

Beethoven's Fifth Symphony: The Original Rock Star and His Revolution

Allegro con brio (♩ = 108)



The most famous notes in all of music, a symbol of resistance to fascism in World War II, a great way for siblings to tell each other they're in trouble, and a pivotal moment in the original rock star's musical revolution. These are the notes that signaled a change in the entire concept of the symphony. In Beethoven's eyes, they were the knock of Fate on the door. Such intensity and anger—a slap across the jaw the world came to expect from Beethoven. Let's venture inside the music to experience Beethoven, his inspiration, and his Fifth Symphony like you've never heard it before.

I. A Storm from Nowhere

Beethoven was the tempest who led music out of the ultra-refined Classical era and into the Romantic, the era of passionate self-expression. This is the music of a tortured soul, an angry iconoclast, and a true individual with a passion to find his own way in the world of music. And how does the world create such an angry and defiant young man? Family angst is always a good place to start.



Born to a family of court musicians at the electorate of Cologne, Beethoven's musical future was far from assured. His father, a court tenor and modestly talented music teacher, was also a notorious drunkard. Johann van Beethoven married the widow Maria Magdalena Leym on November 12, 1767—a marriage that neither family supported. Their first child, Ludwig Maria, lived only six days, so the name was passed along to their second son, Ludwig, who was baptized on December 17, 1770.

Life in the Beethoven household was far from stable. Johann oversaw Ludwig's music studies in the worst way, often beating him to get him to practice. He stayed out all hours drinking, often coming home late at night, sometimes getting little Ludwig out of bed to demonstrate his violin and piano skills to his friends. As Johann aged, the alcohol took its toll on his health and the family finances. His advocates at the court dwindled and colleagues began to whisper about Johann's uncertain reputation and "stale voice." The last straw was an attempt to defraud the heirs of the Belderbusch estate through a false claim. Not long after, the fourteen-year-old Ludwig officially sought the position of assistant organist at the court, blatantly stating that his father was no longer able to support the family. Johann was thereafter kept on the electoral rolls more as an act of charity and was seen as a court joke.

If Beethoven had a role model, it was his grandfather, after whom he was named. The elder Ludwig van Beethoven was a longtime court musician and Kapellmeister who had been the most influential person in Bonn's music scene. Little Ludwig practically worshipped him. Johann and the elder Ludwig never saw eye to eye, which probably made Johann's relationship with his son even worse. Maria Magdalena, while running the household on a shoestring, was molding young Beethoven to be like his grandfather, while Johann saw his son's uncanny talent as a means to extra income and self-glorification.

Young Ludwig's first attempts at creativity were in improvisation—a hallmark of Baroque and Classical virtuosos and composers—but Johann would have none of it. "Scrape according to the notes; otherwise your scraping won't be of much use," he yelled.

Ludwig withdrew, becoming extremely introverted. Acquaintances found him unkempt, awkward and monosyllabic, and he failed to make any real progress at school. In later years, he barely spoke of his father. For his mother, he had a kind of distant respect. He admired her strength in adversity, which is perhaps why strong women would feature heavily in his later dramatic works, especially Leonora in his opera *Fidelio*, who risks her life to save her imprisoned husband.

Realizing that he was largely alone in the world, Beethoven began seeking additional instruction outside the home in violin, piano, organ and composition. As his powers grew, his creativity became his protective cloak. He felt so apart from his family that he would question everything about his ancestry. He believed his certificate of baptism was a fraud, that he was actually born at least two years later, and that he was the illegitimate son of one of the kings of Prussia—either Friedrich Wilhelm III or his uncle, Frederick the Great. When he read the *Odyssey*, he underlined the passage:

Few sons are like
Their fathers; most are worse, a very few
Excel their fathers.

His first song, composed when he was twelve, was titled *To an Infant*—a song to a child who doesn't know who his parents are. Now apart from his family and firmly his own person, Beethoven would take the reins of his education and his career, with astonishing results.

