

## CS Beethoven250 1112.mp3

[00:00:00] Classical music loves a milestone, and this year we approached a big one, Ludwig von Beethoven's 250th birthday, but all of our grand plans ended up changed, postponed or canceled due to the pandemic. Perhaps we went too big and tempted fate. I'm Colleen Phelps, and this is Classically Speaking. From Beethoven's lifetime and beyond, composers and other musicians have had a lot to say about the composer, his work and what the looming legacy means to them.

[00:00:46] Beethoven's music sets in motion the machinery of all the fear of terror, of pain.

[00:00:52] That's ETA Hoffman.

[00:00:54] I detest Beethoven.

[00:00:56] Russian composer Igor Stravinsky. In 1922

[00:01:00] at 80, I have found new joy in Beethoven.

[00:01:03] Igor Stravinsky again in 1962.

[00:01:06] It may be compared to a pleasant member of a disagreeable family who cannot be invited without asking the whole party.

[00:01:14] A critic at the Philharmonic Society in eighteen twenty eight.

[00:01:18] What can you do with it? It's like a lot of yaks jumping about

[00:01:22] famed conductor Sir Thomas Beecham.

[00:01:25] Beethoven always sounds to me like the upsetting of a bag of nails with here and there also a dropped hammer

[00:01:32] pianist Glenn Gould.

[00:01:33] I've never forgiven myself for not being Beethoven

[00:01:37] rock star Billy Joel.

[00:01:40] The dreamer will recognize his dreams, the sailor, his storms and the wolf his force,

[00:01:46] Victor Hugo. And the man largely said to be the follower of Beethoven, Johannes Brahms.

[00:01:53] You can't have any idea what it's like always to hear such a giant marching behind you.

[00:02:11] Like Brahms, our very first guest on classically speaking could feel Beethoven marching behind him, but Christopher Rouse didn't necessarily see that as a bad thing. Instead, he leaned in, even starting his own Fifth Symphony with the same motive... as Dear Ludwig.

[00:02:45] Your symphony opens right there with the fake motive,

[00:02:50] right, sort of

[00:02:51] as does Beethoven.

[00:02:52] Yeah, I wanted to begin it with the, you know, the exact same rhythm and senza fermata of the Beethoven. I didn't choose the same notes. I have completely different notes. We're all the sum of the music we know, and especially like that's the music that will tend to influence us. It's not so much that I feel Beethoven persay hanging over me. I feel Beethoven and Brahms and Tchaikovsky and Haydn and and Prokofiev and everybody else that great or great symphonies before me. And I do think of of the symphony as a serious undertaking. So I didn't really write my first my official first one until I was in my later 30s. It just I just didn't feel I lived enough of a life yet to have something worthwhile saying in a symphony.

[00:04:07] I loved in the program notes reading you reference hearing Beethoven five when you were younger and really into rock music and that your mother suggested, hey, you might like this, too, because I brought my seven year old who's super into rock and roll to the performance to hear your piece, but also to really experience Beethoven five.

[00:04:27] Wow. Well, I was six at the time, so I don't remember that clearly, except that I just got very wrapped up in it. It was like the sky opening up and revealing, you know, something amazing.

[00:04:50] One of the real pleasures of life for me is to thank people who have created things that have made such a difference in my life. And sometimes you're lucky enough to have someone who's alive to be able to thank them personally. And if not, do maybe make a little omaggio to them, a little tip of the cap in what you create. So the Beethoven Fifth, having been so important to me when I was coming to my own Fifth Symphony, I thought, well, I'll give a little shout out to hear Beethoven, but only use his rhythm, not his notes, not really his form. Because I don't want to write a piece that really is more the other person than me.

[00:05:50] That rhythm dadadadaaa that you find it in Haydn all over the place.

[00:05:53] Well, he was Beethoven's teacher, so maybe Beethoven should give it back to Haydn.

[00:06:03] But wait, you find that rhythm, I mean, it's a central rhythm to the French baroque overture to Rameau, badadadaaaa so maybe Haydn should give it back to Lully and Rameau. But wait, madrigals. And that's all composers in the Renaissance. You find that rhythm many times. So maybe Lully and Rameau should give it back to Janequin and, you know, going the other direction from Beethoven on. I mean, hundreds and hundreds of composers have used da da da da, maybe some of them intentionally thinking of Beethoven. And in other cases, it's it's just a rhythm.

