

10 FACTS

Beethoven's 5th Symphony in context

- Beethoven wrote nine symphonies in all, the last known as the 'Choral Symphony' and contains the Ode to Joy. The whole work is usually about 70 minutes and it is said that, with the invention of the CD in the 1980s, the famous conductor Herbert von Karajan said it should be possible to hear Beethoven's Ninth Symphony on one CD. To this day, the maximum length of a CD is just over 70 minutes!
- While Beethoven is renowned for his deafness, he certainly didn't have a speech impediment, in case B-B-B-Beethoven is misinterpreted as a stammer!
- Beethoven planned and wrote his 5th Symphony during the years 1804 to 1808
- This was during the period of Beethoven's life called the middle, or 'heroic', period (1802-1812)
- At the start of the heroic period, Beethoven wrote a sad and serious document, rather like a will, called the Heiligenstadt Testament (1802) which mourned the loss of his hearing but also spurred on his sense of destiny to compose music. He was only in his early thirties then. It was discovered when he had died, 25 years later, and after he had written so much more great music.
- From 1802, Beethoven wrote music on a larger scale than the more classical Mozart/Haydn-like music written before that: 1804: Symphony No.3, the 'Eroica' (meaning 'heroic')
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbGV-MVfgec>
- First performance of 5th Symphony was on 22 December 1808 conducted by Beethoven himself. The concert was a benefit concert held in aid of the composer himself
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKI4T5BnhOA>
- The opening motif is often referred to as the 'fate motif' based on writings by Beethoven's secretary and early biographer Anton Schindler. But apparently the composer Carl Czerny met Beethoven who said that he had noted the birdsong of a yellowhammer singing the motif. Which one are we supposed to believe, or is it a combination of both?
- The 4-note motif works rather like the DNA for melodic and rhythmic material. There are references to the rhythm in accompaniment patterns in the slow movement (2nd mvt), the scherzo (3rd mvt) and in the finale which features a return of the scherzo.
- One final fact – the first half contained Symphony No.6, the 'Pastoral', and the second half featured No.5, resulting in the two symphonies being premiered out of numerical order