



Cheyenne
Symphony
Orchestra

Masterpiece 5 – Fantastic Finales

April 17, 2021

Piano Concerto No. 5, op. 73 in E^b Major, (“Emperor”)—Ludwig van Beethoven

It is Mozart, of course, to whom we owe the creation of the mature, symphonic piano concerto. Following in his stead, Beethoven wrote five works in this genre; the first two were composed in the 1790s and owe much to the example of Mozart. The third, in C minor, was completed in 1803, around the time of his second symphony, and it is a far darker and impassioned work than the previous ones. By the time of the fourth concerto, finished in 1806, Beethoven had undergone remarkable growth as a composer. He had resolutely fought his way out of the deep suicidal depression occasioned by his increasing deafness. The monumental *Eroica* (third symphony), his opera, *Fidelio*, and the *Rasumovsky* string quartets had been created, and revealed the musical power, psychological depth, and progressive imagination of the mature composer. As such, the fourth piano concerto occupies a significant place in his *oeuvre*, with the rôle of the piano assuming greater strength and independence than in the earlier concertos. The fifth concerto thus stands at the end of his efforts in the genre. The moniker, “Emperor,” has no real meaning, having been attached later in circumstances not related to the composer, although it must be admitted, it’s not inappropriate, at all, if you must have a nickname. It is a major work, not only in its intrinsic artistry, but also marks the culmination of an extraordinary period of inspiration and production on the part of the composer. That time began more or less in 1803 with the *Eroica*, went on to include other major works in the “heroic style,” and ended in 1809 with the fifth piano concerto. Many of them are in the key of E^b major, which seems to have been Beethoven’s key of choice when essaying a bold, dynamic, confident work.

As he matured, Beethoven, like many great artists pushed the limits of the artistic conventions of his milieu; one has only to think of the challenging nature for performer and listener alike of the late string quartets and piano sonatas. That was certainly true of many aspects of his fourth piano concerto, and even more so for the fifth. The latter is a significant work in all regards, not the least for its great length—one of the longest of his symphonies and concertos—but not a measure too long for his formidable execution of the musical architecture. It unfortunately marks another milestone: it was the first of his concertos that he did not perform, owing to the significant deterioration of his hearing, which made collaboration with the orchestra impossible.

Like the fourth concerto it begins unconventionally, the piano playing the opening bars with the orchestra. The beginning consists simply of three great hammer strokes in the orchestra, after each of which the piano plays a short roulade of arpeggios, trills, and other cadenza-like gestures, in a style not unworthy of Chopin. The orchestra immediately follows with a vigorous statement of the main theme, a simple, but stately one, in the Beethovenian tradition, and not inappropriate for the grand nature of the work. Soon, the quieter second theme comes, first in the minor in the woodwinds, and

immediately in the major in the horns. The orchestra works its way through to the end of the section and the piano finally enters with a scale, a trill, and the main theme from the opening measures. There then ensues one of Beethoven's longest movements, in which the soloist and orchestra engage in a dialogue that stunningly exemplifies the creativity and genius of the composer, as they work out the themes on their way to the recapitulation--heralded by a repetition of the hallmark opening chords and piano flourishes.

The profound serenity, beauty, and reflective eloquence of the slow movement stand at the apex of the composer's gift in this voice. The gentle main theme is primarily stepwise, rather like a simple chorale, played first by the orchestra. The rich, freshness of the opening is accomplished in no small part by Beethoven's choice of key—B major, a remote key, but really an enharmonic version of one of his signature harmonic relationships. The piano enters, and engages in a series of explorations of the material, in a free and almost improvisatory fashion, interspersed with meditative, straightforward statements of the eloquent theme. This sublime, discursive mood continues--certainly no one is in hurry for it to end—but it surely must, and the composer again pulls out a bit of trickery to bring on the finale. A soft, sustained B natural in the bassoons and horns descends to B^b, the strong note in music that psychologically takes us to E^b, the main key of the concerto, and where we must go for the last movement. But the intent is mysterious: we hear a brand new theme in the piano, softly and deliberately stated, and then, without notice, we vigorously plunge straightway into the happy last movement with that new theme its subject. It's a romping, stomping affair which some have compared to a rough German dance—it's certainly in the vein of his seventh symphony, which he would compose two years later.

