

MasterWorks 6: Beethoven's Fifth Program Notes

Aaron Jay Kernis (b. 1960)

Too Hot Toccata

Written: 1996

Movements: One

Style: Contemporary American

Duration: 6 minutes

“I want everything to be included in music,” writes the composer Aaron Jay Kernis, “soaring melody, consonance, tension, dissonance, drive, relaxation, color, strong harmony, and form — and for every possible emotion to be elicited actively by the passionate use of these elements.”

Born in Philadelphia in 1960, Aaron Jay Kernis began his musical career on the violin. When he was twelve, he began teaching himself piano. He attended the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, the Manhattan School of Music, and the Yale School of Music. His principal teachers were John Adams, Charles Wuorinen, and Jacob Druckman. At age 16, he won the first of three BMI Foundation Student Composer Awards, one of the most prestigious prizes for young composers. In September 1993, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra appointed him as Composer-in-Residence. In 1998, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his String Quartet No. 2 (“Musica instrumentalis”), becoming the youngest composer to win that award. Again, in 2002, he became the youngest composer to win the Grawemeyer Award for his *Colored Fields*. Kernis has served for over ten years as New Music Advisor to the Minnesota Orchestra and he is currently the Director of the Minnesota Orchestra’s Composer Institute. Since 2003, he has been teaching composition at the Yale School of Music.

Current events have inspired some of Kernis’s compositions. He wrote his Second Symphony in reaction to the First Gulf War, and *Colored Fields* – a concerto for English horn and Orchestra – is a musical response to his visit to Auschwitz. *Newly Drawn Sky* and *Musica Celestis* are two works that demonstrate another more lyrical and contemplative aspect of Kernis’s music. Then

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there are compositions like *New Era Dance* and *Too Hot Toccata*, which Kernis fills with references to pop music, jazz, honky-tonk, and even rap.

He wrote *Too Hot Toccata* – almost a concerto for the entire orchestra – as he was finishing his tenure with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. He provides the following description of the piece:

I considered *Too Hot Toccata* to be a kind of farewell to my residency, but not as a farewell to the Orchestra. This work features just about all of the principal players and treats all of the various orchestra sections as soloists. There is also a horribly difficult honky-tonk piano solo, as well as a fiendish clarinet solo and a big part for the piccolo trumpet, in addition to a lot of virtuoso percussion writing. The music is a little hyperactive — very high energy and quite out of control, but with a slower middle section for balance.

“I want to write music that is visceral, that is moving, and that is impeccably put together,” he has written. “I don’t want classical music to be a passive experience. I want it to have as much of an impact as the best rock concerts.”

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No 2. in F minor, Op. 21

Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849)

Written: 1829

Movements: Three

Style: Romantic

Duration: 30 minutes

Frédéric Chopin was one of the greatest pianists of all time, but his reputation rests on remarkably few public concerts; he gave only three after the age of twenty-five. Instead, Chopin made his reputation playing for small elite parties at the various salons in Paris. Perhaps that is why his output for the piano seems best suited for the smaller hall. He played all of his nocturnes, ballades, impromptus, waltzes, and polonaises in those intimate salons. He wrote only six pieces for piano and orchestra, all of them before he turned twenty-one while he was living in his native Poland, trying to launch his career.

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Chopin was almost entirely self-taught. He developed a style in which the melody, most often played in the right hand, had a singing lyrical quality. The rhythm and harmony contained in the left hand was much more complex than in previous generations. Chopin also helped define *tempo rubato*, that “robbing” of time from beat-to-beat or measure-to-measure that gives music from the nineteenth century its breathing or “push-pull” quality. He played very lightly, almost daintily. Once an audience member, outside after hearing a recital by Chopin, started shouting, “I’ve been listening to *piano* all the evening, and now, for the sake of contrast, I want a little *forte*.” (The pun is that *forte* means “loud” and *piano* means “soft.” *Piano* is also the abbreviated name of the solo instrument for the concerto, otherwise known as the *pianoforte*.)

