



The First Four Notes: Beethoven's Fifth and the Human Imagination

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A unique and revelatory book of music history that examines in great depth what is perhaps the best known and most popular symphony ever written and its four-note opening, which has fascinated musicians, historians, and philosophers for the last two hundred years.

Music critic Matthew Guerrieri reaches back before Beethoven's time to examine what might have influenced him in writing his Fifth Symphony, and forward into our own time to describe the ways in which the Fifth has, in turn, asserted its influence. He uncovers possible sources for the famous opening notes in the rhythms of ancient Greek poetry and certain French Revolutionary songs and symphonies. Guerrieri confirms that, contrary to popular belief, Beethoven was not deaf when he wrote the Fifth. He traces the Fifth's influence in China, Russia, and the United States (Emerson and Thoreau were passionate fans) and shows how the masterpiece was used by both the Allies and the Nazis in World War II. Altogether, a fascinating piece of musical detective work—a treat for music lovers of every stripe.

The First Four Notes: Beethoven's Fifth and the Human Imagination Details

Date : Published November 13th 2012 by Knopf (first published January 1st 2012)

ISBN : 9780307593283

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Format : Hardcover 384 pages

Genre : Music, Nonfiction, History, Art

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Sarah Barlow says

Certainly interesting if you're into this kind of thing. Each chapter can be read as its own little essay. Favourite quote "Many men were disturbed over the beginning of the Fifth. One of them asked Beethoven about the reason for the unusual opening and its meaning. Beethoven answered: the beginning sounds and means: You are too dumb."

Claire says

I just wanted to think about the great majesty of Beethoven's 5th symphony again, so that's why I got this book. There is no other reason.

See, it was my first major symphony I performed as oboe I with the Philadelphia Young Artists' Orchestra. I didn't realise at the time I would associate such **strong** emotion with it. I am strongest tied to this piece of music.

I am not confident enough to play any other instrument professionally, even flute, bassoon or voice. In fact, I am probably not confident enough to play even oboe right now at the same level as I once did, but the fact is in the past I did make a little bit of money by blowing air through the instrument which is just below the flute and above the clarinet in the score.

I am always going to listen to this symphony the whole way through and emote and everything else since it is just an incredible feeling! ♥

Not just the first four notes, mind you! The whole thing! All of it! Hear it! Play it! Be it! That was my path. It can be yours, too. Orchestras play it all the time.

Patrick says

This book is as dense and self-indulgent as you might expect if, like me, you are gobsmacked by the thought of anyone having written 282 pages about four notes. The level of detail here puts Charles Dickens and Leo Tolstoy to shame. But look again at that clever title, or better yet, read it aloud, because the title has the same rhythm as its subject. Moreover -- and to be fair -- Mr. Guerrieri writes not only about the first four notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, but also about the work as a whole, together with its enduring impact throughout western culture (and, indeed, world music). He's done his homework. He's an excellent writer. And some of what he says is brilliant.

If you love Beethoven's work and are intrigued by the way a masterpiece like the Fifth Symphony can influence or be appropriated by radically different kinds of people over two tumultuous centuries, then this is a book you might enjoy. It's also worth reading as a textbook example of how a confident writer marks uncharted territory. I learned a lot from this book, but Mr. Guerrieri made me think, and now I want to read

something fast and trashy.

Renee says

I'm not a fan of Beethoven, but even I have to admit that a lot of his music was groundbreaking; even revolutionary and more than 200 years later is now very recognizable – especially the 5th Symphony. I truly enjoyed the historical and biographical information in the book and appreciated the many references. I appreciated the music theory and philosophical points somewhat less so, but they too added to a pleasurable and illuminating read.

John says

Ok, Well I tried. Gave it the 20 page test. Then jumped all over the place to see if I was denying myself an undiscovered gem. Not for me. Think i'll listen to the music instead.

Britt says

The last chapter was my favorite; I struggled to connect some of Guerrieri's ideas together before this chapter. He's heavy on philosophy that is difficult to read without being familiar with the ideas and philosophers he writes about.

Jim Coughenour says

The four-hour 1808 premiere of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (which also included Beethoven's Sixth; an aria, the "Gloria" and "Sanctus" from the Mass in C Major; the Fourth Piano Concerto; an improvisation; and the Choral Fantasy for Piano) was famously described as "too much of a good thing." Matthew Guerrieri's book runs the risk of the same compliment. By the time Guerrieri documented the transmutation of the symphony into disco, hip-hop and ringtones – then delved into the arcane musings of Adorno – my concentration was edging toward exhaustion.

