**Beethoven: Piano Concerto no. 5, Op. 73, ‘Emperor’**

In May 1804 the First Consul of France, Napoleon Bonaparte, declared himself Emperor. This was considered by many to be a betrayal of the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity which had been championed by the French Revolution. Beethoven, who hitherto had been an enthusiastic supporter of Napoleon, was disgusted. He had recently brought about his own musical revolution with the composition of his third symphony, a work on a grander scale than any that had gone before it, and he had dedicated it to the First Consul. On hearing the news that Napoleon was now calling himself Emperor, Beethoven tore out the dedication on the title-page of his score and threw it on the floor. The Napoleon Symphony was re-christened the Heroic Symphony – *Eroica*.

Five years later, Napoleon’s armies were bombarding Vienna as Beethoven was writing his last ever concerto, the piano concerto no. 5. It is in the same key as the *Eroica* symphony – E flat – and has the same heroic grandeur; but he did not make the same mistake with the dedication. The title *Emperor* was not bestowed on the concerto by the composer, but probably by his English publisher, J B Cramer; indeed, in German-speaking countries the title is unknown.

If not Napoleon, then, who is the emperor that Cramer had in mind? Beethoven did have imperial connections. One of his pupils was the Archduke Rudolph of Austria, brother of the Holy Roman Emperor Francis II (for whom Haydn had written the song *Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser*, which later became the Emperor Quartet, and – even later – *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*). But there is no particular link between this concerto and the Austrian Royal Family: it is not one of the 14 compositions that Beethoven dedicated to the Archduke.

It is much more likely that the emperor in question is the music itself. In the last few years the word ‘compelling’ has become one of the most over-used words in the language, usually expressing little more than a general feeling of approval. It is a word that has floated to the top of the laundry-basket of English and is the first one to come to hand when imagination fails. But I’m afraid it really is the right word to describe the Emperor Concerto. Wagner said that Beethoven’s seventh symphony was the apotheosis of dance, and the fifth piano concerto partakes of something similar: it is almost impossible to listen to it without being compelled to move. It is not dance music, but it is definitely muscle-music. The music commands us: this is why it is an emperor.

It begins with a sequence of chords played by the orchestra: in outline, the most hackneyed sequence in the book, as it happens. But Beethoven, as so often, performs his musical alchemy, taking simple base elements and turning them into symphonic gold. Between each of these opening chords the piano plays cascading, coruscating cadenzas of immense energy, winding the tension up and up so that when we get back to E flat it is like a trebuchet being released.

And we are flung into the first movement: and rarely has the word ‘movement’ been more appropriate: the commanding energy continues almost without a pause. Even the second subject, which is gentler than the first, has an insistent rhythm to it, rocking between tonic and dominant, which keeps moving forward. Such moments of relative calm as there are do not feel like rest: rather, they are like the drawing in of breath or the rewinding of the spring so that we can return to the fray with renewed vigour. It is a movement characterised by grand gestures, and it is hard to hear it without flinging your arms wide melodramatically as it compels you to take it all in.

The second movement is a total contrast. It begins quietly, with muted strings playing a melody that is slow, dreamy, devoid of that eager forward momentum which characterised the first movement. When the piano comes in, its simple theme, barely more than a descending scale, is played over long held chords in the orchestra, creating the sensation of stillness. The themes develop, but slowly, gently, never straying far from their original form. At the end of the movement all energy dissipates and the piano line meanders downwards through the octaves with the instruction *morendo*, ‘dying’.

The music comes to rest on a B natural, held by the bassoons. But then a transformation happens. Perhaps sensing that we have to get back to the concerto’s home key, the B turns to a B flat and the piano tentatively, politely, tries out a new theme.

Then suddenly the final Rondo explodes around us. The opening movement may have been compelling, but this takes things to a new level. The emperor is back, grander and more dashing than before, and once again you will find it impossible to sit still as those restless rhythms burst from the keyboard. Nor will you be able to take a breath till a few bars before the end, when the piano seems to calm down briefly with only a ghostly pair of timpani for company, before setting off even more boisterously than before and leading the orchestra into the final great blaze.

Earth’s proud empires pass away. A year after the première of Beethoven’s fifth piano concerto in 1811, Napoleon’s armies were left exhausted and disoriented after the Battle of Borodino, a battle which it was given to another composer to commemorate. Three years after that came Waterloo, and Bonaparte was no longer Emperor. But today, two hundred years later, Beethoven’s music still has the power to command.

© Mark Browse 2014