II. The Tempest Emerges

Now in his teenage years, Beethoven's attitude completely changed. New abilities bred new confidence, expressed in a new look—the gala dress of the court musician—and a new sense of inner worth. His petition to become the deputy court organist was granted at a salary of 150 florins. Beethoven sought the guidance and support of composer, organist and conductor Christian Gottlob Neefe, who recognized the boy's genius, taught him all that he could, got him his first professional engagements, and even arranged for publication of his early compositions. Beethoven even made his first attempt at a symphony in C Minor, foreshadowing the Fifth. He appeared to be on his way, but as his father's situation worsened, he had to market himself more as a keyboard virtuoso, giving private recitals at the Beethoven home.

In 1787, he had his first chance at a big break. The elector of Bonn decided to send him to Vienna to display his keyboard talents. Within days of his arrival, Beethoven's father notified him that his mother's consumption had gotten worse. He raced back to Bonn, leaving nothing but debts in Vienna. His mother lingered for weeks, and her passing left the young Beethoven in charge of the household. In effect, he became the guardian of his siblings and his father. The terrible pressure brought Beethoven's composition to a standstill. By November of 1789, Beethoven had no choice but to petition the elector, asking that half his father's salary be paid to him and, if necessary, that his father be exiled from Bonn. The petition was granted, but Beethoven waited until his father died in 1792 to put it into effect. Now the head of the household, he decided on a bold move—a return to composition.

His inspiration may have been a new circle of friends among the most distinguished minds of Bonn, who adopted the principles of the European Enlightenment. Beethoven suppressed his aversion to teaching and took on students, took classes at the university, and saw the world differently through Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller, whose poem *Freude* he would later set to music in his Ninth Symphony. The only downside to this new Beethoven was an inability to pursue women who weren't already married, which would plague him for the rest of his life.

The Enlightenment was changing the world, and Beethoven was about to be swept up in that change. Franz Joseph Haydn, considered the leading composer of his time, had just accepted his first offer as a private composer not working for a royal court. Haydn would travel to London, where he would compose and perform his

London Symphonies and show the world that a composer could be a huge success without royal patronage, and he would have to travel through Bonn! Beethoven played for Haydn and presented him with a score to one of his cantatas. Haydn accepted Beethoven as a student and, in early November, 1792, Beethoven again set out for Vienna. Seven weeks later, Beethoven would receive news that his father had died, but this time family wasn't enough to draw him home. Despite his intentions to return to Bonn, Beethoven would never see home again.

III. Vienna

The musical life of Vienna was everything Beethoven could have wanted. Operas by Mozart, Paisiello, Cimarosa, Dittersdorf and Pergolesi and instrumental music by Haydn, Mozart and Pleyel: It was a perfect place to inspire a young composer, and this time, Beethoven would be an overwhelming success.

At first, Beethoven was viewed as a brilliant pianist and a student of composition. Mozart, the last piano virtuoso in Vienna, had been gone for over a year. Beethoven's powerful style and uncanny improvisations were something new and exciting. He would arrive in the elite salons of aristocracy, ignore their fashions and pleasantries, and attack the piano with enough force to break strings. After a passionate improvisation, with his audience in tears, Beethoven would burst into laughter: "You are fools! Who can live among such spoiled children?!" He was a new kind of musical iconoclast—the original rock star!

His studies with Haydn were going well, and Haydn was wise enough to let Beethoven be Beethoven. His latest compositions, including the *Pathétique* Sonata, were competitively pursued by publishers. "My art is winning me friends and renown, and what more do I want?"