[00:06:50] That motive that ba ba ba ba ba, it comes again and again throughout the symphony. The opening was used to start BBC broadcasts during World War Two because that fate motive is also Morse code for V for victory. It's also the star of my son's favorite joke. What's Beethoven's favorite fruit? Bananana. And of course, Rouse isn't the

first composer after Beethoven to reuse that motive in his own music. For example, Nashville Symphony conductor Giancarlo Guerrero finds it in several pieces, including the opening of Gustav Mahler's Fifth Symphony.

[00:07:43] Well, there are something about that fanfare which is very recognizable, and you can also make the connection because it begins with ba ba ba ba ba ba ba ba.

[00:07:53] There's another fifth that struts like that. And I think there's a direct reference to the most famous of the fifth, which is Beethoven's.

[00:08:00] In this case, Mahler turns it into a military fanfare and that follows with a funeral march very much in his personality. But you also have to remember that this was not the first time that he was using this fanfare. He used it in the first moment of the Fourth Symphony direct quotation. So this is not original music. In the big climax of the first movement of the fourth, this same fanfare comes out, but this time surrounded by the whole orchestra.

[00:08:24] It's always been a mystery why the composer decided to recycle that very powerful moment in the fourth century to open the fifth. But as you say, it is one of the most poignant moments in classical music. Not only was he a Beethoven fan, he orchestrated all of the symphonies. Not only did he love them, but he admired him. And even though the beginning has a fateful four notes, ba ba ba ba ba, that's not the only time throughout the first and second move when you hear that very clearly, that there is a revisiting. And yeah, sometimes you do that, you know, subconsciously.

[00:09:00] But I think in this case, Mahler was trying to pay some sort of an homage to, you know, the great symphonies of the 19th century.

[00:09:18] Oh, Gustav Mahler. Why would you mess with Beethoven? Well, by Mahler's time, the orchestra had gotten bigger. The concert hall had gotten bigger, not to mention the instruments were eight decades more advanced. Listen to Mahler's version of the Ninth Symphony. Can you tell that it sounds a little more full? Essentially, Mahler changed how many people are playing the cat notes and chords the same. Remember that by Mahler's time, orchestras didn't necessarily play music from their past quite as often as they do today.

[00:10:00] Like Beethoven, he could at times see the light at the end of the tunnel. And even when you hear some of the tragedy, there was always a moment of light. There's always a moment of hope. And Beethoven, in his own case of dealing with deafness, he always felt that maybe, you know, it would be temporary. We know that he never was. Once again, faith and life would feel you, you know, reality.

[00:10:47] I always say that sometimes playing the most famous piece like a Beethoven five or even a Mahler five can be the toughest because everybody knows them and they will bring their own, you know, history to it.

[00:10:59] So your job as a conductor sometimes is to get everybody together and hopefully, you know, under one banner present a coherent performance. And that would be.

[00:11:18] So we've looked closely at one iconic start to a piece of Beethoven's music, what about a start where you don't play anything for a few minutes? What's that like? Find out after the break.

[00:12:15] Yefim Bronfman has played all of Beethoven's Piano Concerto many, many times. He estimates he's played the third concerto over 100 times. And I always had a lingering question about that one for those first few minutes, the pianist doesn't play. So I had to ask him in those few minutes with all the eyes in the hall on you, what are you doing up there?

[00:12:37] Every time is different, of course. And I try to just listen to music and become one never rests on stage, even if you even have to play one note, whatever else, especially this is a very difficult concerto coming in front of me. And you just see that and try to stay calm and listen to music and and enjoy, you know, don't enjoy whatever whatever you're doing. Keep it quiet.

[00:13:19] And like before, in this piece, Bronfman and I found many note groups, are they all the fake motive or just groups of four? That's only for Beethoven to know.

[00:13:35] There are four notes in this concerto at the ba dum . Almost in every piece it has it.

[00:13:45] Yeah, the Appassionata bup bup bup bup bup bup bup bup bup bup on the fourth piano concerto and pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop.

[00:13:55] You know, always four notes. I don't know if it's coincidental.

[00:13:59] And you can look for those patterns in every composer and you can see that it's something that always pushed them to to write and to express something that may maybe, for better or worse, the four notes.