But this cavil melts into nothing in my warm appreciation for this grand program note to Beethoven's spectacular symphony (too often reduced to its first four notes; here I sympathize with Adorno). If "the list of those who have tried to claim it – revolutionaries and reactionaries, Hegelians both Right and Left, radical Transcendentalists and proper Victorians, the Nazis and the Allies – is forbiddingly long and frequently contradictory," Guerrieri makes light work of it all. His learning is evident and his wit usually works. I particularly enjoyed his dry send-up of Helen Schlegel's "goblins" in *Howard's End*, a fantasy that has long soiled my appreciation like a cat stain on the carpet. I also appreciated his appendix "Eight Interesting Recordings" without which I would have never discovered the 2001 performance by Péter Eötvös.

Like many musical amateurs, I'm a longtime fan of the lectures by Robert Greenberg. Guerrieri's study adds

a whole new dimension. (The edition by Knopf is characteristically solid. The type and paper are a pleasure to read.)

BlackOxford says

Was Beethoven Jewish?

I have spent a day with this book and I can't go on. Not because it is horrid but because it is wonderful. Every page is not only informative, it's inspiring. The consequence is that it's got me off pursuing obscure possibilities, that lead to further conjectures, to more research, to more possibilities, potentially ad infinitum. So I'm calling it a day until I can recover some equilibrium.

Here's an example of what I mean: Guerrieri starts with the hidden (except to musicians) eighth rest that begins the Fifth Symphony. Who knew! This magnificent work begins in silence. Then it occurs to me in a flash that this rest serves exactly the same function as the silent consonant Aleph in Hebrew. Although it has no sound in itself, Aleph indicates a sort of preparation for the speech to follow, equivalent to the conductor's baton stroke. The kabbalists consider the Aleph therefore to be the silent origin of all words, indeed of the entire universe, from the mouth of God. The parallel with the creative mind of Beethoven is irresistible, particularly in light of the fact that he was almost certainly entirely deaf when he wrote the symphony. From nothingness to existence and yet an existence that is of a fundamentally different kind to its creator.

Meditation on the eighth rest/Aleph then leads to further thought. The rest creates an odd musical stress, as Guerrieri discusses in detail. Although the piece is in 2/4 time, there is only one beat, and that is on the last note of the bar: dah dah dah DUM. This too is the general rule in Hebrew in which the stress moves toward the final syllable (the mil-ra). This is very unlike most European languages in which the emphasis tends to move toward the initial syllables with a consequent historical loss of final sounds. It's why English has few distinct noun-cases; German has a few more but these are indicated by the form of the definite or indefinite article not in the noun itself. So Beethoven's dramatic emphasis on the last note is in a sense unnatural for a German-speaker.

In my fevered state, speculation on this unusual stress then becomes frantic. Treating the bar as a phrase rather than a word, The poetic meter of the first four notes is something called quartus paeon, a poetic foot consisting of four syllables, any one of which is accented or stressed. In the Fifth Symphony, it is of course the last musical word in the phrase. Hebrew poetry, at least its biblical form, has no clear metrical structure. However, it does make a distinction between open syllables, which end on a vowel, and closed syllables, which end on a consonant. In the former, vowels are long; in the latter preceding vowels are shortened, given extra punch if you will to the final consonant. This I think is the Hebrew poetic equivalent to the structure of Beethoven's first bar, giving even more strength to that final musical word, DUM, while shortening or softening the previous notes in a sort of closed poetic form.

On a roll now, I can see the afternoon lost in the arcane subtleties of Hebrew grammar. One of the peculiarities of Hebrew is that it doesn't express verb tenses - past, present, future, and so forth - with separate forms as in English and other European languages. Most often the tense of a verb has to be picked up from context (something that makes biblical translation a real art form little understood by evangelical

literalists). Interestingly, the first four notes of the Fifth, G and E-flat, are, as Guerrieri points out, ambiguous as to their key. They could develop in several tonal directions. It is not until the seventh bar that the key is 'established' as Beethoven's favoured C minor. This is eerily like a typical Hebrew sentence whose tense can't be determined until sufficient context has been established.