The introverted life of the composer began taking its toll, however. Beethoven developed an aversion to performing in public, sometimes flying into a rage when he was asked to play, or demanding to play alone in an adjoining room from his audience. This fire and individualism began to show in his music. Bucking the conventions of Classical style, he expanded standard forms beyond recognition. His Second Symphony, for example, was the longest symphony composed up to its time, with a finale so lengthy that one prominent critic called it "a serpent that will not die." After his Violin Sonata in D Major, op. 28, Beethoven confided to his friend, violinist Wenzel Krumpholtz, "I am only a little satisfied with my previous works. From today on I will take a new path." His next move, inspired by the philosophers he studied and the wave of revolution that was sweeping the world, was his Heroic Period.

IV. The Heroic Period

Late in the 1790s, Beethoven would gradually become aware of an approaching nemesis. "... my wretched health, has put a nasty spoke in my wheel; and it amounts to this, that for the last three years my hearing has become weaker and weaker. ... my ears continue to hum and buzz day and night. For almost two years I have ceased to attend any social functions, just because I find it impossible to say to people: I am deaf. If I had any other profession I might be able to cope with my infirmity, but in my profession it is a terrible handicap. ... at a distance I cannot hear the high notes of instruments or voices. As for the spoken voice, it is surprising that some people have never noticed my deafness; but since I have always been liable to fits of absentmindedness, they attribute my hardness of hearing to that. I live entirely inside my music."

Seeking peace and solitude, Beethoven left for the quiet village of Heiligenstadt in April of 1802. In October, he wrote his famous Heiligenstadt Testament, decrying his deafness and even hinting at suicide: "I would have ended my life—it was only *my art* that held me back. Ah, it seemed to me impossible to leave the world until I had brought forth all that I felt was within me."

Remarkably, Beethoven's despair did not reflect in his music. His Third Symphony, the *Eroica*, broke another record for longest symphony, introduced a kind of taut drama that thrilled Viennese audiences, and directly challenged Mozart's *Jupiter* Symphony with fugues in five-part invertible counterpoint. Rather than diminishing his productivity, Beethoven's deafness ushered in eight fantastically productive years. By 1804, his works appeared on concert programs more often than Mozart and Haydn, but there was one area where Beethoven just couldn't succeed—opera. From 1803 to 1806, Beethoven labored tirelessly to create the same kind of revolution in opera as he had in instrumental music, but to no avail. His *Leonore*, later revised and retitled *Fidelio*, flopped in 1806 and would be shelved until 1814. Once again, a major setback would not only fail to stop Beethoven, but would usher in another burst of creativity, including the Fifth Symphony.

V. The Fifth Symphony

Beethoven began sketching ideas for the Fifth Symphony in 1803. With the failure of *Leonore* in 1806, Beethoven was more than ready to return to instrumental music. Still in Heroic mode, his compositions of 1807 would lean heavily on what he called the "heroic key" of E-flat Major, its relative minor, C Minor, and the nearby keys of C Major and A-flat Major. All of these are prominent in his 1807 compositions, including the *Coriolan* Overture, the *Leonore* Overture No. 1, the Mass in C Major, and of course, the Fifth Symphony. In the broad perspective, the Fifth

Symphony is a journey from C Minor to C Major, from darkness to light, with the heroic key of E-flat Major and the nearby A-flat Major figuring prominently. The bold character and revolutionary spirit are undoubtedly in reference to Beethoven's sense of nationalism at the collapse of Prussia in 1807 at the hands of Napoleon. Beethoven's patrons, Prince Lobkowitz and Count Razumovsky, to whom the Fifth Symphony was dedicated, were active enemies of France. Beethoven would have to conceal any overt references to current events, but his message was perfectly clear.

The Fifth Symphony would bring to fruition a long-held ideal of Beethoven—creating more music from fewer materials, which would inevitably result in greater cohesion that audiences might not fully understand but would certainly sense. Not only are the first four notes instantly memorable; they serve as the building block of the entire piece.

<https://youtu.be/UZU9rt5qkF0?t=4> (Listen to 0:04 – 0:10)

The first melody is constructed entirely on that building block: the second violins, with precisely the same notes, but this time played softly. They are answered, slightly higher, by the violas, and the melodic phrase is completed by the first violins. Putting it together, the casual listener might not notice the building blocks.

