



Classics Concert Insights Lecture

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BEETHOVEN SYMPHONY #5 (1808)



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1808

MUSICAL HISTORY:

- Middle Ages and Renaissance.
- **Baroque** (1600-1750): Bach, Handel, Vivaldi.
- **Classical** (1750-1803): Haydn, Mozart, early Beethoven.
- **Romantic** (1803-1900): Late Beethoven, Brahms, Schumann, Tchaikovsky, Mahler.
- **20th Century**: Stravinsky, Copland, Bartok.

BEETHOVEN BIOGRAPHY (1770-1827):

- Born and raised in Bonn; father was musician.
- Moved to Vienna 1792, studying briefly with Haydn and Salieri.
- Early career as a piano virtuoso; compositions receive praise.
- 1796 Beginning of hearing loss.
- 1802 Heiligenstadt Testament.
- Napoleonic Wars 1802-1815. Vienna occupied twice by the French, 1805 & 1809.
- 1808 Fifth & Sixth Symphonies.
- 1811 Stopped performing or conducting due to hearing loss.
- 1815-20 Drop in compositional output; custody battle for nephew.
- 1824 Ninth Symphony; Beethoven personally conducted it.
- 1827 Died of alcoholic liver disease.

BEETHOVEN'S CAREER (1770-1827):

- **Viennese Period** (1790-1802): Classical works; Symphonies #1-2, Piano Concerti #1-3.
- **Heroic Period** (1803-1815): Romantic works; Symphonies #3-8, Piano Concerti # 4-5, Violin Concerto.
- **Late Period** (1815-1827): Symphony #9, Great Fugue.

BEETHOVEN'S COMPOSITIONAL STYLE:

- The composer's need for expression supersedes other concerns, including musical form.
- Rhythm assumes thematic importance. *"It is astonishing how many of Beethoven's themes can be recognized by their bare rhythm without quoting any melody at all."* (Tovey)
- Thematic unity; large compositions built from small ideas.

HISTORY OF SYMPHONY #5:

- Composed 1804-1808, interrupted for other projects; main work in 1807.
- This was a period of personal turmoil for Beethoven with his worsening hearing loss, and political turmoil for his country with the Napoleonic Wars at the doorsteps of Vienna.
- Beethoven's "*patriotic and anti-Napoleonic sentiments had reached their height at this time.*" (Jane Jaffe)
- First performed in Vienna December 22 1808, in a famous 4 hour-plus, all-Beethoven concert that also included Symphony #6 and Piano Concerto #4.

THE "FATE MOTIVE":

- Beethoven described the famous four notes, with its unique short-short-short-long rhythmic profile, to his friend and biographer Anton Schindler as "*Thus Fate knocks at the door.*"
- Beethoven left no other programmatic statements regarding Symphony #5.
- In World War II this motive was adopted by the Allies as V in Morse code - symbol of Victory.

CATHARSIS SYMPHONY:

- A symphony that begins in a minor key and ends in major.
- Such symphonies have a dramatic focal point where catharsis is achieved.
- **Symphony #5: C minor to C major, is the granddaddy of catharsis symphonies.**

BEETHOVEN SYMPHONY #5:

- FIRST MOVEMENT: Allegro con brio. C minor. Sonata Form. 2/4 meter
- SECOND MOVEMENT: Andante con motto. A-flat major. Double variation. 3/8 meter.
- THIRD MOVEMENT: Scherzo. C minor. A-B-A-Segway. 3/4 meter.
- FOURTH MOVEMENT: Allegro. C major. Sonata Form. 4/4 meter.

FIRST MOVEMENT

EXPOSITION:

- Two fate motives in strings and clarinets (C minor), second sequenced down, last note held longer. Forms a mini introduction.
- Note: this is NOT a true theme in the Classical Era sense. It is merely a motive.
- Theme I (C minor), in first version, made entirely of fate motives, sequenced and transformed; ends in an extended open cadence.
- Theme I second version: a single Fate Motive announces it. Fate motives tumble over each other in a quiet, imitative passage. Music rises, and with driving energy, continuing into a brief modulating bridge.

