



Beethoven's Fifth

A picturesque tone poem by Rachmaninoff plus clarinet music by Debussy and Bernstein comprise the first half of today's concert. After intermission, we'll hear one of the most iconic pieces of music ever written, Beethoven's Symphony No. 5.

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Born 1 April 1873; Semyonovo, Russia
Died 28 March 1943; Beverly Hills, California

The Isle of the Dead, Opus 29

Composed: 1909

First performance: 1 May 1909; Moscow, Russia

Last MSO performance: October 2010; Edo de Waart, conductor

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo); 2 oboes, English horn; 2 clarinets; bass clarinet; 2 bassoons, contrabassoon; 6 horns; 3 trumpets; 3 trombones; tuba; timpani; percussion (bass drum, cymbals); harp; strings

Approximate duration: 20 minutes

Rachmaninoff composed his programmatic tone poem *The Isle of the Dead* [Ostrov myortvikh] in Dresden, where he with his wife and infant daughter lived in seclusion for a few months each year. Both his celebrity and the political unrest in his native Russia had made the motherland inconducive to work. Opus 29 dates from 1909, about the same time as his Symphony No. 2 and Piano Concerto No. 3, two of his best-known works.

In Paris two years earlier, Rachmaninoff had seen a black-and-white drawing of Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin's *The Isle of the Dead*, a matchless icon of late Romanticism. Its scenario: a bleak island of rock sits beneath a sunless sky; a boat carries a coffin toward this gloomy destination, traversing dark, silent water. It fired Rachmaninoff's imagination. When he subsequently saw a full-color version in Leipzig, the experience did not come close to his initial reaction, and he opined that he might never have written the tone poem had he encountered the painting first.

Rather than telling a story, Rachmaninoff sets a panoramic mood, at times utilizing descriptive tone painting – for example, the irregular 5/8 meter at the beginning that suggests the movement of the oars and the lapping of the water. The horn's lament is echoed by the oboe, and this in turn evolves into a brass chorale. What previously was only alluded to now becomes evident: "Dies irae" (Day of Wrath), the medieval plainchant for the dead. The central section is one of many examples of Rachmaninoff's "ability to imagine seamless lines stretching ever onward to their ultimate goal" (Geoffrey Norris), as the strings take flight, recasting the lament into music of passion and poignancy. Agitated, portentous phrases lead to the concluding section, where the unrelenting "Dies irae" underpins several melodic remembrances. Ultimately, only the murmuring water remains, and even that is finally quieted. Life descends into an everlasting void.

Recommended recording: Fritz Reiner, Chicago Symphony Orchestra (RCA Victor) ↻

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Born 22 August 1862; Sainte-Germain-en-Laye, France

Died 25 March 1918; Paris, France

Première rapsodie for Clarinet and Orchestra

Composed: 1909-10

First performance: 14 July 1910; Paris, France (clarinet/piano)
 3 May 1919; St. Petersburg, Russia (clarinet/orchestra)

Last MSO performance: November 1994; Zdenek Macal, conductor;
 Russell Dagon, clarinet

Instrumentation: 3 flutes; 2 oboes; English horn; 2 clarinets; 3 bassoons;
 4 horns; 2 trumpets; percussion (cymbals, triangle); strings

Approximate duration: 7 minutes

At the invitation of Gabriel Fauré, in 1909 Debussy became a member of the advisory board of the Paris Conservatoire. That same year, the Conservatoire asked him to compose two pieces for the 1910 clarinet juries. One piece would test the players' sight-reading ability, and the other would be a more substantial concert work. Apparently, he finished the sight-reading piece at the eleventh hour. It was later published as *Pétite Pièce*.

For the contest solo, however, he devoted much more of his time and creative energies and was quite happy with the result, exclaiming, "Surely this piece is one of the most pleasing I have ever written." He titled it *Première rapsodie*. Originally scored for clarinet and piano, its first performance was given by the work's dedicatee, Prosper Mimart, clarinet professor at the Conservatoire. Afterward, Debussy wrote to his publisher Jacques Durand, "to judge by the looks on the faces of my colleagues, the *Rapsodie* was a success." The orchestrated version on today's concert dates from 1911, and was premiered by Gaston Hamelin.

Debussy disliked the term "Impressionistic," but there is hardly a better word to describe his *Première rapsodie*. It is a free-form piece, set in two large sections. The soft, expressive music at the outset is marked *Rêveusement lent* (slowly dreaming). We hear a short motive that the soloist then capitalizes upon to unfurl a long, lyrical line above a dreamy accompaniment from strings and harp. Midway through the piece, the mood changes drastically, as a new *scherzando* motive enters. Throughout the work, Debussy fully exploits the instrument's range of dynamics, its various registers, and its endless palette of tone colors. It's little wonder that the *Rapsodie* is one of the most beloved – and most challenging – selections in the clarinet repertoire.

Recommended recording: Sabine Meyer; Claudio Abbado, Berlin Philharmonic (EMI Classics) 

LEONARD BERNSTEIN

Born 25 August 1918; Lawrence, Massachusetts

Died 14 October 1990; New York, New York

Sonata for Clarinet

Composed: 1941-42

First performance: 21 April 1942; Boston, Massachusetts (clarinet/piano)
 23 July 1994; Sapporo, Japan (clarinet/orchestra)

Last MSO performance: MSO Premiere

Instrumentation: timpani; percussion (glockenspiel, triangle, wood block, xylophone); piano; strings

Approximate duration: 11 minutes

At age 25, Leonard Bernstein became an overnight sensation after being called upon to fill in for an ailing Bruno Walter at a New York Philharmonic concert at Carnegie Hall – 14 November 1943. His career continued to skyrocket when he conducted the inaugural performance of his "Jeremiah" Symphony in January 1944 and the premiere of *Fancy Free*, his first ballet, just three months later.