<https://youtu.be/UZU9rt5qkF0?t=11> (Listen to 0:11 – 0:23)

Symphonies almost always have two contrasting melodies in the first movement. Since Beethoven started with a tense melody in C Minor, a bold melody in E-flat Major would be the right contrast. The building block is obvious in the horns in the first half of the phrase. In the second half, which Beethoven repeats as he moves through several keys, notice how the melody hints at the building block rhythm, while the cellos and basses state it very clearly.

<https://youtu.be/UZU9rt5qkF0?t=48> (Listen to 0:48 – 1:32)

The first movement thrives on storm and stress, undoubtedly the most intense symphonic movement composed up to its time, but the innovation doesn't stop there. The two themes are supposed to return relatively untouched, but Beethoven inserted something else never found in a symphony before—a cadenza for the first oboe. It must have seemed like madness to Viennese audiences.

<https://youtu.be/UZU9rt5qkF0?t=270> (Listen to 4:28 – 4:57)

Beethoven explores the simple building block from every possible angle, taking his audience on a wild and dramatic ride. To end the movement, he restates the

melody one last time, now very soft, as though he is very weak from the journey, only to find one last burst of energy.

<https://youtu.be/UZU9rt5qkF0?t=437> (Listen to 7:17 – 7:33)

Haydn, Mozart, or any other symphonist of the day would turn to entirely new ideas in the second movement, but Beethoven had other plans. The second movement would revolve around two melodies based on the building block—a noble melody in A-flat Major with variations, and a triumphant melody in C Major that would stay mostly the same.

Notice how the first melody, in the violas and cellos, hints at the building block rhythm, while the pizzicatos in the basses spell it out clearly. Even the answer in the woodwinds ends with the building block.

<https://youtu.be/UZU9rt5qkF0?t=475> (Listen to 7:55 – 8:47)

The variations on this melody are brilliant, playful and imaginative, like this variation, where violas and cellos are give the melody in a constant stream of notes while the basses stay with the building block.

<https://youtu.be/UZU9rt5qkF0?t=697> (Listen to 11:37 – 11:55)

The second melody is really a fanfare for the oboes, brass and timpani, but it's first introduced quietly by clarinets and bassoons. Rather than a crescendo to foreshadow the brass, Beethoven almost suspends time for a moment, allowing the brass to come crashing in unexpectedly.

<https://youtu.be/UZU9rt5qkF0?t=527> (Listen to 8:48 – 9:23)

So the first movement has C Minor and E-Flat Major as its two tonal centers, the second movement has A-flat Major and C Major, and as we turn to the third movement, Beethoven has chosen a starker contrast—C Minor and C Major. This is the journey of the entire piece, now in the microcosm of a single movement. In his sketchbook, Beethoven copied twenty-nine measures of Mozart's Symphony No. 40 in G Minor, probably seeking some inspiration, so the opening of the third movement is remarkably similar. The soft phrases only hint at the building block rhythm, but the horns crash in fortissimo, leaving no doubt.

<https://youtu.be/UZU9rt5qkF0?t=1055> (Listen to 17:35 – 18:16)

The C Major section arrives with a fugue. The melody, beginning with a quick succession of eighth notes, almost seems like it doesn't belong, but Beethoven slips in the building block at the end to tie everything in.

<https://youtu.be/UZU9rt5qkF0?t=1164> (Listen to 19:24 – 19:40)

In a typical classical symphony, we would hear the C Minor section, the C Major section, and then a repeat of the C Minor section and that would be all. At most, a composer might add a little coda to end the movement, but Beethoven was about to do something completely new. He returns to the C Minor section, but it is a shadow of its old self. No blaring horns and defiant fortissimos! Instead, the softest pianissimo, pizzicatos in the strings, and solo winds.