- A loud horn call announces Theme II.
- NOTE: This horn call is an extension of the Fate Motive by two notes. It will give rise to other themes in the symphony.
- Theme II (E-flat major). Finally a “real” melody, lyrical. Derived from the horn call that announced it, repeated thrice, quietly, in different instrument groups, followed by an extension that rises.
- Closing music: fast, energetic, syncopated. Begins with music akin to the modulating bridge, ends with emphatic fate motives. Closed cadence and pause.

EXPOSITION REPEAT: ????

DEVELOPMENT:

- Begins with two loud fate motives (F minor), imitative and truncated, in horns and orchestra. Sounds foreboding.
- Theme I developed in different instrument groups in a quiet passage, in imitative polyphony.
- Music gets louder, texture thickens, horn call developed.
- Loud two note ideas.
- Music begins to quiet down, tempo slows, on the two note ideas.
- Music continues to break down, now to single notes, sounding like agonal breathing. “*Chords of despair.*” (Greenberg)
- Loud orchestral horn call melody fails to revive music.
- Music remains on two notes, quiet and slow.
- Sudden burst of fate motives revives music and leads to a loud, triumphant, double fate motive, like the one that started the movement, but now in full orchestra. Recapitulation has begun.

RECAPITULATION:

- Fortissimo recap of the two fate motives is followed by Theme I, first version. It is more subdued compared to its Exposition version, especially at its rising end.
- Theme I ends in an open cadence leading to a surprise cadenza.
- Oboe cadenza: a mournful oboe sings a pathos-filled song.
- NOTE: This oboe passage is most unusual in a symphony. Its meaning has been subject to varying interpretation. It appears as a lamentation to the breakdown that just occurred. “*Death of innocence.*” (Greenberg)
- Remainder of Theme I and modulating bridge continue with the same driving energy as in Exposition.
- Horn call now returns in bassoon announcing return of Theme II, both in the unexpected key of C major.
- Closing music, blustery, fast and triumphant proceeds, also in C major.

- NOTE: The change of instruments on the horn call was necessitated by the primitive horns of Beethoven's time. Lacking necessary valves, horns that played E-flat could not then switch to C. Thus, Beethoven had to assign the passage to another instrument.
- In reference to this horn problem, the opinionated Sir Donald Tovey writes, "*it is really a mistaken reverence for Beethoven which puts up with the comic bassoon instead of horns...there is no reason why his spirit should continue to put up with an unmitigated nuisance.*"
- NOTE: The unexpected appearance of C major in the Recap foreshadows the overall dramatic arc of the entire symphony.
- The end of the Closing section is truncated compared to the Exposition and not conclusive. It leads into the coda uninterrupted.

CODA:

- This is essentially a second development section.
- Music returns to C minor.
- Multiple *ff* fate motives rise to a question, and echoed by a solo horn. Pause.
- Another burst of emphatic, *ff*, fate motives, followed by the quiet, solo horn motive in orchestra.
- Loud passage based on the Exposition horn-call motive leads to a brand new melody, vigorous, march like, rhythmic.
- This new melody, derived from the horn-call, is developed. Music still loud, vigorous.
- Music leads to two very loud fate motives accompanied by tympani rolls. It leaves the impression of a second Recapitulation.
- A brief quiet passage recalls Theme I, contrasting with all the blustery music that preceded it.
- NOTE: this quiet interlude harkens back to the oboe cadenza.
- Loud concluding chords based on the fate motive.
- NOTE: The vigorous music of the coda, essentially a second development, sharply contrasts with the musical near-death of the development.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

- The movement features many non-Classical gestures.
- The theme itself as a mere motive rather than a full melody, is startlingly stark.
- The events of Development are most unusual, Classical developments being brief, non-dramatic affairs, usually providing variations on the themes exposed.
- The key areas of the Recapitulation, mostly C major, do not fit the Classical "prescription".
- Classical codas are brief pieces of concluding music. The lengthy second development of Beethoven's coda is unexpected.

