

PROGRAM NOTES

Ludwig van Beethoven - Symphony No.5

By Susan Swinburne

When Ludwig van Beethoven composed his now-iconic Symphony No.5 in C minor in the early years of the 19th century, he had already suffered for a decade from the progressive hearing loss that would eventually result in total deafness. Before then, while in his 20s and enjoying popular success as a sought-after and much-ballyhooed performer in Vienna, he lived the riotous life of a late 18th-century rock star, becoming one of the city's most eccentric and prominent celebrities. When his 5th symphony premiered in 1808, by then in his late 30s, the descent into deafness had significantly worsened. Beethoven spent more and more time away from Vienna, his life as an in-demand performer shifting to quieter times concentrated mostly on composing. By the age of 45, he was totally deaf.

The 5th symphony did not make much of a splash when it premiered, partly because the orchestra had only one rehearsal before playing the mammoth work and the resulting performance was mediocre. It was also performed on a marathon concert program of eight works by Beethoven that lasted for more than four hours. The 5th was performed fifth on the program, following the only intermission, and the audience was already exhausted. However, one year later it had gained momentum, kept rising steadily in popularity, and soon was well on its way to becoming one of the most frequently performed symphonies, and also what we today refer to as a musical meme.

By the time the BBC adopted the 5th symphony's globally-recognized motif in 1941 as the theme introducing all its WWII wartime broadcasts – dubbing it the “Victory Symphony” thanks to its unmistakable opening “bum bum bum BUM” equating to the letter V in Morse Code (dot dot dot dash) – the work had already achieved the vaunted stature it still holds as the world's most well-known piece of classical music.

Beethoven is rightly credited with many watersheds in the evolution of classical music, including cementing the presence of the trombone as a necessary member of the horn section in a full size orchestra. The trombone features prominently in Symphony No.5, and from this musical moment onward, trombones remained in the standard brass line-up.

Today, after two centuries as a stalwart of the orchestral standard repertoire, the 5th Symphony's well-recognized opening musical motif and other signature selections have enjoyed innumerable eclectic and creative iterations. In 1973, Chuck Berry's classic do-wop song “Roll Over Beethoven” was covered by the band Electric Light Orchestra, whose contrapuntal arrangement interpolated Beethoven's original theme and other passages from the 5th symphony in its very popular updated version of Berry's 1956 hit. In 1977, Walter Murphy's popular arrangement, “A Fifth of Beethoven”, was featured in the soundtrack to the John Travolta disco dancing film classic Saturday Night Fever. Starting in 2004, another adaptation became the theme music for the popular TV show Judge Judy. And, the rock band Deep Purple's original guitarist and composer, Ritchie Blackmore, stated on more than one occasion that the theme to the band's equally iconic and globally recognizable guitar riff to their mega-hit song “Smoke on the Water” is actually an inverted interpretation of Beethoven's inescapable motif. Says Blackmore of Ludwig van Beethoven, “I owe him a lot of money!”