A FIFTH OF BEETHOVEN

May 13 & 14, 2017

Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 73, “Emperor”

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Two of the signature aspects of Western thought are the importance of progress and individuality. Nowhere are these concepts more apparent than in the history of music, where we give special attention to innovation in form and harmony. While not always appreciated at first hearing — witness the audience riot over Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* — innovators eventually receive their due — in hindsight.

In his greatest works, Beethoven was both an innovator and an individualist who attempted to put his personal stamp on everything from harmony and musical structure to advances in piano construction. While retaining the three-movement form of the concerto, he expanded the internal structure of the individual movements, especially in the Fourth and Fifth Piano Concertos. The dramatic use of the piano in the opening phrases of these concertos was tried only once before — by Mozart in his Piano Concerto in E-flat major, K. 271 — and did not occur again in any major piano concerto until the B-flat major Concerto of Brahms. The thunderous opening of the Fifth Concerto was without precedent, as was Beethoven’s refusal to allow the performer to improvise a cadenza.

Beethoven composed the Concerto in Vienna during the summer of 1809, under conditions hardly conducive to creativity. Following a day of heavy bombardment, Vienna surrendered to the French army under Napoleon, and those citizens who could afford to flee did so, including Beethoven’s patron and friend the Archduke Rudolph. Prices and taxes skyrocketed, food was scarce, parks were closed to the public and Beethoven remained in the city, alone and lonely. In spite of the hardships during those trying months, he managed to compose some of his greatest works: the Piano Sonata Op. 81a (“Les adieux”), the Quartet in E-flat, Op. 74 (the “Harp”) and the “Emperor” Concerto (the title bestowed on it by one of the publishers, without Beethoven’s approval.)

The Fifth Piano Concerto was premiered in Leipzig in 1811 to an enthusiastic reception. It was the only one of Beethoven’s piano concertos without the composer himself at the keyboard, since by that time his hearing had deteriorated too far for him to perform in public, especially with an orchestra. Two months later, however, the first performance in Vienna was a total failure, primarily because the Concerto was on the program of a Charity Society performance featuring three living tableaux on Biblical subjects — hardly a suitable milieu.

The Concerto opens with a powerful orchestral chord, followed by a sweeping cadenza-like flourish by the piano solo. Only after two more orchestral chords interrupted by the piano outbursts, does the orchestra introduce the principal theme. The movement is stormy and driving with some of the same harmonic ambiguity as in the first movement of the Fourth Concerto. At the point where traditionally one would have expected a cadenza, the pianist’s score bore Beethoven’s directive: “Do not play a cadenza!” The music that follows, however, has all the characteristics of a cadenza as if the composer wanted to be sure that his ideas, not the performer’s, would prevail.

The hymn-like lyrical second movement opens with the muted violins introducing the theme, followed by a pianissimo aria by the piano. There follow two variations, the first by the piano, the second by the orchestra. Then follows one of Beethoven’s most mysterious musical moments, the hushed transition leading without pause into the exuberant Rondo. Beethoven builds up immense tension by subtle changes in key and tempo with hints of the rondo refrain to come, until the Finale bursts out in its jubilant mood.
The four most clichéd notes in classical music were once the most revolutionary. For the first time a rhythm, rather than a melody, became the main subject of a symphonic movement – and not merely as a first theme to be stated and picked up again for a while in the development and recapitulation sections. Beethoven wove the rhythm into the entire fabric of the first movement, and subsequently into the rest of the Symphony. The motive first appears as a repeated demand, subsequently expanded into a genuine melody in the first theme. It recurs as a throbbing accompaniment in bass and timpani in the second theme, all the way to the final cadence of the exposition.

Such an original symphonic structure did not come easily, especially to a composer who lacked the ever-ready melodic genius of a Mozart, Bach or Haydn who all produced copiously on demand. A collection of the composer’s sketchbooks bears witness to the lengthy and often painful gestation of some of his greatest music. The Fifth Symphony took four years to complete, between 1804 and 1808. But Beethoven also had to eat, and during those four years he also produced the Fourth Symphony, the Fourth Piano Concerto, the three String Quartets Op. 59, the Mass in C and the Violin Concerto.

Although Beethoven had already been at work on what was to become the Fifth Symphony, he composed the Fourth in fairly short order in 1806 on commission from Count Franz von Oppersdorff. The Count eventually paid the 500 florins agreed upon for the work and in 1807 commissioned another symphony with a down payment of 200 florins. Beethoven notified Oppersdorff in March 1808 that the Fifth Symphony was ready and that he should send the remaining 300 florins. But the Count sent only another installment of 150 florins, and by November Beethoven, in one of his less than ethical moves, apparently felt justified in selling the score to the publisher Gottfried Härter. Upon finally paying in full, Oppersdorff received a copy.

The Symphony No. 5 was premiered at one of those monster public concerts common in the nineteenth century; on the program were premieres of the Sixth Symphony and the Fourth Piano Concerto, the aria “Ah! Perfido,” the Choral Fantasia and several movements of the Mass in C. One can only imagine the bewilderment of the audience on its first encounter in a single evening with the “Pastorale” and the Fifth.

Because the Fifth Symphony is now so familiar, it is difficult to think of it as innovative, but it was not only the integration of the four-note rhythmic motif into the entire fabric of the first movement that was new. The second movement, Andante con moto, involves its own kind of novelty. It is made up of two short juxtaposed, contrasting themes: the first in dotted rhythm in the strings, the second a slow almost military theme in the brass. Beethoven produces from the two themes a double set of variations. And it should be noted that the second theme contains within it in augmentation (in longer note values) the germinal four-note rhythm of the first movement.

For the Scherzo, Beethoven again prominently takes up the motivic rhythm in the horns, this time in augmentation. The Trio is a fugue. The repeat of the Scherzo theme is scored for clarinet and bassoon over pizzicato strings playing pianissimo.

Symphony No. 5 has frequently been referred to as a struggle from darkness to light, but it is a commonplace that has palpable grounding in truth. Not only does the symphony begin in C minor and end in C major, but there is also the magnificent transition between the third and fourth movements, a kind of sunlight breaking through the clouds with violins stammering over the timpani as it throbs out the motto. The emergence into the triumphant Finale paved the way for the symphonic writing of the future, including Beethoven’s own Ninth Symphony, Mendelssohn’s Third (The “Scottish”) and Brahms’s First.