SECOND MOVEMENT

A – B – A' – B' – A'' – B'' – A''' – CODA

- **A lyrical Theme I** (A flat) stated in violas and cellos. Its dotted rhythms infuse a stately air to the music. Its last phrase echoed in orchestra and extended in winds and strings.
- Theme I has a rising three note motive at its core, with a long-short-short rhythmic signature.
- **Theme II** is a similar, quiet melody, built on the same motive. Suddenly a loud, triumphant **march based on the theme (C major)** emerges in full orchestra.
- Quiet, slow, transitional passage repeating three note motives, modulates back to A flat.
- **Variation of Theme I** (A flat), more embellished, with dotted rhythms smoothed out, the notes twice as fast, in low strings with wind accompaniment. Extensions follow.
- **Variation of Theme II**, very similar to its initial version, with another **loud C major march** that follows. Quiet transition.
- **Variation of Theme I** (A flat), dance like, notes yet faster. Phrasing differs from earlier versions, the extensions now absent. Instead, it is repeated in two more variations, the last as a rhythmic orchestral climax with regular accented beats.
- Slow, quiet, two-note, heartbeat-like transition.
- **Variation of Theme II**, a quiet, extended woodwind chorale. The **C major march that follows the loudest, most dramatic and heroic**. Transitional passage, shorter.
- **Minor key variation of Theme I** (A flat minor), quiet, in winds with *pizz.* string accompaniment. “*The first theme smiling through tears in the minor mode.*” (Tovey)
- **Variation of Theme I** (A flat), *ff* and dramatic, in full orchestra. Extensions return, quiet and verbatim, as in the original version.
- **Variation of Theme I** (A flat) begins quietly in bassoon, string accompaniment giving the music a skipping-hopping feeling. Three loud rising gestures introduce the extensions in winds and upper strings, now also in variation.
- **Coda** begins with quiet Theme I motives (A flat); music then rises, the finale surprisingly vigorous for a slow movement, with loud re-statements of the motives in full orchestra.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

- This is unusual music for a slow movement of the era.
- The three bursts of loud, triumphant C-major marches - the last one in particular - transport the listener to a different world than the one of the slow A-flat music.
- The C major gestures fit with the overall arching narrative of the symphony: as in the first movement recap, Beethoven is presenting a “taste” of C-major, as yet not fully attained.
- The loud A-flat finale gives a sense that C-major may have infused the world of the slow movement with some of its vigor.

THIRD MOVEMENT

SCHERZO:

- C-minor is back in “*a ghostly affair.*” (Steinberg)
- “*That dream of terror which we technically call the scherzo.*” (Tovey)
- A: In a quiet, ominous sounding passage low strings present a rising C-minor arpeggio, answered by woodwinds. The passage repeats, slightly longer.
- B: Suddenly horns blare out a loud new theme clearly based on the Fate Motive.
- A’: Ominous passage returns, stated once.
- B’: Horns repeat the Fate Motive based theme louder, slightly longer.
- A’’: Ominous low string/wind passage.
- C: A new sounding melody, based on the C-minor arpeggio. Brief recall of the loud horn music. Codetta and closed cadence.

TRIO:

- Fugue-like music with rhythmic energy in C-major, repeated three times.
- Melody presented in three imitative entries, going from low strings to high. The music abruptly ends after these entries; therefore this is not a true fugue,
- Fugue-like passage repeated.
- A third, extended version of the same passage, rises to an open cadence and pause.
- Final, fourth version is quiet, truncated, and fizzles out.

SCHERZO DECAPO & SEGWAY:

- Ominous prelude in low strings and winds returns (C-minor), more quietly, stated once. The melody then becomes pizzicato.
- SURPRISE! The blaring horn melody (C-minor) is now truncated and very soft (*pp*), *pizz* in winds and strings.
- “A” & “C” return, also very soft, *pizz*. Codetta.
- Music becomes merely a pedal base (double pedal on G & C), *ppp*, atop which strings play a very slow, soft version of scherzo theme (C-minor).
- This is clearly transitional music and gives the impression that we are in a “*murky tunnel of thudding drums and groping bits of melody,*” (Steinberg).
- Sudden crescendo as we emerge from the tunnel. Loud, triumphant C-major Theme I of Movement Four bursts forth like a sunrise that parts the clouds.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

- This movement aroused fear in contemporary audiences.
- It is a most unusual third movement for its time.

