NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2026

Opening Weekend: Beethoven's "Emperor" & Schubert's "Great"

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

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

Beethoven's Fifth Piano Concerto, known as "Emperor," does not refer to any particular monarch, although it does bear a dedication to the composer's student and patron, Archduke Rudolph of Austria. The nickname "Emperor" attached itself later but incurred skepticism early. The English editor and writer Sir George Grove dismissed the label in the 1870s as 'inauthentic.' The term has stuck because the concerto *seems* imperial: unfolding in large, commanding gestures that suggest power, poise, and confidence. Hallmarks of Beethoven's heroic style—the key of E-flat major, march rhythms, and quasi-military themes—strengthen the association, which seems fitting to this marvelous concerto.

One of Beethoven's innovations in the "Emperor" Concerto is his placement of the piano cadenza at the beginning of the first movement, rather than toward the end. Notice the interaction between piano and orchestra, when one is playing and the other is not; their interchange is a model of concerto dialogue. The French composer Hector Berlioz called Beethoven's slow movement 'the very image of grace.' Equally graceful is the subtle, seamless transition to the finale—no pause after the slow movement! Gloriously optimistic, the finale positively sparkles.

Franz Peter Schubert: Symphony No. 9 in C Major, "The Great"

From the standpoint of orchestration, rich thematic material, and sheer majesty, the "Great" C Major is the undisputed pinnacle of Schubert's symphonic maturity. Sadly, he never heard it performed. He began working on it in 1825. After he presented the manuscript to Vienna's *Gesellschaft der Musikifreunde* (*Society of the Friends of Music*) the following year, he was rewarded by a stipend 'in recognition of his achievements and for further encouragement.' In 1827, Schubert had the manuscript copied for the *Gesellschaft*, still vainly seeking a performance. The Vienna Philharmonic rejected the work, deeming it overly long and too demanding for the players. Even after Schubert's death in 1828, his brother Ferdinand was unsuccessful in his attempts to sell the score to a publisher.

That changed when Robert Schumann called on Ferdinand Schubert during the winter of 1838–1839. Schumann examined the score and was awed by its genius. The discovery prompted his famous letter to Felix Mendelssohn that has given musical posterity the phrase 'heavenly length.' (Schumann was describing Schubert's inexpressibly lovely Andante.) Mendelssohn conducted the premiere of the symphony with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra on March 21, 1839. Even with extensive cuts, it still created a sensation. Publication followed in 1840, and the "Great" C Major has been standard symphonic repertoire ever since.

In his earliest symphonies, Schubert relied more heavily on Haydn and Mozart for his inspiration and formal guidelines. In the later ones he took a freer approach, exercising more personal discretion in areas like modulations, formal structure, and proportion, all of which we have come to associate with the romantic (as opposed to classical) symphony. These factors reach their apogee in Schubert's Ninth. It is the strongest symphonic link in the continuum from Beethoven to Brahms, Bruckner, and Mahler.

Schubert was clearly emulating the enormous scale of Beethoven's Ninth. The duality between classic and romantic styles is one of the 'Great' C major's most compelling fascinations. Scoring details such as the use of trombones in all four movements make it unusual. Formal departures from the norm, for example the full sonata form of the scherzo movement, break from tradition and confirm the individuality of the symphony.

Even the slow introduction, brought to such perfection in the late Haydn symphonies, takes on new character in Schubert's asymmetrical, heroic opening horn theme. Its second measure dotted rhythm provides the impetus for the entire Allegro to follow; his re-integration of that theme into the development section and the coda is one of many felicitous touches in this magnificent work.

The balance of the symphony adheres to classical models. The principal oboe has the main theme in the Andante con moto, which balances march-like elements and brief string outbursts with wistful woodwind writing. In climactic moments, the brasses play with surprising force. Schubert's writing almost foreshadows Mahler.