Chopin wrote his second piano concerto when he was nineteen. Actually, it was the first concerto he wrote, but he published it some years after his only other concerto, which is called his first. (Such are the ways of music publishing.) Unlike most concertos where the orchestra and solo instrument sometimes compete against each other, this concerto is meant solely to display the piano. It has the standard three movements. The first starts with a long orchestral introduction, introducing the two main themes. Then the piano enters, plays the same themes, adds new material, and then develops the first theme. The orchestra and piano then restate the opening.

The second movement has a beautiful slow melody with a dramatic middle section. Chopin’s youthful infatuation with the singer Konstancja Gładowska served as the inspiration for this music. He wrote about it to his friend Tytus Wojciechowski:

“I have met my ideal, whom I have been faithfully serving for six months without making mention of my feelings. I dream about her, and the Adagio of my new concerto has taken shape under her influence. ... It is unbearable not to be able to free oneself of an oppressive

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burden. You know to what I am alluding. I am therefore entrusting to the piano what I have sometimes spoken of to you.”

The final movement is what the eminent English music critic Donald Francis Tovey called “a delightful example of the long ramble through picturesque musical scenery, first straight up a range of keys and then straight down again, which Chopin, for reasons unknown to history called a rondo.”

Symphony No. 5 in C Minor, Op. 67

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Written: 1807-1808

Movements: Four

Style: Romantic

Duration: 31 minutes

Here we are in the 21st century listening to one of the greatest works of the symphonic repertoire, Beethoven's Symphony No. 5. Many regular symphony goers know it intimately; *everybody* knows those famous first four notes. Written nearly 200 years ago, those four notes have become as recognizable as “Kleenex,” “Xerox,” or “Coca-Cola.” But that familiarity has probably robbed us of the sort of impact it had on the listeners of the 19th century when they first heard it. Take the French composer and theory teacher Jean François Le Sueur when, only 20 years after Beethoven wrote it, he heard it for the first time:

“Ouf! I'm going outside. I need some air. It's unbelievable, wonderful! It so moved and disturbed me and turned me upside down that when I came out of my box and went to put on my hat, for a moment I didn't know where my head was.”

Another impediment to our responding to Beethoven's Fifth the way Le Sueur did is that we rarely hear other works that were so popular at the time. Rarely will you *ever* hear a live performance of a symphony by Neefe, Hässler, Reichardt, Zelter, Himmel, Cannabich, Ries, or Kalkbrenner – all

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contemporaries of Beethoven. If symphonies of those fellows were your normal fare – along with an occasional one by Mozart or Haydn – when you finally heard Beethoven you, too, might have said “Ouf!”

Those unforgettable first four notes dominate the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth. Indeed, there is hardly a moment when you don't hear them. It might also strike you that this movement, with all of its focus on rhythm and energy, really has very little what you might call *melody*. Beethoven saves that for the second movement, which is a series of variations on two melodies; the cellos and violas play the first straightaway. The clarinet sneaks in with the second, and then it appears triumphantly, played by the oboes, trumpets, and horns.

In contrast to the forceful beginning of the symphony, the third movement starts tenuously. Twice, ever so quietly, the cellos and basses attempt to start, only to have the orchestra respond and then stop. Suddenly, the horns blast in with a rhythm that sounds suspiciously like those famous four notes of the first movement in slow motion. The rest of the first part of this movement is an interplay between those four notes and the opening melody of the cellos and basses. The same instruments begin the central part of this movement as well, this time with a courageous *fugue*, an involved sort of “follow the leader.” The first part of the third movement returns, but notice that this time a very quiet clarinet replaces the horns. In fact, *everything* is very quiet until a suspenseful build-up leads directly into the heroic fourth movement. This is the grand wind-up of the symphony, but with a big surprise. Beethoven interrupts all of the festivities with a sudden reappearance of those four notes – not from the first movement, but from the third – and all played *very quietly!* Another build-up brings us to the beginning of the movement again, and after another ratcheting up of the tempo, the exultant close.