[00:14:23] Tell me about your first experience with Beethoven in general, you're your Beethoven background record

[00:14:31] What a question I didn't expect it. Now I have to go back many years and. One of my first Beethoven experiences was growing up in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and turning television on and hearing. The two events that I was blown away by Beethoven was one was a triple concerto by Beethoven, live broadcast from Moscow with very, very strong desire for support and such a staff writer and conducting Moscow Philharmonic. And it was that really blew me away. First of all, not only the greatest performers of all times playing Beethoven, but also the music itself kind of was so powerful that it blew me away. And then watching on television a career and conducting Ninth Symphony, that also was shocking and striking experience. Of course, later I was listening to music and was playing between some of us, which was, of course, out of this world. And and then I started playing Beethoven. I started playing and quite young, I was playing his one of his earlier easier sonatas, not not earlier, not necessarily the easy ones, but there are some who were appropriate for somebody who is eight or nine years old. So I started playing then the Beethoven and then I then later in my teens, I learned all the concertos and I would have been living with this music for quite some time.

[00:16:13] Yeah, I noticed the concertos are pretty standard for you. How many times do you think you've played the third concerto like a ballpark?

[00:16:20] Ballpark was maybe a hundred times.

[00:16:23] Wow,

[00:16:23] ballpark. I don't, but I'm not sure I could be way off.

[00:16:27] How do you feel like they've evolved for you over the years, especially number three.

[00:16:31] It's still hard. It's in fact, it's probably even harder because you have different demands and you have different knowledge and you have different body, different hands.

[00:16:45] And you have maybe you are more demanding of yourself today where you say that, but never mind say again, demanding, demanding, demanding and looking for perfection. So it's if anything, it got harder. And I think this is a very challenging piece of, you know, in every way.

[00:17:24] As classical music plans its own return, we have important existential questions about our art form to answer, including how we can justify giving the same composers like Beethoven that valuable space on our limited season, year after year, as new composers arrive on the scene and diverse groups of composers are still just starting to get their due. Was Beethoven really even a barrier breaker? A total iconoclast? Pianist Stephen Hough weighed in on that question.

[00:17:51] I don't think Beethoven was an iconoclast in that. I don't think he was destroying things. In fact, he held on to classical form, to his very last pieces. And I think this idea of of Beethoven as a romantic is a very wrong one. He certainly developed this idea of the individual rather than the community as being expressive. And that was quite new because people before that were either writing for the court or writing for the church where you think of Haydn and Mozart and so on. And Beethoven is writing for the Beethoven. And this is a new idea in human life. Actually, we didn't sort of think it was quite well mannered to be so self obsessed. But of course, Beethoven is not self-pity at all, even when he was suffering. And I think this is something incredible in his music and the power of it. But yeah, very few. I can't think of composers who really wanting to destroy the icons of it before, and they developed them and they work from them. But, you know, this is something that I love this this examination of the word original because original comes from the source of origin. So you can't have original without respecting the origin from which it comes. So it's roots. It's not novel and new and fashion and changing every season. It's something that's growing like a great tree. And so, yeah, I think is part of this, as is Peter.

[00:19:27] And pianist Lara Downes suggested there's good reason that Beethoven's music has stood the test of time to become part of the so-called canon in a way that she can relate to the beautiful and diverse group of pieces that make up her repertoire.

[00:19:41] What do you think it is that makes some pieces of music enter the canon or the repertoire and not necessarily others?

[00:19:50] I was just talking this morning with somebody about about the canon and expanding it and also kind of why do we stick with certain things? And we were talking about Beethoven and how what is in Beethoven's music that still affects us so deeply is

not some, you know, abstract quality called genius. It's the rawness of it. It's the emotional power of it. It's the, you know, crashing and banging and weeping of it.

[00:20:25] We'll talk more about Beethoven in our next episode is Giancarlo Guerrero, and I take you on a survey right through all nine symphonies. So make sure you're subscribed on your favorite podcast app. Classically speaking is a production of Nashville Public Radio. The show is edited by Anita Bugg and mastered by Carl Pedersen. I'm Colleen Phelps asking you to visit us on social media and tell us about your favorite Beethoven piece or pop culture reference we're at classically speaking on Instagram and Facebook and at Speak Classical on Twitter. Thanks for tuning in and enjoying a backstage pass to classical music history through the present, classically speaking.