passage work and yes, even a little melodic lead-in to a second chord from the orchestra, this time in A-flat major. Once again unaccompanied piano responds, this time with more elaborate figuration for both hands. The piano ushers in the third orchestral chord, a preparatory dominant seventh—no one in the orchestra has yet played more than a single pitch—and answers it with a more melodic, but still virtuosic, passage to the main theme.

A more or less conventional exposition follows, but after such introductory drama, we are hardly listening to first and second themes with conventional expectations. Beethoven indulges in nearly 100 measures to unfold his ideas before we hear the piano again; clearly he is in no hurry to make his point in this work. The soloist re-enters with another grand flourish: this time an ascending chromatic scale and a dramatic trill, before a simple, elegant statement of the imperial theme.

A lesser composer might have made a bombast of scales, arpeggios, trills, thunderous chords and the like. In Beethoven's hands, the piano weaves around the principal melodic ideas, etching elaborate figures without ever obscuring the noble design of each theme. There is no solo cadenza per se at the end of the Allegro, though the extended coda that serves the approximate function does begin on the familiar six-four chord that many listeners will recognize as heralding a cadenza. The structure is actually rather symphonic, more akin to the second development that occurs in the massive coda to the "Eroica" Symphony. Everything sounds just right, inevitable and, yes, majestic.

Shimmering slow movement

The middle movement of the concerto is comparatively brief, perhaps because its rich tonality of B major is so potent. Emphasizing dialogue between soloist and orchestra, Beethoven develops his material almost like variations, with an improvisatory character. An inspired moment occurs at the very end of the slow movement, with the transition to the glorious finale. The horns sustain a single pitch for what seems like an eternity, suspended in midair—then, seemingly out of nowhere, the soloist introduces the triumphant chords of the closing Rondo, initially posing them as a tentative question.

Affirmative finale

With affirmation forthcoming from the noble horns, the exultant finale launches its irrepressible joy ride for one of the most delightful and positive conclusions in all Beethoven. As in the first movement, the piano choreographs dazzling figures around the structure of the main themes, without compromising their structure. We can always perceive the skeleton, yet our appreciation of detail and our perception of royal splendor remain unimpaired. The “Emperor” ends with every ounce of the magnificent style with which it opened: virile, spacious and ever confident.