The shape is simple—only a diversion in the middle interrupts this dancing, active material. There, the pianist explores briefly a few fresh keys and contrasting ideas, but soon enough, the driving, dancing fun resumes, as the smashing conclusion seems to near. One more trick, though: gradually the intensity appears to be waning, not growing, and a quiet duet between the soloist and the timpani portends a tranquil ending. Not so—for a triumphal outburst in Beethoven's best manner from the whole orchestra clinches the matter.

Symphony No. 1 in G Major, op. 11—Joseph Bologne (Chevalier de Saint-George)

It is difficult indeed, to know just where to begin with the amazing life of Saint-George (a.k.a. Joseph Bologne). If any life were said to be colorful and improbable it would be his. He was variously the first successful black classical composer; the champion swordsman of all Europe; colonel of his own regiment, which fought in the Revolution; virtuoso violin soloist; survivor of a slave revolt in the Caribbean; confidant and companion to Marie Antoinette; conductor of famed orchestras; patron to Josef Haydn—and much more! While in many ways constrained by racial attitudes and traditions of Royal France, he nevertheless successfully negotiated his way through the complex social labyrinths of the time as a respected and esteemed member of the lower nobility and intellectual and artistic circles of France.

Bologne was born on Christmas Day on the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe in 1745, the son of a wealthy planter, George Bologne, and Nanon, a Black slave, servant of George's wife. Acting unilaterally, his father had assumed the noble-sounding honorific, "de Saint-George," after the name of one of his plantations—but only later was it formalized. And in a startling contrast to the times, Bologne embraced Joseph as his son, and took him—with his birth mother—off to France, where the youngster enjoyed a remarkable education. It began with training with one of France's best fencing masters. He excelled famously—in that, as well as in his well-documented romantic affairs. By the age of twenty-one he was considered the best swordsman in all of France. No mean accomplishment.

But, concurrently, he must have engaged in serious music study, for he joined the orchestra of the important composer, François-Joseph Gossec in 1769, and he probably studied composition with the luminary, as well. By the age of twenty-seven, he was busy as a virtuoso violin soloist, performing his own rather difficult concertos. Add to that his burgeoning career as a conductor, and you must admit the young man was off to an impressive life. His many compositions, besides a dozen violin concertos, include string quartets (among the first in France) and ten *symphonies concertantes*. In addition, there are many works for the stage, including operas. He had been proposed as head of the Paris *Opéra*, but racial politics torpedoed that august appointment. Nevertheless, he rose to noteworthy positions in the intricate artistic and social world of pre-Revolutionary France. He went on to found the famous Concert de la Loge Olympique orchestra, and in this rôle he commissioned Haydn to compose his famous "Paris" Symphonies (c.1785). By the time of the onset of the French Revolution he had continued his remarkable career as premier swordsman, had gotten involved in the dangerous politics of the Revolution, and was named the colonel of his own regiment in the National Guard.

Notwithstanding his service to the Revolution, like so many of that parlous time, he ended up imprisoned in the Reign of Terror, but escaped the guillotine, and resumed his command after the death of Robespierre. After the Revolution he went back to the Caribbean, disappeared into the tumult of a slave revolt, and for two years given up for dead. But, he resurfaced, traveled back to Paris, and resumed his acclaimed career as a conductor until his illness and death in 1799—an astounding life by any measure.

The two opus 11 symphonies were most likely composed in the middle 1770s, when the composer around thirty years old. They are almost perfect textbook examples of the "correct" model for the early symphony. Haydn had been busy for some time—along with others—establishing the norms for instrumental music in the early classic period. Baroque musical style, with its innate spinning out of long phrases, emphasis upon counterpoint, and rich harmonies had yielded to the simpler "*style galant*,"—an interim style with rather limited possibilities. And now, most everyone was looking to the more simple textures, harmonies, and balanced, square phrasing that characterized the steps to the classic style of mature Haydn, Mozart, and early Beethoven.

