

Ludwig van Beethoven, *Symphony No. 5* (1804-1808)

Abstract

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) was born in Bonn, the capital and princely residence of the Electorate of Cologne. He gave his first public piano recital at age seven and at age 14 was employed as organist at the Elector's court. In 1792, he moved to Vienna, where he studied composition with Joseph Haydn. Vienna was the capital of European music at the time and Beethoven would spend the rest of his life in Austria, where he witnessed the conquest of Vienna by the French during the Napoleonic Wars twice. Beethoven initially made a name for himself as a pianist but soon gained noble patronage for his compositions as well. Beginning in 1798, his hearing began to deteriorate, and by 1815 he had almost completely lost his ability to hear. While his hearing loss meant that he struggled to perform publicly and thus lost a significant part of his income, he was able to continue composing until his death. His works marked the transition from the Classical period to the Romantic era in Western music and remain among the most frequently performed works in classical music today.

This is the famous opening movement of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5*, which he composed between 1804 and 1808. Its four-note opening motif in particular has become instantly recognizable. It had its premiere in Vienna on December 22, 1808 during a concert that would make music history. Beethoven himself staged and conducted a program of his works that ran for more than four hours and included two symphonies (no. 5 and 6), a piano concerto, a new choral piece, and several other works. At this point, aged 38, Beethoven had lost much of his hearing and this concert was to be his last public performance as a pianist. Audiences and critics – who had braved freezing temperatures in the unheated theater for hours – initially were puzzled by the performance. At this time, Vienna had neither a concert hall nor a professional orchestra, so musicians had to rent locations and hire musicians for their productions. The following year, the French occupation of Vienna during the Napoleonic Wars brought social and cultural life to a standstill. Once musical life resumed and Beethoven's score had been published, however, his *Symphony No. 5* quickly became a beacon of the Romantic era, and it remains one of the most iconic and most frequently performed works of Western classical music to this day.

Source

Source: Ludwig van Beethoven, *Symphony No. 5* – Allegro con brio, 1804-1808. Performed by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Leonard Bernstein. Columbia Records, 1963. Available from the Internet Archive, Unlocked Recordings [ark:/13960/t6743489q], https://archive.org/details/symphonyno5incmi00beet/01_Side_1.mp3

Recommended Citation: Ludwig van Beethoven, *Symphony No. 5* (1804-1808), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/the-holy-roman-empire-1648-1815/ghdi:audio-5039>> [July 15, 2025].