

Beethoven's Fifth Symphony

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Beethoven: Overture to *Coriolan*. *Coriolan* is vintage Beethoven: a stormy sonata-form movement in the heroic key of C minor. Jolting chords and lurching accents in the principal theme portray the tortured, indecisive hero. This is Beethoven at his most tragic.

Bartók: Piano Concerto No. 3. A kinder, gentler Bartók emerges in the Third Piano Concerto. Nascent neoromanticism blooms in his melodious, folk-inflected first movement. A noble chorale gives way to nature's night sounds in the slow movement, leading to an exhilarating finale.

Beethoven: Symphony No. 5. Fate knocks at the door in symphonic literature's most famous opening. Beethoven takes us on a journey from struggle to triumph in his magnificent Fifth Symphony.

BEETHOVEN: Overture to *Coriolan*, Op. 62

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born: December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: 1807

World Premiere: March 1807 in Vienna

NJSO Premiere: 1927–28 season; Philip James conducted.

Duration: 8 minutes

Beethoven's overtures vary widely in content and quality. Some are occasional pieces with little dramatic import; others are middle-period masterpieces. The former category includes *King Stephen* and *The Consecration of the House*. The latter group is dominated by the three *Leonore* Overtures and the Overture to *Fidelio*; plus *Egmont* and this weekend's featured overture, *Coriolan*.

What they all share is a connection to staged drama. Beethoven only completed one opera, *Fidelio*, but we know that he considered several other operatic projects. His *Creatures of Prometheus* was one of the most popular ballets of the early 19th century. Beethoven also composed incidental music for several plays. Thus the common denominator for his overtures is theatre. Only one of Beethoven's overtures, *Namensfeier*, was conceived independent of the stage.

The common denominator for Beethoven's overtures is the stage, whether opera, ballet, or incidental music. His source for *Coriolan* was Heinrich von Collin's drama, based on the same legend as Shakespeare's play. The story concerns a Roman general who is banished because of his proud disdain for the plebeians. He allies with the enemy Volscians and schemes to attack his fellow Romans. His wife and mother enter the enemy camp in order to plead with him. In Collin's drama, the tormented general commits suicide (a *dénouement* significantly different from Shakespeare, in which Coriolanus is killed by the Volscians). Collin's play was produced successfully in Vienna in 1802, but by 1807 its popularity had dwindled.

Beethoven's musical evocation of the drama focuses on the hero's moment of decision. The overture is a succinct sonata form that the composer imbues with the conflicts and human drama inherent in Collin's play. Beethoven plunges us into the turmoil with agonized chords at the start. Coriolanus' indecision is apparent in the unstable, flexible rhythm of the principal theme, whose lurching accents and phrasing are out of synchronization with the movement's march tempo.

At the conclusion, the hero is destroyed. No triumph emerges from this struggle. Beethoven's message is dark, focusing on the hero's frustration. His musical momentum is tied to Coriolanus' emotional one-track mind. The result may be a tad depressing, but it is powerful in its finality.

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

BARTÓK: Piano Concerto No. 3

BÉLA BARTÓK

Born: March 25, 1881, in Nagyszentmiklós, Transylvania

Died: September 26, 1945, in New York, New York

Composed: summer 1945

World Premiere: February 8, 1946, in Philadelphia. György Sandor was the soloist; Eugene Ormandy conducted the Philadelphia Orchestra.

NJSO Premiere: 1973–74 season. György Sandor was the soloist; Henry Lewis conducted.

Duration: 23 minutes

In April 1940, Bartók left his native Hungary for a new life in America. He was accompanied by his second wife, Ditta, and their teenage son Peter. The adjustment was not easy. Hampered by a weak command of English, Bartók found this country strange and daunting. The noise of New York City proved irksome and disturbing. Plagued by exhaustion, overwork and emotional stress, his health declined. By spring 1942, he was quite ill with leukemia and struggling financially.