Vigorous rhythms drive the Allegro vivace portion of Schubert's Scherzo. He balances the rambunctious opening gesture with a gentler Austrian *Ländler* (*a slow waltz*). The central Trio transports us to the world of folk song and rural village dancing. Schubert's sudden key changes and gentle use of the brass add interest throughout.

The grand finale is like a force of nature: as if Schubert had gathered up all world energy and invested it in his orchestra. The glory of Alpine Austria and the great outdoors pulses through this Allegro vivace, bringing Schubert's glorious symphony to an exuberant close.

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, Germany
Duration: 38 minutes
Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs, timpani, solo piano, and strings

Take a look at the sleek, 9-foot ebony instrument at center stage.

By 1809, what we call the piano had expanded beyond Mozart's five-octave *fortepiano*; however, it took more than another half-century before that development culminated in an instrument the size and scope we hear tonight. 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. Surely, he would have been delighted with the modern concert grand, and nowhere more so than in the "Emperor" Concerto.

Bold innovation: cadenza at the outset

Beethoven tested his boundaries and elasticity of form in this last concerto. One revolutionary move was placing the cadenza at the beginning of the first movement, rather than its traditional placement near the end. Full orchestra intones a resonant, *fortissimo* E-flat major chord. Solo piano replies with a series of arpeggios that cede to a trill, then figuration, passage work, and a melodic lead-in to a second chord from the orchestra, this time in A-flat. Once again unaccompanied piano responds, this time with more elaborate figuration for both hands. The piano ushers in the third, preparatory orchestral chord—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.

Nearly 100 measures of music unfold before we hear the piano again; clearly Beethoven is in no hurry to make his point. (In fact, this opening Allegro is the longest movement he ever composed.) The soloist re-enters with another grand flourish: this time an ascending chromatic scale and a clarion trill, before a simple, elegant statement of the imperial theme. The piano weaves around the principal melodic ideas, etching elaborate figures without 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 chord that usually heralds a cadenza. The structure is broad and symphonic, the music commanding, and yes, majestic.

Employment offer from a foreign monarch

Beethoven composed the E-flat concerto during a period when Vienna was braced for the second onslaught by Napoleon's army. Ironically, the French Emperor's brother Jerome Bonaparte, King of Westphalia, had recently invited Beethoven to move to Cassel, Germany to become *Kapellmeister*. Beethoven was tempted. Then three of his wealthy Viennese patrons pooled resources to provide him with an annuity, thereby persuading him to decline the offer.

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, in 1810. Beethoven's pupil Karl Czerny played the first Viennese performance the following year.

Berlioz on Beethoven's slow movement: "The very image of grace"

The middle movement is comparatively brief, perhaps because its rich tonality of B major is so potent. Beethoven's Adagio un poco mosso emphasizes dialogue between soloist and orchestra. He develops his material almost like variations, with an improvisatory character. Hector Berlioz was a great admirer of this movement, calling it "the very image of grace," and singling out Beethoven's ethereal orchestration. Perhaps the most inspired moment occurs at the very end, with the bridge to the glorious finale. The horns hold a single pitch for what seems like an eternity, suspended in midair; then, seemingly out of nowhere, the soloist diffidently introduces the triumphant chords of the closing Rondo, initially posing them as a question.

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 principal themes, without obscuring their contour. Our perception of royal splendor

remains unimpaired. The “Emperor” ends with every ounce of the magnificent style with which it opened: virile, spacious, and ever confident.

Franz Peter Schubert: Symphony No. 9 in C Major, “The Great”

Franz Peter Schubert
Born: January 31, 1797 in Lichtenthal, Vienna, Austria
Died: November 19, 1828 in Vienna, Austria
Composed: 1825–1826
World Premiere: March 21, 1839 in Leipzig, Germany; Felix Mendelssohn conducted the Gewandhaus Orchestra
Duration: 48 minutes
Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns, and trumpets in pairs, three trombones, timpani, and strings

From the standpoint of orchestration, rich thematic material, and sheer majesty, the “Great” C Major is the undisputed pinnacle of Schubert’s symphonic maturity. Maurice J.E. Brown, in *The New Grove*, calls it “his greatest masterpiece.” Harold Truscott considers the C Major Symphony “a summing up of Schubert’s instrumental thinking from 1811 onwards.” Schubert himself thought the work represented his striving for the highest art.

