

# Program Notes



## Beethoven, Brahms, and the Baton

When conductors begin their training, each note of the nine symphonies of Beethoven and the four of Brahms are considered biblical. Conducting auditions almost always feature a movement from one of these thirteen symphonies.

Jim Ross, my mentor at the University of Maryland, gave a final exam which featured a set of hundreds of excerpts for which we were responsible for identifying the symphony, movement, position within the form, and for providing written insight into the importance of the music motive to the overall piece. Identifiers such as the key signature, instrumentation, or even expressive terminology were removed. The three sets of repertoire deemed worthy of this level of rigor were the final operas of Mozart, the symphonies of Beethoven, and the symphonies and concerti of Brahms.

Following academic study of these pieces, conductors begin leading them from the podium. Even the most familiar of these works, such as Beethoven's Fifth, proves to have deep challenges. The famous opening bars are extremely difficult technically—and many interpretive decisions have to be made:

- Should the three short eighth notes have space between them or should they be full length?
- How should the strings use their bows (speed, pressure, and direction) so that the sound is of the correct character and also sets up the following gesture?
- Is there any way that we can hear the clarinets, playing in the middle of their register where it is hard to deliver volume, against the full complement of strings? (Did you ever notice that the clarinets are the only non-stringed instrument to play during the opening bars?)

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Once these questions and many more are successfully answered—conductors bring those decisions to bear while leading dozens of musicians who have valid, but varying ideas of what will sound best. Added to this, the piece is played so quickly that the conductor can only provide one baton beat per measure of music. This results in an inherent lessening of the “control” that the conductor possesses gesturally over such nuances.

As you listen to these familiar works today, I encourage you to challenge your expectations as a listener. Maestro Milanov will be delivering to you his carefully constructed interpretation, and it will enliven your experience to consider the detailed decision-making that defines an artist’s and an orchestra’s rendition of a masterwork.

## Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

### **Piano Concerto No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 15** **Composed 1858**

The relationship between the two composers we hear today is oft-considered, most especially when orchestras perform the first symphony of Brahms, and the tale is told of the long delay between the inception of Brahms’ composition career and the finalization of that piece in 1876. While the delay of his symphony is certainly noteworthy, Brahms composed many of his greatest works for orchestra during the period before 1876.

The D minor piano concerto is really the first of these significant works, composed in 1858. The others of note form an interesting list: two multi-movement orchestral serenades, the Haydn Variations, the massive German Requiem, and a number of larger, cantata-like works for orchestra plus chorus and various soloists, among them *Alto Rhapsody*, *Schicksalslied*, and *Triumphlied*.

Much of the pressure Brahms felt during this time was placed upon him by his colleague and friend, Robert Schumann. In addition to his compositional life, Schumann was the editor of the Leipzig-based musical publication *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, which had enormous readership and influence during that time. In 1853, Schumann, searching for a Beethovenian heir, claimed he had found it in the young Brahms, stating that the composer's mastery had "sprung fully formed, like Minerva fully formed from the head of Zeus."

This D minor concerto was really his reply to that pronouncement—the young Brahms' first step into the Beethoven-dominated world of concerti and symphonies. The completed concerto was a long labor of frustration for Brahms. Initially, his intention for the piece was a two-piano sonata. As the composition grew, so too did the composer's ambition, and the design morphed into a full-scale, four-movement symphony. Ultimately, Brahms discarded all but the first movement, rewrote the orchestration as a piano concerto, and by 1859 it was complete. While many scholars point to the completion of the first symphony as the composer's "breakthrough" against artistic frustration, I argue that this concerto achieved many of those same goals for Brahms almost two decades earlier. The work's history is one of hardship and struggle, but it remains firmly in the repertoire today and traces a journey of dark (D minor) to light (D major).

## Ludwig van Beethoven

(1770-1827)

### **Symphony No. 5 in C Minor, Op. 67**

**Composed 1804-1808**

I ended my remarks about the Brahms by highlighting the concerto's movement from minor to major, and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is really the genesis point for a style of music journey. This and other innovations had an everlasting impact on the symphonies that followed.

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The impact is found in new features such as:

- This aforementioned beginning of a piece in major and ending it in the parallel minor key. Beethoven himself wrote, *“many assert that every minor piece must end in the minor. On the contrary!... The major has a glorious effect. Joy follows sorrow, sunshine—rain.”*
- The use of piccolo, contrabassoon, and trombones in the finale cemented these instruments’ place in the symphonic force.
- The *“attacca”* (proceeding without pause) motion from the third movement into the finale.
- The music germ, or motif, of the opening notes of the symphony having an impact in the creation of so much of the other musical material.
- The return of music from the third movement in the latter half of the fourth movement.

These innovations, plus many others, removed compositional norms and created a new palette of possibilities for the great symphonists that followed. It will be a beautiful listening experience to consider this masterpiece with fresh ears and minds today. Consider how these innovations must have impacted the audience of Beethoven’s day, and also the careful architecture of musical decision-making led by Maestro Milanov that will make this piece sound fresh and vibrant to you today.

**~By John Devlin**

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