

The secrets of the world's most famous symphony

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1. 00:12 These eight **ferocious** notes
2. open one of the most **explosive** pieces of music ever composed.
3. Ludwig van Beethoven's Symphony Number Five
4. **premiered** in 1808, on a **blisteringly cold** Vienna night.
5. The piece was just one small part of a **lengthy** program,
6. and the orchestra had been **hastily** assembled and **under-rehearsed**.
7. But despite this **inauspicious** premiere, the symphony quickly **won acclaim**.
8. One critic **likened the piece to** "glowing beams of light,
9. **piercing through** the darkness."
10. This intensity **persists** throughout the composition,
11. and its dramatic **musicality** continues to move listeners today.
12. So what exactly makes Beethoven's Fifth so captivating?
13. 00:59 When the symphony **premiered**, Beethoven already **had a formidable reputation**.
14. While his peers produced music exclusively for religious functions or private events
15. held by their wealthy **patrons**,
16. Beethoven was one of the first **freelance** composers.
17. He made his living composing and selling his music
18. to publishers in multiple countries
19. and **showcasing** his compositions to an **adoring** public.
20. This career choice gave him the flexibility to compose for self-expression
21. and Beethoven was always **pursuing new ways**
22. to translate his powerful emotions into music.
23. 01:33 At the time, most composers worked within the Classical style,
24. which offered limited options for a **piece's overarching structure**
25. and instrumentation.
26. Beethoven composed most of his earlier pieces in this tradition,
27. following in the footsteps of **role models** like Mozart and Haydn.
28. But with his Fifth Symphony, he experimented with elements of **Romanticism**.
29. This **blossoming mode of composition** was known for its **expressive** melodies,
30. **extended forms** and surprising instrumentations.
31. 02:03 **The first movement** of Beethoven's Fifth uses a Classical **sonata form**,
32. in which a central musical idea is explored, developed, and repeated
33. in an **altered** manner.
34. **Within these parameters**, he explores a simple idea with incredible **depth**.

35. A single rhythmic motif serves as the building block for most of the movement:
36. three short notes, followed by a **lingering fourth**.
37. One of Beethoven's biographers would later call this pattern the "fate motif,"
38. because it suggests the figure of fate knocking at the door.
39. **02:35** While it's not clear if Beethoven composed the motif with fate in mind,
40. these notes certainly create a gripping hook. (**gripping** = exciting or interesting in a way that keeps your attention)
41. The rhythmic pattern creates **forward movement,**
42. while the **prolonged** fourth note **signals doom.**
43. This motif **haunts** the symphony,
44. including its **accompanying parts** and **rhythmic flourishes.**
45. Beethoven experiments with **dozens of** variations,
46. **playing out across** different instruments and **itches.**
47. Throughout the piece, this motif is passed around the orchestra like a whisper,
48. **gradually** reaching more and more instruments until it becomes a roar.
49. **03:10** The motif's inventive repetition is a large part (**inventive** = new & interesting)
50. of what makes this piece so **memorable,**
51. but it's not the only innovation on display.
52. This was the first major orchestral composition to use **trombones,**
53. and Beethoven also employs a **high-pitched** piccolo
54. and a **low-pitched contrabassoon**
55. to give the orchestra a wider range than most classical compositions.
56. Exaggerated musical dynamics further heighten the drama.
57. And harmonically, the piece has a clear emotional arc—
58. beginning in a **somber** (= sad & serious) **C minor** and ending in a triumphant **C major.**
59. **03:46** This **progression,** from **ominous unease** to majestic resolution,
60. is a testament to Beethoven's ability to inject raw emotionality into his music.
61. He wrote this symphony while battling with hearing loss,
62. and his **anguish** can be heard in the composition's
63. thunderous and repeating musical phrases.
64. Beethoven continued to compose even after he became completely deaf,
65. producing innovative music until his death in 1827.
66. And the Fifth Symphony's central motif has continued to resound through the ages.
67. **Outside of** concert halls,
68. the piece has become a symbol for **suspense, revelation, and triumph.**
69. The fate motif **sounds out** the letter V in Morse code,
70. and during World War II,
71. the Fifth Symphony became a code for victory amongst the Allies.
72. The iconic composition can be found in film scores,
73. and it's even been explored through musical reinterpretations and visual art.
74. But whatever the context,
75. Beethoven's Fifth takes its listeners through a dark world,
76. then guides them into the light.