

One of the twentieth century's most important pianists, Wilhelm Kempff found warmth in Beethoven where many others discovered only stress and passion. Concentrating on the composers of the late Classical and early-to-middle Romantic periods, Kempff achieved graceful, amiable results while not neglecting the sterner core of this music. His nobility of purpose was everywhere evident, made manifest through lucid textures, an adherence to a flowing legato, and tonal shading. In addition, he was a composer whose oeuvre included two symphonies, four operas, songs, and solo piano works.

Trained first by his Lutheran church musician father, Kempff studied privately before entering Berlin's Hochschule für Musik at age 9. In 1914, he traveled to Potsdam for further studies at the Viktoriagymnasium before returning to Berlin to finish his work at the Hochschule and enroll at the university. At age 20, Kempff served as organist and pianist on a tour of Germany and Scandinavia by the Berlin Cathedral Choir. A successful 1917 piano recital at the Berlin Singakademie led to an engagement the following year with the Berlin Philharmonic, the first of innumerable collaborations with that august ensemble. During the 1920s and 1930s, he toured South America and Japan, as well as many parts of Europe, adding to his reputation for uncompromising musicianship and personable interpretation. At the same time, he taught, serving first as director at the Stuttgart Musikhochschule from 1924 to 1929 and, later, as piano instructor at Potsdam's Mamorpalais for the decade before WWII. The war kept his activities confined to Germany, but with its end, Kempff once more resumed a busy performance schedule.

England and America heard Kempff only later. In London, the public, including a large number of German émigrés, applauded him upon his first appearance there in 1951. Not until 1964 did New York hear the pianist in person, although by then his many Deutsche Grammophon recordings had already established his stature for Americans. Indeed, Kempff's long and fruitful relationship with that label had brought to the market a long list of desirable recordings, among them the complete Beethoven piano concerti; the sonatas; a relaxed, but rewarding survey with Wolfgang Schneiderhan of the Beethoven violin sonatas; and various collections of Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, and Brahms.

Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 5

Wilhelm Kempff

Ferdinand Leitner - Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra



Emperor Concerto, byname of Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat Major, Op. 73, piano concerto by Ludwig van Beethoven known for its grandeur, bold melodies, and heroic spirit. The work was dedicated to Archduke Rudolf, who was a friend and student of the composer. It premiered in Leipzig, Germany, in 1811, and it remains the best known and most frequently performed of Beethoven's five piano concerti.

Beethoven began his work on this piece in 1808, about the time that he completed his fifth and sixth symphonies and fourth piano concerto. Despite difficult living conditions—in 1809 the city of Vienna was under bombardment by Napoleon's troops—the composer finished it promptly. Because his profound deafness prevented his own performance of the solo part, the honour fell to a 25-year-old church organist, Friedrich Schneider.

In February 1812, three months after its premiere, the concerto was given its first performance in Vienna. The pianist on that occasion was Beethoven's student Carl Czerny, a performer still renowned today in keyboard

circles for his own piano compositions. The success of the Emperor Concerto was due in part to technological developments in piano production that enabled a greater measure of expressive power. The piece quickly won for itself a place in the piano repertoire, and it became a great favourite of Franz Liszt.

The concerto's sobriquet "Emperor" dates from Beethoven's time, and it is sometimes attributed to German-born English pianist and music publisher Johann Baptist Cramer, whom Beethoven reportedly regarded as the greatest pianist of the day. Whatever the origins of the concerto's nickname, it is unlikely to have pleased Beethoven himself, who reconsidered the dedication of his third symphony—initially to have been dedicated to Napoleon—after Bonaparte assumed the title of emperor in 1804.

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I. Allegro 20:15

II. Adagio un poco mosso 7:34

III. Rondo. Allegro 10:36

Recorded by DGG 1962

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