

BEETHOVEN: THE MAN AND HIS MUSIC – Concert Review
Teacher Lesson Sequence

Objective:

Students will read and discuss written reviews of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5 from different time periods, then write their own review following the concert.

Materials:

- Pencils and paper
- Concert Review Handout
- Concert playlist

Lesson Sequence:

1. Listen to the first movement of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5. As they listen, ask students to write down a few notes about what they hear. How does the music make them feel? What does it make them think of? Allow to students to share responses with the class when you finish listening.
2. Distribute Concert Review Handouts. Read the three reviews as a group, or allow students to read silently.
3. Compare the reviews in an open discussion. What do they have in common? What is different about them? What is the language like in each time period? How does someone reviewing this piece in the present day have a different perspective from someone hearing it at the very first performance?
4. Listen to the piece once more. While listening, have students circle or underline words or phrases in the reviews that they especially agree with.
5. Inform students that following the concert, they will write their own reviews of this piece. Encourage them to watch for NEW things during the concert that they didn’t notice while listening to a recording.
6. Following the concerts, have students write a one-paragraph to one-page review of Beethoven’s Symphony no. 5 (1st movement). Remind students that a review in an **opinion** piece and should reflect their own individual thoughts on the piece.

Extensions:

- Have students share their reviews with a partner or small group and discuss what they heard.
- Share your reviews with us! Send student reviews by mail to:
Cleveland Orchestra Education Department
11001 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, OH 44106

Or email to: education@clevelandorchestra.com

Three Concert Reviews of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5

Beethoven's music wields the lever of fear, awe, horror, and pain, and it awakens that eternal longing that is the essence of the romantic. What instrumental work by Beethoven confirms this all to a higher degree than the profound Symphony No. 5 in C Minor, a work that is splendid beyond all measure. How irresistibly does this wonderful composition transport the listener through ever growing climaxes into the spiritual realm of the infinite. Nothing could be simpler than the two-measure main idea of the first Allegro, which, in unison at first, does not even define the key for the listener. The character of apprehensive, restless longing contained in this movement is made even plainer by the melodious subsidiary theme. The chest that is oppressed and alarmed by intimations of things monstrous, destructive, and threatening wheezes for air with wrenching gasps, but just then a friendly, luminous figure appears and brings light into the dark night. All these passages are short—almost all consist only of two or three measures—and these are constantly divided among the wind and string instruments. We might think that from such elements only something fragmented or incomprehensible could arise, but instead we receive from them a sense of the whole. So too the constant repetition of passages and single chords, one after the other, which increases the feeling of an unnamable longing that reaches to the highest degree.

-E.T.A. Hoffman, 1810

How does one approach the performance of the musical work that begins with the most famous four notes in all of music? "Beethoven's Fifth" has been played in every conceivable way (as well as some that are likely inconceivable); is it necessary for a conductor to try to find something new in this timeless masterpiece? Franz Welser-Möst did not strive for the unusual or bizarre; he infused this performance, especially the famous first movement, with tension and urgency, with tempi that were brisk but not rushed. There were wide dynamic ranges, from the most delicate quiet passages to thunderous climaxes.

-Clevelandclassical.com, 2013

Then came Beethoven. Under the direction of conductor Francois-Xavier Roth, Beethoven's iconic symphony sounded at times like something that had just been written a few years ago. This was especially true in the first movement. Almost everyone knows the first four notes of this symphony, the ones that go, "Da da da, dum." We're even familiar with the way the notes are played. That's why I was so surprised by the way the BSO under Roth's direction performed the first movement. The first four notes - which are repeated right away - sounded too fast and a little clipped. Something didn't seem right. Something seemed off. And part of that something was the speed. I have never heard Beethoven's 5th played so fast. I guess Roth has a dinner reservation he really wants to get to tonight, I thought. I also wrote in my notebook that the BSO's performance of the first movement of Beethoven's 5th "lacked warmth." That it was too "clinical" and lacked the brooding romanticism we often associate with the mad genius. "You're a Bozo, Ross." "You cannot be serious." But as the piece progressed, all of Roth's decisions seemed to make more and more sense. And by the time the fourth movement began, I was completely on board with Roth's revelatory re-awakening of this iconic work. And yes, I'm serious! The BSO and Roth didn't botch anything. They nailed it. That's because they allowed the audience to hear this iconic music in a whole new way. That's truly radical. That's why the BSO remains one of the best orchestras around.

-Ken Ross, Masslive.com, 2018