He was short, probably standing no more than five feet, four inches tall. His face bore the pockmarks of an attack of smallpox that he endured in his youth, and women found him both fascinating and physically repulsive. That he was sometimes bad-tempered, there is absolutely no doubt; when served a plate of meatballs that he found improperly cooked, he dumped the entire bowl of food over the waiter’s head. His advancing deafness increased his irritability and his isolation from everyone except his closest friends. By early middle age, he was using ear trumpets to amplify the sounds of other people’s voices, and he could eventually only communicate through a correspondence book, in which friends and acquaintances would write their side of the conversation and he would reply by speaking. He was by all accounts socially inept, often bordering on rude and boorish — and that was the opinion of his dearest friends!

Yet this diminutive, awkward, angry man created some of the most soul-stirring music ever written on our planet, music that is as dynamic, inspiring and moving today as it was two centuries ago when it was first composed. His music has been recorded by the greatest musicians of every generation, numerous movies and countless books have been devoted to his life, his music appears in advertising and video games, and his works pervade the programs of soloists, chamber groups, and orchestras the world over. His immortal music fuels both our compassion and our aspirations, reflects both our humanity and our divinity, and, even in those works’ darkest moments, gives us hope for a better future for all humankind.

His name was Ludwig van Beethoven.

**Ludwig van Beethoven: Coriolan Overture, Op. 62**

In an era where most musicians were little more than servants to the noble families and royal courts of Europe, Beethoven conversed with his noble Viennese patrons as their social equal. He strongly advocated the Enlightenment concepts of “Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité (Liberty, Equality, Brotherhood)” espoused by the leaders of the French Revolution. In a letter to one of his aristocratic friends, Beethoven wrote:

> “Prince, you are what you are through the accident of birth; I am what I am by what I have made of myself. There are and always will be hundreds of kings and princes; there is only one Beethoven!”

He had originally dedicated his Third Symphony (1803 – 1804) to Napoléon Bonaparte, who at the time held the egalitarian title of First Consul of France. Beethoven had pinned his hopes on Bonaparte to eliminate the oppression of the aristocracy throughout Europe and usher in a new era of freedom and
democracy. When Napoléon declared himself Emperor, Beethoven’s student and friend Franz Ries brought the news to the composer. Ries later wrote about Beethoven’s reaction:

I was the first to tell him the news that Buonaparte had declared himself Emperor, whereupon he broke into a rage and exclaimed, “So he is no more than a common mortal! Now, too, he will tread under foot all the rights of Man, indulge only his ambition; now he will think himself superior to all men, become a tyrant!” Beethoven went to the table, seized the top of the title-page, tore it in half and threw it on the floor. The page had to be recopied, and it was only now that the symphony received the title Sinfonia eroica.

Given his beliefs in the rights of all mankind, it is not surprising that Beethoven would be drawn to the story of the legendary Roman general Gaius Marcius Coriolanus. He was believed to have been a Roman soldier whose swift and decisive action defeated the Volsci (bitter enemies of Rome at the time) at a battle near the Volscian town of Corioli (earning him his title Coriolanus and a promotion to general). Ignominiously exiled from Rome, he became a general for the Volsci, and successfully defeated the Roman armies in battle. His forces surrounded and laid siege to Rome, but Coriolanus’s mother and wife came to the Volsci camp under a flag of truce in order to plead with Coriolanus to be merciful and spare Rome. Coriolanus, moved to pity, threw down his sword, abandoned his armor, and left the army, never to be heard from again.

While it is tempting to assume that Beethoven’s overture was inspired by Shakespeare’s play Coriolanus (especially given Beethoven’s plans to create operas based on both Macbeth and King Lear), the overture was written in 1807 for a production of the play Coriolan by Heinrich Joseph von Collin. While having much in common with Shakespeare’s drama, von Collin’s play ends slightly differently – Shakespeare has Coriolanus murdered, while in von Collin’s drama, Coriolanus takes his own life.

The overture opens with a thunderbolt: a sustained fortissimo C in the strings, slapped away by a brutal C minor chord. A sinister scurrying figure begins in the strings, which will form most of the melodic material of the overture, contrasted with a more lyrical pleading melody in the violins over undulating cellos and violas. The overture follows the basic designs of sonata form, but the listener is drawn into the conflict between these two musical ideas, and the masterful way in which Beethoven creates tension even in the simple interplay of a two-note figure. At the end of the overture the defiant opening returns, but this time two thrusting chords (perhaps Coriolanus’s suicide?) bring the forward momentum to a screeching halt. The overture ends in quiet mourning over a repetition of the undulating cello motive. Three barely audible pizzicato notes bring a grim end to the overture, much like three taps on a funeral drum.

**Beethoven: Symphony No. 1 in C major, Op. 21**

The popular perception of Ludwig van Beethoven is of the heaven-storming Romantic composer, writing powerful and dramatic music inspired by a largely tragic muse. If musical triumph is achieved in his works, it is only through titanic struggle, as in the Third Symphony (“Eroica”), the Fifth Symphony, or the
Ninth Symphony. He is the ultimate hurler of musical thunderbolts, the grim, fiery-eyed, wild-haired trailblazer of a new musical path, leading to the work of Berlioz, Liszt, Wagner, Mahler and beyond.

That is certainly one aspect of Beethoven’s musical personality, but not the only one. As a young man in Vienna, Beethoven often lived a hand-to-mouth existence, writing dance music and fulfilling other commissions in order to make ends meet, all the while trying to earn the favor of publishers, patrons and audiences with his music while remaining true to his own principles. Where Beethoven’s later music bent and broke the “rules” of the Classical style, his earliest compositions show a young composer who has learned valuable lessons from the works of Haydn, Mozart and others, and is just beginning to flex his compositional muscles to see if he can push the envelope in terms of form, technique and expression.