<https://youtu.be/UZU9rt5qkF0?t=1251> (Listen to 21:23 – 21:31)

And next, another innovation. Instead of ending the movement, Beethoven composed a transition to the finale. For the first time, two symphonic movements would be joined together! And the transition is no less innovative. For 42 measures, the second violins and violas sustain a C while the cellos, basses and first violins pull us in different tonal directions. It's the Mannheim Rocket gone nuclear and the final destination is C Major.

Still not enough innovation for you? Once we arrive at the finale, we are greeted by three instruments never before used in a symphony: the piccolo, contrabassoon and trombones. Beethoven was out to break all the rules.

<https://youtu.be/UZU9rt5qkF0?t=1317> (Listen to 21:57 – 23:17)

In the finale, the building block is still there, but it might be harder to recognize. First, it is transformed. Listening to the previous excerpt, the fourth movement begins at exactly at 22:41. Notice that the first we hear is not the usual short-short-short-long. It is now opposite: long-long-long-short.

But the original building block is still there. Remember how it was used to construct the melody in the first movement? This idea returns in the second phrase of the fourth movement at 22:49.

In a myriad of ways, the building block permeates the fourth movement, but the innovation doesn't stop there. Since Beethoven interrupted the third movement to create a seamless transition to the fourth, the missing piece of the third movement finds its way into the finale. Revisiting a previous movement had only been tried twice before: Haydn's Symphony No. 14 in B-flat and, in a much less recognizable way, Mozart's Jupiter Symphony.

<https://youtu.be/UZU9rt5qkF0?t=1682> (Listen to 28:02 – 29:30)

In keeping with his ideals, Beethoven had composed the most cohesive symphony ever, but this was no simple academic exercise. Audiences may have *sensed* the cohesion, but they *heard* the inspiration.

The Fifth Symphony was premiered on December 22, 1808 in a concert at the Theater-an-der-Wien to benefit Beethoven. The program was enormous: The Sixth Symphony, the concert aria “Ah! perfido,” the Gloria movement of C Major Mass, the Fourth Piano Concerto with Beethoven as the soloist, an intermission, the Fifth Symphony, the Sanctus and Benedictus movements of the C major Mass, a piano improvisation by Beethoven, and the Choral Fantasy. More than three hours of music! With the chorus, orchestra and vocal soloists, it was an expensive undertaking, and all of it on just one rehearsal. Not surprisingly, the performance was rough and the Fifth Symphony didn’t get its fair recognition.

Once it was published, the Fifth Symphony became a sensation and a trademark of Beethoven’s music. When Mendelssohn introduced the aging Beethoven to Goethe, Beethoven played the Fifth Symphony at the piano. Goethe was astonished: “How big it is—quite wild! enough to bring the house about one’s ears! and what must it be with all the people playing at once?” Indeed!

Hear the entire performance on YouTube, from the beginning:

<https://youtu.be/UZU9rt5qkF0>

Recommended recordings:

The Vienna Philharmonic with Carlos Kleiber. This is an exciting, dynamic performance. Kleiber brings the Fifth Symphony to life in a persuasive, powerful and animated way.

<https://www.arkivmusic.com/products/beethoven-symphonies-no-5-7-kleiber-vienna-52517>

The Chicago Symphony with Georg Solti. The earlier analog recording (which has been beautifully remastered) is better than the later digital recording by this team, with a little more edge and absolute dedication to making every detail heard.

<https://www.arkivmusic.com/products/beethoven-complete-symphonies-solti-chicago-symphony-orchestra-114712>

Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique with John Eliot Gardiner. This is a period instrument performance. Instruments in Beethoven’s time were more nimble but didn’t produce as much sound. Gardiner’s interpretation tries to capture Beethoven’s actual tempi, which are very fast, and there is never a hint of hesitation or lingering. The full recorded cycle is a surprising look at Beethoven’s symphonies.

<https://www.arkivmusic.com/products/beethoven-the-symphonies-john-eliot-gardiner-5-239341>