

Ludwig van Beethoven stands out as a pivotal figure in Western music. It is perhaps less than coincidental that his life spanned a similarly pivotal period in world history. As a German youth in the late eighteenth century, he absorbed news of the revolutionary fervor that captivated America and neighboring France. As an adult, he endured the onslaught of Napoleon's army. Later in life, he perceived the onset of the industrial revolution and the monumental changes it would effect in the path of human civilization. In many ways, the foresight of Beethoven's compositional process is a reflection of the larger forces that engendered Europe at the turn of the century.

Beethoven was well into his period of musical experimentation and innovation when he completed his fifth piano concerto. The compositions of this period were marked by violent contrasts in dynamics and rhythms, as well as greatly expanded forms, tonalities, and instrumental forces. The concerto itself was written amidst the turmoil of the Napoleonic siege and occupation of Vienna in 1809. By this time, Beethoven had already lost most of his hearing. Nonetheless, he is said to have taken refuge in the cellar of his brother Carl's house during the French bombardment of the city, covering his head with pillows in order to protect the little hearing that remained. It is perhaps this loss of hearing that led Beethoven to forego any further piano concertos, as he intended to perform them himself.

One indication of Beethoven's innovative approach is found in the uncharacteristically early cadenza after the opening orchestral chord – one that would typically be reserved for the end of the movement. Just as atypical of the time was Beethoven's insistence on writing out the cadenzas note by note, rather than leaving the cadenzas to the discretion of the soloist. Such "audacity" is only intensified by the double repeat of this device in the introduction – once in the subdominant and again as a dominant seventh chord – before a cadence back to tonic for the opening violin theme.

Beethoven nonetheless allows for an effectual cadenza more conventionally situated later in the movement. Here again, however, the composer ascribes to himself a greater portion of the creative process by instructing the pianist to "not play a cadenza, but go immediately onto the following." In place of an improvisatory break, Beethoven writes out a cadenza-like passage based on the movement's two principle themes. This culminates in a descending chromatic scale in the piano, which crescendos into a forceful coda with the entire orchestra.

More expectedly, the middle movement contrasts in tempo and aura with its predecessor, showing both refinement and restraint. Still, under cover of the muted string opening and nocturnal serenity of piano embellishments lurks a more audacious harmonic reality. From the

perspective of key signatures, the key of B major lies far away from the E-flat major tonal scheme of the concerto. Perhaps to awaken the orchestra from a dreamlike state, Beethoven "corrects" the tonality to B-flat major just three measures from the movement's conclusion. Consequently, he hearkens back to his own fifth symphony – completed nearly two years earlier – by moving without interruption to the final movement. Here, he achieves this over an eleven-measure French horn pedal that links the two movements. The ensuing rondo is distinguished by its recurring upward theme and its galloping timpani played in tandem with the piano in the coda.

Why Beethoven's fifth piano concerto carries the subtitle "Emperor" is not completely clear. The composer did not christen the last of his piano concertos as such. Many historians speculate that the work earned its honorific title in response to the grandeur of the work. Indeed, while Beethoven's five piano concertos comprise one of the most important sets in the repertoire, the "Emperor" represents the culmination of these works. It carries as much drama and pathos as can be found throughout the genre without extending beyond the technical abilities of the virtuoso pianist.