

# Disaster in the Concert Hall: The Night of Beethoven's Fifth (and Sixth) Symphonies



**Der Platz Am Hof mit dem Radetzkydenkmal im Schnee, vorne eine Bude und Christbäume**, (Am Hof Square with the Radetzky monument in snow with a stall with Christmas Trees) 1908, watercolor by Karl Wenzel Zajicek (Austrian artist; 1860-1923); even though this image is from nearly 100 years later, this market would have been familiar to Beethoven and his peers. Painting in Public Domain.

December 22, 1808: The concert hall was freezing and the orchestra and audience shivered within their coats and shawls, their breath puffing out in the air. Everyone waited for the man of the hour, the greatest composer in Vienna, perhaps, the greatest in history: Beethoven.

It was Advent, the only time a composer could produce concerts in the winter. The Vienna aristocracy who attended these concerts always fled the heat and dust of the summer for their cool country homes. In the winter, operas hogged the theaters, filling every minute with rehearsals and performances.

However, during Advent, the 40 days before Christmas, and Lent, the 40 days before Easter, operas were forbidden by the Church. Just because no one could attend operas did not mean people stayed home. It was concert season! And for a composer like Beethoven, this was an important event: concerts always raised money for something or someone, and that someone could be the composer! After all, Beethoven had to eat, just like everyone else.



*Beethoven, as he appeared in 1804, when he started composing the Fifth Symphony and four years before the soon-to-be-infamous concert.*



*Emanuel Schikanider, the an der Wein's owner, dressed to impress as Papageno, the silly bird man of Mozart's last opera.*

He turned to his favorite concert hall, the Theater an der Wein. It was the newest, largest, and most comfortable theater in all of Vienna. Built by the man who had written the Magic Flute alongside Mozart (and played Papageno, the Bird-Man), this theater had also been Beethoven's home for several years. (The owner set aside several rooms to create Beethoven's "apartment.")

In return, Beethoven premiered many pieces here: his *Second Symphony*, his *Third "Eroic" Symphony* (a smash hit!), his first opera, *Fidelio* (a complete flop—not everything Beethoven wrote was a winner...) People had flocked to hear Beethoven's pieces.





*The Theater an der Wein, which was hired by Beethoven for his December concert, as it appeared in the 19th century. It has been largely rebuilt over the centuries, with only a couple places Beethoven would remember remaining.*

But the owner had also produced some expensive and unpopular operas too...in the end, he went bankrupt and sold the theater. Beethoven was fired as the composer in residence and had been kicked out a year ago. Still, it was the best theater in town, and it was still his favorite place to play.

Checking in with the theater's schedule, there was only one night

available: December 22. So that would have to be the date of the concert.

Beethoven booked the hall and orchestra, then set the price of the tickets: two guilders.

That was expensive: as much as a week's wages for a laborer in Vienna. Because he wanted his audience to get their money's worth, Beethoven would premiere several pieces, including TWO Symphonies: his Fifth and Sixth.

He had labored over these works for years, tinkering and overhauling each movement, each phrase, each note, trying to figure out the best way he could present this music to the world. The Fifth Symphony represented "Fate knocking on life's door", and the Sixth reflected Beethoven's love of the Viennese countryside he walked through every day.

Then, just to make sure the audience heard enough music, Beethoven decided to add more pieces. He would debut several piano solos and concertos. Last minute, worried that people wouldn't hear enough, he dashed off a grand Choral Fantasy to finish he concert.

All in all, Beethoven planned a four-hour concert.

And hoped that would be long enough.

And then, the problems began. Beethoven spent so much time finalizing all the compositions, that he didn't rehearse until the day before the concert, when he got his first shock: over half of his hired orchestra was gone.

The reason the theater had been open that night was because a charity supporting the widows and orphans of dead musicians was conducting their own charity concert across town! Half of his orchestra had promised to play that concert before Beethoven hired them, and so they weren't going to play under Beethoven!

That was the first disaster. More were to come.

The remaining orchestra, knowing they were too small, had brought many of their amateur musician friends to this solitary rehearsal, and Beethoven quickly bowed to the inevitable. This hodge-podge orchestra rehearsed hard throughout the day. There were rages (mostly from Beethoven), tears (from everyone) and at least one resignation. Nonetheless, the concert debuted the next night, ready or not.



The night was clear and bitterly cold.

And when everyone arrived at the theater, they discovered the second disaster.

The heating system was down. It was just as cold inside the theater as it was outside. The musicians shivered, and tried to keep their stiff

fingers and lips flexible for Beethoven's demanding music. The audience huddled inside their coats and wraps, watching their breath puff out in front of them.

For several in the orchestra, this was their first major concert debut, and they only had one rehearsal. When Beethoven arrived, there was a deep breath (which you could still see puffing up from the orchestra!) and the concert began.

It fell apart almost immediately.



*The inside of the Theater van der Wein for an opera.*

The soloist got stage fright and stumbled her way through the concert, forgetting most of her words! You couldn't blame her really. That resignation during rehearsal was the vocal soloist who'd stormed out. This one had been hired with only hours to spare!

Then Beethoven himself caused quite the uproar by forgetting what they'd rehearsed together the day before!