Bologne's Symphony in G Major reflects a solid education in music composition, and while displaying all of the simplicities of most early symphonies, concomitantly does not evince any traits of a "student" work. It is a finely crafted example of what symphonies of the time were—or perhaps a decade earlier. Accordingly, it consists of only three movements—the obligatory

minuet lay in the future—and is scored for the conventional two oboes, two horns, and strings. The first movement is an easy-to-follow sonata form, beginning with a spritely first theme, with punchy dynamic accents and pizzicato strings. The second theme is a bit more lyrical, leading to zippy closing material—all within the conventions of the time. The brief development has some diverting, forays into various minor keys before the recapitulation.

The second movement is an elegant ballroom dance in two sections. Dance movements were conventional in all countries and styles during the eighteenth century, but this one just exudes the perfumed atmosphere of the stylized culture of the court of France. It rather reminds one of a minuet, but only in duple, not triple time. The last movement is a scamper, in simple binary form, the tempo of which would certainly preclude any dignified dancers from participating. There's a bit of frisson between first and second violins, adding interest along the way, and exuberant horns drive it all to the end.

Profound this work is not—but then, much good music from skilled composers in those times was not. But, it is a finely crafted work by a composer of striking, unlikely credentials. It reminds us that the history of music is, as are all human endeavors, usually much more nuanced and complex than later times perceive.

Overture to *William Tell*—Gioachino Rossini

There are any numbers of great composers who have been able to produce overtures that entertain, lift the spirits, and bring musical “sizzle” to a symphony concert. But almost none excel those of Gioachino Rossini in sparkle, wit, and vivacity. Their droll wit, sly contrasts of mood, and careening drive to the end are simply inimitable. From their conception for Italian opera audiences primarily in the first decade of the nineteenth century, to their familiar use as springboards for movie and television high jinks today, they simply endure.

Rossini was the most important composer of nineteenth-century Italian opera before Giuseppe Verdi. And while he is historically significant for his innovations in serious Italian opera, clearly his *opere buffe*, or comic operas, are his lasting contributions for opera fans everywhere. These are works of his early maturity, roughly before 1820, before he began to focus upon a more serious style. American audiences are most familiar with *The Italian Girl in Algiers* (1813) and *The Barber of Seville* (1816), but there are other masterpieces, as well. After wide European success in the 1820s, Rossini wangled a lifetime annuity from the French government about the time of the composition of his crowning achievement, *William Tell* (1829)—a French grand opera—and promptly retired at the age of thirty-seven. For the next forty-odd years he enjoyed the largess of the French government, and composed very little, certainly no major operas. It's not that he was lazy, although a famous anecdote relates that while composing in bed (which he usually did) he dropped an unfinished aria on the floor, and rather than go to the trouble of getting up to retrieve it, he simply composed another one! In his defense, we should recognize how much work that he had accomplished early: 34 operas by the time that he was 31.

William Tell is, of course, the story of the legendary archer who shot the apple from off his son's head. But, that is incidental. Rather, his legend is all

about honest Swiss yeomanry throwing off the yoke of tyranny, striking a blow for freedom, and ending oppressive foreign domination—arrogant Austrians, in this case. It's a perfect yarn for the demands of French grand opera, with the impressive staging resources of the Paris Opera. There are virtuoso horn fanfares for the gathering of the Cantons; a precarious lake crossing during a storm; choruses of defiant soldiers; and, of course, the dramatic apple shot. Rossini's score for all of this is a masterpiece. Berlioz—no mean conjurer of ripping musical theatrics—lavished praise on Rossini's masterpiece. Rossini's orchestration is ground breaking, his sense of drama, sure, and his skill at building to a tremendous climax, peerless. The overture is simply a reflection of a fantastic opera; if you like the former, try the latter, too.

--Wm. E. Runyan
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