- In particular the trio section, usually lowly instrumented, does not sound like a trio at all. Its main function is to provide yet another C-major contrast to the prevalent C-minor music.
- The Decapo, usually a truncated repetition of Scherzo, is also a surprise, soft and whimpering. It reflects “defeat” of C-minor in the overall narrative.
- Segways between movements were not the norm until Beethoven used them in this symphony as well as his Sixth Symphony (1808) and Fifth Piano Concerto (1809).
- **This Segway is the critical “catharsis moment”, the dramatic focal point of the symphony.**

FOURTH MOVEMENT

EXPOSITION:

- Theme I (C-major) is loud, triumphant, march-like, played in full orchestra that now features trombone, piccolo and contrabassoon for the first time.
- NOTE: This is the first appearance of the trombone in symphonic music.
- Theme I is a lengthy melody with two ideas, a rising three-note motive and a falling four-note motive. The music is full of varying syncopations and accents infusing it with a rhythmic drive characteristic of Beethoven’s heroic style.
- Music continues uninterrupted, fast and loud, with falling four-note ideas leading to another martial theme (C-major) on brass, derived from first movement horn call.
- Very brief modulating bridge.
- Theme II (G major) is a break from the breathless rhythmic drive. A loud, rising four-note antecedent (derived from the Fate Motive) with a soft falling four-note consequent, in strings. Repeated and extended; music rises and ends with an open cadence. Note a base figure throughout, also derived from the Fate Motive.
- Closing Theme (G-major), stated softly in strings, based on a six-note idea, a permutation of the horn call from the first movement. This is sequenced up thrice and answered with a falling phrase.
- Closing Theme (G-major) continues with a loud, triumphant, tutti version of the same melody, the music again infused with a rhythmic drive, moving uninterrupted into a modulatory passage and development.

DEVELOPMENT:

- Begins with a quiet development of Theme II material in strings and winds.
- NOTE: the still present four-note base figure, permutation of the Fate Motive, will gradually rise to the surface.
- The base figure erupts loudly in the brass and alternates with Theme II material in strings.

- A two-note idea derived from the brass motive is sequenced higher and higher, alternating with lightning-like four-notes in brass and tympani. A very dramatic passage in music that maintains breathless forward momentum. Loud Theme II motives follow.
- Music reaches a major climax.
- The momentum is suddenly interrupted with quiet ticking in the violins. This is a transitional passage that leads to a surprise.
- A quiet variation of the horn melody from the Scherzo (C-minor), in strings and winds.
- Another transition, shorter than the segway between movements, re-enacts the dramatic emergence of C-major that began the fourth movement, the sun rising all over again.
- Recapitulation has begun. C-minor will not be heard again.

RECAPITULATION:

- Theme I returns verbatim, loud and triumphant. *“The celebration has begun.”* (Greenberg)
- Music maintains rhythmic forward momentum as falling four-note motives in orchestra lead to the return of the martial theme (C-major).
- Theme II returns verbatim, in C-major.
- Closing Theme (C-major) begins quietly as in exposition. The tutti music that follows is louder, more triumphant and extended. It rises to a big climax with five loud, emphatic chords that give the impression that the movement is about to end.

CODA:

- Another second development, this time purely focused on C-major glory.
- Quiet passage in strings and winds recalls Theme II; extended and embellished.
- A motive derived from Theme I repeated three times in bassoons, horns and winds.
- Music rises with accompanying upward scales in piccolo.
- Orchestral chords in locomotive-like rhythm getting faster and louder.
- Fast Closing Theme motive repeated eight times. If the music was set to ballet this would be a series of rapid pirouettes.
- Music rushes to loud, excited, fanfare-like statements of main Theme I motive.
- Triumphant finale. Dominant and tonic harmonies repeated for 40 measures, some short, some long. Taken out of context, this could be comic.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

- Having set up a glorious finale through unconventional compositional devices in earlier movements, Beethoven now delivers a fourth movement that more-or-less adheres to the Classical tradition.
- Exceptions: Scherzo material recalled in the Development, and extended Coda.
- Overwhelmingly triumphant movement convincingly affirms the catharsis achieved by the decisive arrival to C-major.

Ludwig Spohr (1784-1859), composer and conductor, a Beethoven contemporary highly regarded in his time, thought the theme of the first movement *scrappy and undignified*, and the whole finale *an orgy of vulgar noise*. But he admitted that the re-appearance of the scherzo in the last movement was *a stroke of genius for which the rest of the work might be forgiven*.

Referring to the scherzo re-appearance Tovey writes, “*this is the one true solution which confirms the truth of the former terror and the security of the present triumph; but no lesser artist could have found it.*”

“*The source of Beethoven’s unparalleled energy here is in his writing long sentences and broad paragraphs whose surfaces are articulated with exciting activity.*” (Steinberg)