Ironically, he never heard the symphony performed. He began working on it in 1825. Despite travels to Steyr, Linz, Salzburg, and Gastein, he still found time to work on the symphony. After he presented the manuscript to Vienna’s *Gesellschaft der Musikifreunde* (*Society of the Friends of Music*) in 1826, he was rewarded by a stipend “in recognition of his achievements and for further encouragement.” In 1827, Schubert had the manuscript copied for the *Gesellschaft*, still vainly seeking a performance. The Vienna Philharmonic rejected the work, deeming it overly long and too demanding for the players. Even after Schubert’s death in 1828, his brother Ferdinand was unsuccessful in his attempts to sell the score to a publisher.

Posthumous discovery
That changed when Robert Schumann called on Ferdinand Schubert during the winter of 1838–1839. Schumann examined the score and was awed by its genius. The discovery prompted his famous letter to Felix Mendelssohn that has given musical posterity the phrase “heavenly length.” (Schumann was describing Schubert’s inexpressibly lovely Andante.) When Mendelssohn conducted the premiere in 1839, the symphony still created a sensation, even with extensive cuts. Publication followed in 1840, and the “Great” C Major has been standard symphonic repertoire ever since.

Haydn and Mozart? Or Beethoven? Schubert’s role models
In his earliest symphonies, Schubert relied more heavily on Haydn and Mozart for his inspiration and formal guidelines. After the Fourth, he evidenced a freer approach to the symphony, exercising more personal discretion in areas like modulations, formal structure, and proportion, all of which we have come to associate with the romantic (as opposed to classical) symphony. These factors reach their apogee in Schubert’s Ninth. It is the strongest symphonic link in the continuum from Beethoven to Brahms, Bruckner, and Mahler.

We do not know for certain whether Schubert ever heard Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. He may have been present at its historic premiere in May 1824. Beethoven's final symphony was certainly a model for the younger Viennese composer. Indeed, Beethoven had wrought a powerful influence on Schubert as early as his Fourth Symphony ("Tragic"), composed in 1816.

About the music

Schubert was clearly emulating Beethoven's enormous scale in the older master's Ninth Symphony. Though Schubert would not have placed such labels as 'classic' or 'romantic' on his own music, the duality between the two styles is one of the "Great" C Major's most compelling fascinations. Scoring details such as the use of trombones in all four movements make it unusual. Formal departures from the norm, for example the full sonata form of the scherzo movement, break from tradition and confirm the individuality of the symphony.

Even the slow introduction, brought to such perfection in the late Haydn symphonies, takes on new character in Schubert's asymmetrical, heroic opening horn theme. Its second measure dotted rhythm provides the impetus for the entire Allegro to follow; his re-integration of that theme into the development section and the coda is one of many felicitous touches in this work so suffused by genius.

The balance of the symphony adheres to classical models. Principal oboe has the main theme in the Andante con moto, which balances march-like elements and brief string outbursts with wistful woodwind writing. In climactic moments, the brasses play with surprising force. Schubert's writing almost foreshadows Mahler.

Vigorous rhythms drive the Allegro vivace portion of Schubert's Scherzo. He balances the rambunctious opening gesture with a gentler Austrian *Ländler* (*a slow waltz*). The central Trio transports us to the world of folk song and rural village dancing. Schubert's sudden key changes and gentle use of the brass add interest throughout.

The grand finale is like a force of nature: as if Schubert had gathered up all world energy and invested it in his orchestra. The glory of Alpine Austria and the great outdoors pulses through this Allegro vivace, bringing Schubert's magnificent symphony to an exuberant close.

This information is provided solely as a service to and for the benefit of New Jersey Symphony subscribers and patrons. Any other use without express written permission is strictly forbidden.