The symphony is in the four typical movement form of a Classical symphony, but delightful surprises abound, especially the prominent writing for the woodwinds. The slow introduction opens with an astonishing chord that skillfully sidesteps a resolution to C major, the principal key of the work. This introduction takes its sweet time in establishing this home key, fleetingly touching on it in the eighth bar, but only truly arriving at it in the downward swoop into the subsequent Allegro con brio. The movement is full of ingenious invention and admirable concision, with most of the ideas developing from the initial Allegro theme. There is a sense of joy and amusement as Beethoven fragments and manipulates his themes. He closes the movement in epic fashion, the final C major fanfares aided and abetted by trumpets, horns and timpani.

The slow movement’s opening theme is both graceful and slyly playful, and Beethoven shows off a bit by treating his principal melody in fugal fashion. The subsequent material is equally delightful, ranging from beautiful cantabile to a gentle polonaise. The trumpets and timpani, usually silent in a Classical slow movement, here add a delightful and subtle flavor to the texture.

The Menuetto resembles the elegant 18\textsuperscript{th}-century version in name only – in fact, this is the first of Beethoven’s symphonic scherzo, where the stately minuet’s tempo is hastened so that it feels like one beat per bar instead of three. The jovial minuet sections are simplicity itself, based on a rising and slightly chromatic scale. The music bubbles along in good spirits, even in the trio section, where a noble chorale in the woodwinds receives swirling and slightly cheeky replies from the violins.

The halting and comic scales that open the finale (extended by one note at each iteration) display a Haydn-like wit and a wonderful sense of comic timing. They lead into the exuberant Allegro molto e vivace very much indebted to Haydn’s folk music-inspired final movements. The contrasting second theme kicks up its heels, resembling nothing so much as a can-can. The good humor drives the symphony to the very end, where the first of Beethoven’s “endless” symphonic codas brings the symphony to a brilliant conclusion.
Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 73, “Emperor”

One of the many mysteries of Beethoven’s musical output is why certain genres occupied his attention early in his career, and then he suddenly ceased writing works of that type. While his piano sonatas, symphonies, and string quartets span his entire creative career, he wrote other works in a flurry of creative activity and then ceased entirely. Of his ten sonatas for violin and piano, only the final sonata (G major, Op. 96) dates from later in his life; the other nine works are contained within his so-called early period, from roughly 1792 to 1803.

More inexplicable might be his sudden cessation in writing concertos for piano and orchestra. He was considered one of the greatest pianists of his time and one of most innovative composers for the instrument. The lack of piano concertos from his later life might be from exhausting his muse in that area, but the real answer might be sadder and more practical: Beethoven had grown too deaf to perform in public and saw no pressing need to write further concertos for the piano.

The Piano Concerto No. 5, begun in 1809, rose from circumstances that most composers would have found less than ideal for creative activity. In May of that year, Napoleon’s forces were marching on Vienna, prompting the aristocracy, including the Emperor and most of Beethoven’s noble patrons, to leave the city and find safer accommodations. Beethoven refused to leave Vienna when the French bombardment began on May 11, even though his house was very close to the French target zone. He eventually left his lodgings to stay in the cellar of his brother’s house, doing his best to shield the all-too-fragile remnants of his hearing from the relentless explosions of the French shells.

When the Austrian forces finally surrendered, Beethoven emerged from his subterranean bolt hole to find Vienna "a city filled with nothing but drums, cannon, marching men, and misery of all sorts." The nobility soon returned to Vienna, despite the French occupation, and the social and cultural life of the city returned to normal. Beethoven could not find an occasion to premiere the concerto until nearly two years later, when it was given in Leipzig with Friedrich Schneider as the soloist. There is a legend that at the Vienna premiere, a French officer rose at the end of the performance and exclaimed that the work was “an emperor among concertos,” but this appears to be an urban legend of classical music. Beethoven’s English publisher, Johann Baptist Cramer, created the epithet for the work, and Beethoven probably never heard that nickname.

The concerto opens with a weighty E-flat major chord, to which the soloist responds with resplendent waves of arpeggios in a recitative that leads to the dynamic first theme, which roars forth in full-throated fervor from the full orchestra. The majestic and elegant opening and closing themes in this extended orchestral tutti contrast with the lyrical and noble second theme originally in B minor, but then “correcting” itself to B-flat major. The pianist expounds and elaborates on these themes, providing commentary and ornamentation in often stormy dialogue with the orchestra, but Beethoven masterfully places virtuosity at the service of musical expression, so one is drawn into the composition itself, rather than any pianistic display. The ravishingly beautiful Adagio un poco mosso is worlds away from the outer movements in expression and tonality – it is set in the harmonically distant key of B major. There is a feeling that time has stopped, with an unearthly calm pervading the entire movement. When a peaceful
end seems certain, Beethoven drops the bassoon from B natural to B-flat, setting up a return to E-flat major. The pianist tentatively explores a melodic fragment which grows in confidence, finally bursting forth into the boisterous main idea of the third movement. The finale is a high spirited rondo, bearing a marked resemblance to the finale of Beethoven’s Violin Concerto. The mood is exuberant and triumphant throughout, with the piano leading the proceedings. In the coda, the music grows ever softer, appearing to signal a quiet close, when a rocketing scale from the pianist ushers in the orchestra for a triumphant ending to an epic concerto.