During the winter of 1944–45, Bartók's fragile health took a turn for the worse. In an effort to help, the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) arranged for him to stay in Asheville, North Carolina, hoping that the clean mountain air would encourage his recovery. A great nature lover, Bartók was delighted with the beautiful countryside of western Carolina. He took long walks, jotting down bird melodies, some of which found their way into the Third Piano Concerto.

Bartók knew he was dying. This concerto was, in part, an effort to secure his wife's future. Ditta Pásztory Bartók was an excellent pianist. The couple had concertized widely as a two-piano team. His

love-bequest to her is a cheerful, joyous piece, filled with the buoyant transparency that graces so much of late Bartók. No trace of his middle-period stridency mars this music. His idiom is refined rather than coarse, melodic rather than percussive, tender rather than dispassionate.

The concerto manuscript lacks the profusion of precise expression and tempo markings so characteristic in Bartók's music. Had he lived, he would certainly have edited the piece as painstakingly as he did all his other compositions. The final 17 bars of the concerto were sketched in Bartók's own musical shorthand. Following the composer's death in September 1945, his friend and student Tibor Serly completed the orchestration and assisted in editing the work for performance.

The sonata-form first movement opens with shimmering strings, above which the piano states a single-line melody in two-octave unison. Much of the solo part is in octaves, thirds, and sixths. Bartók's piano style here is oddly akin to Shostakovich, but the melodic profile is distinctly Hungarian, and very much Bartók's own language. Hardly any polyphony intrudes on the clarity of this movement, whose textural transparency is a marvel. Serenity, warmth and accessibility are its watchwords.

Bartók's slow movement is a chorale, marked *Adagio religioso*. His biographer Lajos Lesznai explains that "it does not mean 'religious' in the ordinary sense of the word but suggests the reverent mood of a man in tune with nature." A strong resemblance to—if not outright quotation from—the *Heiliger Dankgesang* movement of Beethoven's String Quartet, Op.132 reflects Bartók's immersion in Beethoven's works late in life.

The chorale movement is interrupted by an episode of "night music," a distinctive, recurrent aspect of Bartók's style from the mid-1920s on. Something of a misnomer, the term more accurately refers to the mysterious, almost supernatural sounds of the night as it gives way to daybreak, at the moment when nature is coming alive. Always fascinated by the sounds of nature, Bartók frequently incorporated those sounds into his music.

His strong affinity with the world around him blossoms in this magically transformed interlude.

Shimmering with life, the night music section is evocatively scored for woodwinds, muted brass, xylophone and string *tremolandi*, in addition to the soloist. After this gossamer sorcery, Bartók returns to the chorale for the close of the movement. The piano weaves light counterpoint, leaving the chorale to the woodwinds.

The rondo finale ensues *attacca* (without pause), blazing with bright chords, strong rhythms, and the superlative, dazzling counterpoint that is rarely long suppressed in Bartók. A disjunct, jazzy theme provides rhythmic and melodic impetus for several absorbing episodes, including a brilliant fugato. Among the most exciting of these is a fugato, initiated by the piano, then joined by the violas and celli, with subsequent commentary from clarinets, oboes and bassoons. With his masterly hand, Bartók tosses off inversions, strettis, mirror canons and all manner of other contrapuntal feats, all the while inducing us to tap our feet as we succumb to the irresistible pull of his rhythm. Few movements in the concerted piano literature sustain so high a level of exuberance and inherent musical substance.

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, xylophone, triangle, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, strings and solo piano.

BEETHOVEN: Symphony No. 5 in C Minor, Op. 67

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Composed: 1807–08

World Premiere: December 22, 1808, in Vienna.

NJSO Premiere: 1929–30 season; Rene Pollain conducted.

Duration: 31 minutes

The decade from 1802 to 1812 was a period of astonishing productivity for Beethoven, yielding a remarkable succession of musical masterpieces. The twin pillars of 1807 and 1808 were his Fifth and Sixth Symphonies. Ideas for a symphony in C minor, however, were percolating as early as 1803.