At this point I have become too overheated to continue. Clearly, as the economist pointed out, if any of this were credible, someone would already have picked up the ten pound note off this particular musical floor. The human imagination is indeed a strange critter. Someone stop me.

Tony says

Notice the eighth rest, like a starter pistol, right before the da-da-da-*dum*. Why? And, if you're the conductor, How? It's not there for nothing. For me, it's as if Beethoven *knew*. And so he makes us pause first, however briefly, before he dramatically announces, in four notes, that music will never be the same.

So, what does it mean? The first four notes and the entirety of the Fifth? Is it Fate knocking on the door? In a surely apocryphal story, Beethoven, when asked what the first four notes meant, replied: *You are too dumb!* What we learn in this marvelous study is that everyone seems to have an opinion about what Beethoven's Fifth means. It has been appropriated and misappropriated. It has made its way into movies and commercials and, now, ringtones.*

True there is a lot in here about Hegel - a lot - until our author notes that "Its at this point that it becomes obvious just how contrived a target the opening of Beethoven's Fifth is for Hegel's logic, a square peg being crammed into a round philosophical hole." Why did we bother, I then wondered.

More appealing was the analysis of the use of those first four notes in World War II. People in the Belgian resistance had been chalking the letters "R.A.F." on walls, sidewalks and even on Nazi vehicles. This drew the unwanted attention of the Gestapo, so the resistance changed to the letter "V", symbolizing victory (*victoire*) in French and freedom (*vrijheid*) in Flemish. The Morse Code symbol for V is dot-dot-dot-dash. And so, those four notes, so recognizable, became a whistling tune of resistance, a hummed irritant to invaders.

I learned that "the rhythmic foot the Fifth lays out--short-short-short-long--was known in Classical antiquity as a *quartus paeon*." I thought maybe this was going to be something else, like Hegel, that I really had no use for. But Guerrieri kept getting back to that, the *quartus paeon*, and showing it in other musical statements, and other examples of Fate knocking on a door. Like: *I have a dream*.

Like Beethoven's Fifth, it's a pause, then a start. Just a start.

*I used to have a ringtone from Bach's Third Brandenburg Concerto but now I just vibrate.

Jonathan says

I read this book after hearing a review on NPR. Too bad the highlights NPR covered were the best parts in the story. The writing was aloof and inconsistent. The constant introduction of composers, philosophers, and politicians with insufficient text describing their connection to the 5th was distracting. Overall, It was hard to tell where the author's narrative was going. A simpler, focused book would have been a more enjoyable read.

Robert Giambo says

A book about more about the intellectual reaction to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony than the music itself. Shows how different intellectual traditions used Beethoven's work to forward and reinforce their own agendas.

As such an interesting sampling of intellectual traditions although the discussion of Hegelianism is the most uninteresting and opaque (but not surprisingly, since Hegel is always boring and opaque).

It is interesting how the uncreative (i.e., the critic) turned beethoven's creative work into their own career opportunities.

Michael Finocchiaro says

This book is a brilliant piece of scholarship that talks of the multiple interpretations and distortions that the da-da-da-dum opening of Beethoven's 5th Symphony has had since he penned it in 1808. It has been appropriated by philosophers, demagogues, writers, and advertisers over the past two centuries. There are some interesting side notes (I was ignorant or had forgotten that the terms "left" and "right" in politics stemmed from Hegel or that the modern phone dial tone is based on the 5th's enigmatic theme), but the tone oscillates between academic and colloquial. I found it very, very boring at many moments and sort of interesting at others. I think that the book by Gardiner about Bach's choral works or Eric Soblin's *The Cello Suites* were more interesting non-fiction writings about a set of classical musical pieces. Perhaps I was asking too much of Guerrieri to make 270 pages about 4 notes captivating all the way through. Recommended only for the Beethoven purist who wants to see how this particular opening has aged. If you want to know about Beethoven himself, stick with Jan Swafford or Maynard Solomon's bios.

I neglected to mention that I looked for several of the recordings of the 5th he mentioned. The first two have relatively poor sound quality (both recorded in the early 20th C) which my ears have a hard time with. On the other hand, I have the Karajan and Klemperer versions which are references. The Toscanini is in mono unfortunately. My favorites are Kleiber's and Gardiner's and also Glenn Gould's recording of the Lizst transcription. This latter is particularly useful to find the melody which in orchestral settings gets lost in my ears with all the emotion expressed in the brasses.

