Concerto No. 5 in E-flat Major for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 73, “Emperor”
– Ludwig van Beethoven
Born December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany
Died March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

This work was premiered on November 28, 1811, by the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig with Friedrich Schneider as soloist and Johann Philipp Christian Schulz conducting. It is scored for solo piano, pairs of woodwinds, horns, and trumpets, with timpani and strings.

When Ludwig van Beethoven left his hometown of Bonn and relocated to the famed musical capital of Vienna in 1792, his entire reputation was at stake. He had become well known in Bonn as a gifted pianist and a promising young composer. When Franz Joseph Haydn had passed through Germany on his first journey to London in 1791, he had invited the twenty-one year old composer to make a pilgrimage to Vienna as his student. Bonn’s biggest musical fish suddenly found himself engulfed by the sprawling ocean of Vienna.

Beethoven felt immense pressure to prove himself if he was ever to become recognized in a town so full of famous musicians. It seemed natural that his pianistic virtuosity, the most visible of his talents, should be his ticket to success. So it was as a pianist that Beethoven made his first inroads into Viennese society by playing in the homes of aristocrats. He also presented public concerts, often as benefit performances for musical or political causes – and sometimes for the purpose of funding his own career. It was against this background that the first four piano concertos arose as showcases for his skills as pianist and composer. By the time Beethoven composed his final piano concerto in 1809, his deafness had progressed to the point that he did not even conceive of the work as a vehicle for his own performance. His premiere performance of the Fourth Concerto, on the same program as the Choral Fantasy on December 22, 1808, was disastrous. Being unable to hear the orchestra, synchronization was simply not possible and the performance fell apart – a mishap that Beethoven blamed on the orchestra and conductor when the fault was clearly his own.

During the Emperor Concerto’s composition, the French army invaded Austria for the fourth time in eighteen years. According to an often quoted story, the composer huddled in the basement of his brother’s suburban Vienna home with pillows over his ears. At this moment in time, it is clear to even a casual observer that whatever respect the composer once held for Napoleon, if it had not already dissipated, was blasted away by the cannons invading the neighborhood. It is often assumed that the moniker Emperor refers to Napoleon, but this cannot be true. Likewise, it probably does not derive from the heroic character of the music. The answer is quite simple, but only recently proposed after nearly two centuries of speculation – the premiere occurred on the Austrian holiday commemorating Emperor Joseph II’s accession of the throne (as father of the sitting Emperor, this day was celebrated with great fervor).

Beethoven’s Fifth Piano Concerto must be considered the pinnacle of his Heroic Period and is without doubt a full-fledged masterpiece of the Romantic Period. The first movement begins with a three bold chords, each of which is embellished by extended cadenza-like passages for the soloist. Taking the place of the usual slow introduction, this preparatory filigree leads directly to the martial main theme of the allegro. As the movement progresses through the usual sonata form, march-like rhythms remain a crucial element. The opening chords return just before the recapitulation with its usual restatement of the movement’s themes.
Beethoven’s second movement (adagio un poco mosso) begins with a devotional theme, followed by piano triplets and figurations throughout. When everything seems to be complete, the texture thins to a lone B-natural in the bassoon. It is with only this one pitch that Beethoven brilliantly sets up a transition by simply lowering that pitch by a half-step, thereby allowing a seamless transition to the key of the final movement. The piano plays tentative, short fragments that coagulate into the main theme of the finale, connecting the movements without pause. Beethoven’s brilliant finale incorporates elements of sonata form into its structure. However, since the rollicking main theme returns between contrasting episodes, it must be classified as a rondo. One especially noteworthy moment is near the end when the rest of the orchestra drops out of the texture, leaving only the soloist and timpanist in an unusual duet. A brisk coda provides an exhilarating conclusion to this monumental work.

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