Considering that E-flat major, the key of the “Eroica” Symphony, is the relative major of C minor, it is not all that surprising that Beethoven generated ideas for both works at the same time.

C minor has been called both the “key of fate” and the “heroic key” in Beethoven’s music. There is no question that certain tonalities carried deep significance for Beethoven, and several other works in C minor share the terse drama of the Fifth Symphony. The “Pathétique” Sonata, Op.13 (1798–99) and the Third Piano Concerto, Op. 37, (1800) are earlier examples; the Overture to *Coriolan* that opens this NJSO program is a C-minor work contemporary with the Fifth Symphony.

Tradition has assigned a philosophical program to the Fifth Symphony: the artist as hero, pitted against an unsympathetic society, emerging triumphant after a victory over internal strife.

Beethoven’s scribe Anton Schindler reported that Beethoven pointed to the beginning of the first movement and expressed in these words the fundamental idea of his work: “Thus Fate knocks at the door!”

Musical scholar W.J. Turner referred to the symphony’s non-self-seeking hero, the passionate idealist battling against the inclemencies and hostilities of nature and the passions of his fellow men and struggling to harmonize his own desires with those of the rest of mankind.

Robert Schumann detected French influence in the music of the Fifth Symphony, particularly that of Etienne-Nicolas Méhul (1763–1817). Much French music at the turn of the century, especially opera, bore the imprint of the French Revolution. France was in a state of political and social upheaval for Beethoven’s entire creative life, and the strong presence of a growing military culture made its impact felt in the arts.

About the music

Military flavor is perhaps the overriding characteristic that unifies the Fifth Symphony. March rhythms figure prominently, sometimes even when the music is in triple time, as in the C-major sections of the

slow movement. Beethoven's emphasis on the brass section underscores the martial quality. So too does his expansion of the orchestra to include piccolo (redolent of military band flavor), contrabassoon and trombones for the finale.

The first movement is dominated by the iconic four-note motto. Beethoven's focus on it is imaginative and varied, building dramatic tension that leads to electric climaxes. The motive recurs in the later movements, ingeniously altered.

Beethoven opens the slow movement with an elegant, elaborate theme that dissipates the storminess of his Allegro con brio. He then presents four variations, including one in minor mode and another with a brilliant fanfare incorporating the military aspect. His scherzo is traditional in its organization: loosely related to the classical structure of minuet-trio-minuet. Beethoven departs from tradition with the spooky, menacing lower strings that outline his opening gesture. Military elements return as the horns announce a new theme, whose rhythm is the same as the first movement motto. The central trio is bumptious and good-natured, reminding us that Beethoven had both a wonderful sense of humor and a formidable command of counterpoint.

The transition to the finale is one of classical music's great moments: a controlled crescendo that builds to a triumphant first statement. There is no pause between the third and fourth movements. The finale overflows with an abundance of new themes, all of which reinforce that the struggle is over. The symphony closes with victorious, resounding chords that will linger in your ears long after the concert is over.

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

Learn more about the works on the program at www.njsymphony.org/notesNov2-5.

Ten things you probably didn't know about Beethoven

Many music lovers consider Beethoven to be the greatest musical genius who ever lived. The literature about him is enormous, since scholars continue to examine every aspect of his life and works. The general public has been no less curious, flocking to films such as Bernard Rose's *Immortal Beloved* (1994). Consequently, we know more about Beethoven than other composers—or at least we think we do. Even seasoned concertgoers, however, may be surprised at some unusual information about his background, life and colorful personality. Consider the following:

- Beethoven's grandfather, also named Ludwig [Louis] van Beethoven (1712–73) was the first of three generations of Beethoven musicians. Born in Antwerp, he later moved to Bonn to take the position of Hofkapellmeister in the court of Elector Maximilian Friedrich of Cologne.
- Under the tutelage of his most important instructor, Christian Gottlob Neefe, Beethoven learned Bach's complete *Well-Tempered Clavier*: 48 preludes and fugues that were not well known in the 1780s. He was playing them by memory in his early teens.
- Beethoven's first professional position was as court organist to Elector Max Franz in 1784. Five years later, he was playing viola in the Elector's court orchestra; he was also a capable violinist.
- Napoleon's youngest brother Jerome Bonaparte, who was King of Westphalia at the height of Napoleon's empire, offered Beethoven the position of Kapellmeister in 1808. (The composer declined.)
- After a visit to Vienna in 1817, the English piano maker Thomas Broadwood sent Beethoven a six-octave grand piano. According to Broadwood's biographer David Wainwright, "The case was Spanish mahogany, inlaid with marquetry and ormolu, the brass carrying-handles formed as laurel wreaths." Beethoven's name was inscribed along with a Latin translation noting the gift. Broadwood enlisted five other musicians to autograph the instrument, including the pianists

Frederic Kalkbrenner and Johann Baptist Cramer. Franz Liszt acquired the instrument about 1846. Eventually he presented it to the Hungarian National Museum in Budapest.

- Twelve museums in five European countries are devoted to Beethoven. Four of them are in Vienna, where he lived for most of his life, moving frequently within the city.
- Beethoven's favorite composers were Mozart, Haydn, Bach and Handel (he preferred Handel to Bach.) Among older composers, he also revered Palestrina. Although he was critical of most contemporaries, he admired the operas of Gaspare Spontini and Luigi Cherubini.
- The concept of heroism, and specifically the death of a hero, is a recurrent theme in such great works as the "Eroica" Symphony, the oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives* and the incidental music to Goethe's *Egmont*. Heroism surfaced much earlier in Beethoven's music. His first-known composition was a funeral cantata from 1781 that has not survived. In 1790, the city of Bonn commissioned him to write a Cantata on the Death of the Emperor Joseph II. We know it as WoO 87 (read on!).
- Most major composers have a thematic catalogue compiled by scholars. Bach has the Schmieder catalogue, abbreviated S. (or BWV for *Bach Werke Verzeichnis*); Mozart has the Köchel catalogue (source of the K. number), and Schubert the Deutsch catalogue (abbreviated D.). Beethoven has multiple catalogues. Four 19th-century efforts were superseded by Georg Kinsky and Hans Halm's *Das Werk Beethovens: Thematisch-Bibliographisches Verzeichnis* in 1955, which is the standard. Kinsky and Halm included a special category, WoO, which stands for "work without opus number." Willy Hess published another catalogue in 1957 that captures Beethoven's unfinished works and sketches.
- Dozens of Beethoven's conversation books survive from 1818 until 1827. They reflect thoughts communicated to the deaf composer by his friends, family, and associates, but not his own comments, since he usually responded verbally. Consequently, these books, while a valuable

biographical source, require the reader to reconstruct Beethoven's half of the conversation. They are filled with details about everyday life, from gossip to family matters, from medical maladies to weather. Comparatively few of the entries pertain to Beethoven's music.

- The familiar images of Beethoven show a craggy-faced man with wild, longish grey hair. All surviving portraits depict him as clean-shaven. During his last decade, however, he frequently allowed his beard to grow long, adding to his eccentric appearance.
- In addition to deafness, Beethoven suffered from lifelong bouts of intestinal disorders beginning in his teens. Modern physicians who have analyzed reports of his stomach complaints and contemporary diagnoses believe that he may have suffered from Crohn's disease, a chronic, recurrent inflammatory enteritis. His final illness was cirrhosis of the liver. At the time, his death was attributed to abdominal dropsy. (The modern term is ascites, an accumulation of fluid in the peritoneal cavity of the abdomen.) A recent theory put forward several years ago asserts that he may have been inadvertently poisoned by lead by his final physician, exacerbating his liver condition.