Before all that, however, came his clarinet sonata, the young man's first published composition. Its musical style showcases both the classical and jazz capabilities of the clarinet, and shows the influence of Hindemith, Copland, and Gershwin. It is cast in two movements: 1. *Grazioso*; 2. *Andantino – Vivace e leggiero*.

Bernstein spent the summers of 1940 and 1941 at Tanglewood, where Paul Hindemith was on the composition faculty. The German composer's influence is apparent in the opening *Grazioso*, as the clarinet wanders slowly above orchestral counterpoint. An agitated ostinato pattern soon ensues and the clarinet continues to spin out its melody. Following a brief development section, the opening slow material is restated before the orchestra plays a pensive, blues-inspired melody that is then taken up by the clarinet.

The orchestral chords of the *Andantino* again hint at Hindemith, but when the music plunges into the *Vivace e leggiero*, we hear the walking basses, pervasive syncopations, and melodic flourishes so often associated with Bernstein's writing. Its jazzy idiom perpetuates that of Gershwin, who had died just four years earlier. Midway through the movement, a slow, gentle clarinet melody offers a drastic change of mood, but before long the fast, syncopated material returns. At the very end, the soloist ascends to the top of the instrument's range – a gesture not unlike the jazzy smear that concludes Copland's clarinet concerto.

Originally for clarinet and piano, the sonata was written for and dedicated to David Oppenheim, but David Glaser premiered the work, with the 23-year-old composer at the piano. Oppenheim and Bernstein gave the New York City premiere, and later made the first recording of the work. In 1994, at the urging of clarinetist Richard Stoltzman, Sid Ramin – who won both an Oscar and a Grammy for his work on the film *West Side Story* – created the orchestration heard today.

Recommended recording: Richard Stoltzman; Eric Stern, London Symphony Orchestra (Sony) 🎧

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Baptized 17 December 1770; Bonn, Germany

Died 26 March 1827; Vienna, Austria

Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67

Composed: 1804-08

First performance: 22 December 1808; Vienna, Austria

Last MSO performance: April 2017; Anu Tali, conductor

Instrumentation: 2 flutes; piccolo; 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; contrabassoon; 2 horns; 2 trumpets; 3 trombones; timpani; strings

Approximate duration: 31 minutes

Nowadays we expect classical concerts to be of reasonable length. We assume the performers will be well-rehearsed, the seating comfortable, and the room temperature pleasant. Such was not the case at the premiere of what has become one of the most popular pieces in all of classical – or any – music. The Fifth Symphony was first heard immediately after intermission on a four-hour all-Beethoven marathon concert that also included the first public performances of the Piano Concerto No. 4, the Symphony No. 6, the *Choral Fantasy*, Op. 80, the soprano concert aria *Ah, perfido!*, and portions of the Mass in C, Op. 86.

At Vienna's Theater an der Wien, listening to the under-rehearsed concert, the composer Johann Friedrich Reichard later reported: "There we held out in the bitterest cold from half-past six until half-past ten." We can't know just what the shivering patrons in an unheated concert hall in December thought of this now-iconic work. It did not immediately become the world's – or even Beethoven's – most famous symphony. During the master's lifetime, his Symphony No. 3 ("Eroica") was presented more often, and the Allegretto of the Seventh Symphony was dubbed "the crown of instrumental music." Opus 67 became better known after it was published in 1809.

The work opens with what is surely the most famous motif in music history. The composer once pointed to the opening bars in his score and announced, "Thus Fate knocks at the door." Or so Anton Schindler, Beethoven's amanuensis, whose recollections are sometimes highly embroidered, would have us believe. Nevertheless, the aphorism has stuck and most choose to listen that way; indeed, we hear Fate knocking at the door of nearly every measure of the Allegro con brio.

The A-flat major Andante con moto, "consolation after tragedy" (Lewis Lockwood), presents variations on two alternating themes, a compositional technique Beethoven may have copied from Haydn's Symphony No. 103 ("Drumroll"). Interludes with trumpets, horns, and drums separate the variants and a prolonged coda ends the movement. A scherzo and trio makes up the third movement. For the trio, Beethoven shifts from C minor to C major and employs a contrapuntal texture. Rather than a literal repeat of the scherzo portion, the composer

re-orchestrates the material, performed quietly by solo winds and pizzicato strings. Soft taps from the timpani signal us that something important is about to happen. What then follows is a miraculous transition from darkness to light as we rush headlong into C major.

Beethoven's choice of a major-mode finale in a minor-mode work is unusual. And for the first time in symphonic music, trombones (3) are added to the texture, as are piccolo and contrabassoon. Triumphant and exhilarating, the finale includes a reprise of the "horn theme" of the third movement. As Beethoven presses toward the end, he increases the tempo to presto and ends this much-loved opus with 29 bars of C major, played fortissimo – music that must have warmed the hearts of the shivering patrons on that cold night, three days before Christmas 1808.

Recommended recording: Carlos Kleiber, Vienna Philharmonic
(Deutsche Grammophon) 

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.