During rehearsal, he'd instructed the orchestra to play a certain piece without repeats. But during the concert, swept away by his own music, HE played the repeats, and the orchestra continued without him! The results were about as terrible as you might expect. He stopped the orchestra, scolded them publicly, and demanded they play the piece correctly, including the repeats. (After the concert, when the musicians told him his mistake, he was good enough to apologize, and later tell the story all over town of how the infamous "mistake" was his, not the orchestra's.)

Strangely, the Sixth Symphony opened the concert, and the Fifth Symphony opened the second half of the concert. By then, the audience was freezing, and wanted to go home, but couldn't sneak out.



As once concert goer put it, “Beethoven was in the middle of conducting, and [too] close at hand.”

In other words, if you had tried to slip home to your warm house, Beethoven would have caught you.



And then, in the frozen silence, the music broke with a bang: Da-Da-Da-DUUUUH!”

The sound Beethoven described as, “Fate Knocking on the Door” exploded out of the whole orchestra.

The audience jumped in their seats, startled by the sudden shock of sound. It was a new style of symphony: dynamic, powerful, seeming to rage and fight against fate. It was innovative, vigorous, full

of power and energy.

It just wasn’t something the frozen fans appreciated that night. In fact, one of Beethoven’s fans and fellow composers, Johann Fredirich Reichart, said,

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*“There we sat, in the most bitter cold, from half past six until half past ten, and confirmed for ourselves... that one may easily have too much of a good thing, still more of a powerful one.”*

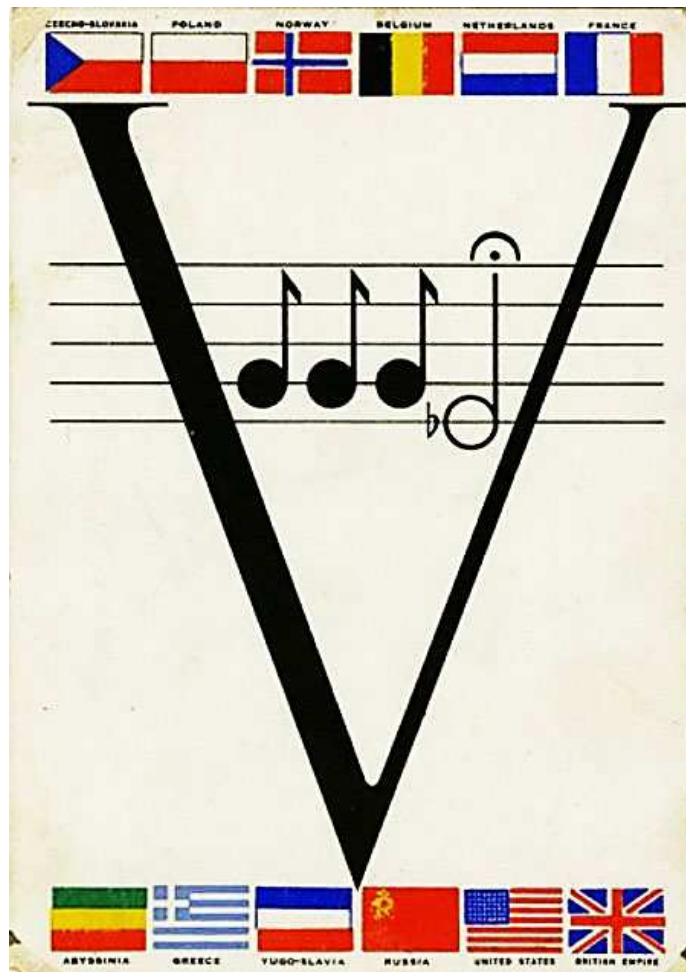
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And so Beethoven's grand concert went down in Viennese history...as one of the worst, most uncomfortable, awkward concerts of Beethoven's career. And yet, over the next century, that startling, terrifying opening of "Da-Da-Da-DUHHHH!!" became iconic. Everyone knew it.

During WWII, the Fifth Symphony took on new significance.

Beethoven, a German composer, was held up as an example of good German music and used by Hitler and the Nazi party. His music, including the powerful Fifth Symphony, was played for many concerts and inserted into films supporting their view of the world.

But over on the Allies side...



The Allies called Beethoven's Fifth Symphony "The Victory Symphony" because the Roman numeral for 5 was "V".

The opening Da-Da-Da-DUHHH was played on the radio every time the BBC had a war announcement.

The three quick and one final knock became a secret symbol of resistance among the civilians of Nazi occupied Europe (spurred on by the BBC's radio through forbidden sets.)

As the war moved forward and the Nazis began to fall and fail, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony became linked with victory for the Allies.

In a weird coincidental twist, "Dot-dot-dot-dash" (which sounds a lot like "da-da-da-DUUH") is also Morse Code for the letter "V".

Victory came, and the fame of the Fate and Victory Symphony remained.

But back in 1808, among the mistakes, the re-dos, the forgotten words, the missing musicians, the quietly quivering audience, a truly special (if disastrous) concert opened and then closed for one night only.

Because Beethoven was also hiding a fateful secret on the night of December 22.

He was going deaf. There was no cure.

Already, he could barely hear soft voices anymore. The bird songs and shepherd's pipes he'd created in his Sixth Symphony were already silent on his daily walks. Sometimes, he couldn't hear high notes. Soon, he sadly knew, his world would go completely silent, and he would never hear his own music again. Never conduct an orchestra again.

And so, for four freezing hours, Beethoven shared the last of his passionate gift that he could hear to the world. For one last time.



The actual, handwritten first page of Beethoven's 5th Symphony