

## **Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 73 'Emperor'**

- i. Allegro**
- ii. Adagio un poco mosso –**
- iii. Rondo: Allegro ma non troppo**

For Beethoven, the piano had always been a vehicle for the ground-breaking innovations of his musical style. As with the other major forms he pioneered (the symphony, quartet and sonata), Beethoven's five piano concertos trace a journey which transformed Classical models as he found them into landmark masterworks. The Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat major is the composer's crowning achievement in the genre, influencing concertos written throughout the rest of the nineteenth century.

On 22 December 1808, Beethoven gave a concert of epic proportions which included the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies and the Fourth Piano Concerto; having submitted to the burden of increasing deafness, it was to be his final public appearance as a pianist. Beethoven immediately began work on a Fifth Piano Concerto which was to be dedicated to Archduke Rudolph, one of his favourite pupils whom he regarded with great affection. It was completed quickly and published before it was first performed – in fact, the earliest known public performance wasn't until November 1811, when it was played in Leipzig by Friedrich Schneider. It received its Vienna premiere on 12 February 1812 by another of Beethoven's students, Carl Czerny.

In 1809, Vienna was besieged and occupied by Napoleon's armies, which makes it difficult to believe that Beethoven would have bestowed the epithet 'Emperor' upon his concerto. Much like the 'Moonlight' and 'Pathétique' Piano Sonatas, it in fact has nothing to do with Beethoven. The 'Emperor' title most likely originated with Johann Baptist Cramer, the English publisher of the Concerto, who called it 'an emperor among concertos'. The 'Emperor' nickname is only known in English-speaking countries; nevertheless, its evocation of grandeur meant it has endured.

The Fifth Piano Concerto is the culmination of Beethoven's middle period. As the boundaries between concerto and symphony merge, Beethoven strains the formal framework as far as possible without breaking it. It is also a work of outstanding virtuosity: developments in piano making over the previous 25 years meant that the orchestral writing could not only be conceived on a much larger scale, but that the piano was now capable of dominating the orchestra. Beethoven flaunts this new model right from the outset: three grand orchestral chords are each followed by an improvisatory, cadenza-like passage for the piano which traces the full length of the keyboard. Only after this curtain-raiser are we launched into the main theme, which recurs in various guises throughout the Concerto. This is the longest first movement that Beethoven ever wrote as his ability to juxtapose intimacy with grandeur made this, along with the 'Eroica' Symphony, one of his most monumental works to date.

The serene slow movement is hypnotic in its shimmering, contemplative beauty. Set in the remote key of B major – far removed from the E-flat major of the outer movements – the dark, gentle colours of muted strings create an almost nocturnal feel. The transition from the second to third movement is one of utter genius and originality. The tranquillity of the *Adagio* is left undisturbed as the orchestra drops just a semitone from B to B-flat; still in the slower tempo, the piano hesitantly introduces the theme of the finale, blurring the boundary between movements. The piano then announces the arrival of the finale movement with a resplendent statement of the full Rondo theme. This movement is as majestic and inventive as the first, combining a mastery of form and technical virtuosity to bring to a close one of the great piano concertos of all time.