The author also talks about Charles Ives' *Concord Sonata*. I got Lubimov's version but was underwhelmed. If anyone has a suggestion of a superior recording, I am all ears. Not could I find a satisfactory recording of Hans von Bülow's *Nirwana*.

I think that most people (including myself) may not listen to the 5th beyond the first 4 notes and the Allegro con brio first movement. In fact, the whole piece and especially the resolution in IV Allegro is absolutely

amazing. Listening to the last movement, you can hear the sense of triumph of Beethoven over his increasing deafness which he laments in the first movement.

I am still listening to the 5th at least once a month and finding it spectacular - my 7yo daughter regularly requests it in the car :)

Mike Cuthbert says

Once, in conversation with Antal Dorati, then conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, DC, he told me: “You must remember that every time you perform the Beethoven Fifth Symphony in concert, half the audience will never have heard it all the way through, another third of that has never heard it performed at all and the final third has never heard it played by a professional orchestra. So to almost all of your audience, even the Beethoven Fifth will be a new experience.” Hard as that is to believe, it is probably true. Yet everyone has heard the opening three Gs and an E-flat in some form during their lifetimes. The first four notes have represented Fate, Death, God, and victory plus who knows how many other things but to this author, they represent much more than mere symbols; he traces those four notes through the rest of music history, philosophy, politics and mythology in a dense but rewarding study of a signal work in the artistic history of the West. He goes into the myths surrounding the work—no, Beethoven was not deaf when he wrote it, for example---and, with infinite patience, traces its transmutation into pianists’ repertoires as well as rock studios. I must admit that the most thrilling part of the C-minor for me is the transition from the third movement scherzo into the glorious finale and the first appearance of the trombones in full voice. It almost always, depending on the performance, lifts me partially out of my seat and makes me want to stand and shout. But those first four notes...

Part of the discussion is about how the Germans struggled to maintain intellectual possession of the work. Various French and English philosophers and aestheticians tried to kidnap the intellectual and cultural roots of the work but never succeeded. Perhaps that explains, in part, why the Allies could use the Fifth as a symbol of winning the war—in Morse Code the three shorts and a long of the opening measures represents the letter “V”—and yet the Germans kept playing the symphony as often as possible as well. The Fifth soon became an international citizen, usable by anybody who needed a psychological lift. It will help you understand the book better if you have some musical education, but it is not vital. Philosophy might be more help as background because it is the philosophical arguments that collide around the work that make it such a significant piece of art throughout the over 200 years since it was written. Guerrieri touches on some of the technical problems of those opening notes. As a conducting student in grad school I recall a very funny yet touching class in which one of the brightest of the students, a pianist, got “stuck” at the top of his downbeat, unable to proceed until he lowered his arms, shook out the tension and tried again to proceed to the downbeat. The reason he froze was that the downbeat to the Fifth leads to silence—the piece starts with an eighth-rest—and must convey not only the exact place for the downbeat and the resulting silence, but the tempo at which the 3 eighth notes that follow must be played. Then the conductor (and the orchestra) are confronted by a relatively short fermata or hold, the cut-off of which is the downbeat to the next measure which also ends in silence with three more eighth-notes followed by a longer hold. Take my word for it, if you have never tried to do it, it is one of the sweatiest moments in any young conductor’s life, to negotiate those few measures. Then there are tempo problems throughout the symphony’s four movements. The author spends considerable time discussing differences between conductors and Beethoven who had the opportunity to use a metronome and mark the tempi he wanted. Most critics and musicians are in agreement that most of his markings are inappropriate for the music itself and the arguments go on. This book is not light summer reading but it may lead to some pretty impressive summer listening and certainly a greater understanding of

one of the most iconic single pieces of music in all of the history of the art. Stick with it and realize how fascinating four notes—the first four notes—of a piece of music can be.

Cara says

I heard about this book on NPR radio and thought it would be great since I love Beethoven. It turned out to be a disappointment. It was hard to read, hard to follow and was not that interesting. It tracked peoples' responses and uses of the motive from Beethoven's time to the present.

Susan says

This is a collection of essays, some of them having a lot to do with the first four notes of Beethoven's Fifth, and some having little to do with it. The author is incredibly intelligent, and part of the pleasure in reading the book is in being exposed to someone so incisive. Sometimes, though, I just wanted to hear a story about Beethoven. I did learn a lot, and it's definitely worth reading if you want to know more about music history.
