



# The First Four Notes: Beethoven's Fifth and the Human Imagination

By Matthew Guerrieri

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**A *TIME* Magazine Top 10 Nonfiction Book of 2012**

**A *New Yorker* Best Book of the Year**

***Los Angeles Magazine*'s #1 Music Book of the Year**

This revelatory book of music history examines what is perhaps the best known and most-popular symphony ever written—and its famous four-note opening. Reaching back before Beethoven's time, Matthew Guerrieri uncovers premonitions of the opening notes in the rhythms of ancient Greek poetry and the music of the French Revolution. He discusses the Fifth's impact when it premiered, tracing the artistic, philosophical, and political reverberations across Europe to China, Russia, and the United States, from Romanticism to ring tones, from propaganda to pop. This fascinating piece of musical detective work is a treat for music lovers of every stripe.

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### Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

#### Essay by Author, Matthew Guerrieri

In his bestseller *Beethoven: the Man who Freed Music*, first published in 1929, the poet and essayist Robert Haven Schauflyer polled a parade of opinions of Beethoven's Fifth from a pool of straw men: "To Brown it may signify a fierce conflict with a sexual obsession. To Jones a desperate campaign against an inferiority complex. To Robinson an old-fashioned pitched battle *à la* "Paradise Lost," between the forces of good and evil. To a victim of hysteria it may depict a war between sanity and bedlam. To a neurasthenic a struggle between those two mutually exclusive objectives: 'To be, or not to be?' To an evolutionist it may bring up the primordial conflict of fire and water, of man with beast, of civilization with savagery, of land with sea."

Such mutable celebrity has perpetually surrounded the symphony. Beethoven's Fifth, the Symphony in C minor, opus 67, might not be the greatest piece of music ever written—even Beethoven himself preferred his Third Symphony, the *Eroica*—but it must be the greatest "great piece" ever written, a figure on which successive mantles of greatness have, ever more inevitably, fit with tailored precision. And its iconic opening is a large part of that: short enough to remember and portentous enough to be memorable, seeming to unlock the symphony's meaning but leaving its mysteries temptingly out of reach, saying *something* but admitting nothing.

*The First Four Notes* is a book about Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. More specifically, it is a book about the opening notes of that symphony; and more specifically than that, it is a book about what people have heard in those notes throughout history, and how history itself has affected what was heard. It is, then, history viewed through the forced perspective of one piece of music (though, to be fair, there is only a handful of pieces of music that could yield a comparable view, and most of them are by Beethoven).

To say a piece of music has meaning is to say that it is susceptible to discussions of meaning; by that standard, Beethoven's Fifth is easily one of the most meaningful pieces of music ever written. The number and variety of the interpretations assigned to the Fifth, the creativity with which the piece has been invoked in support of countless, often contradictory causes—artistic, philosophical, political—is a tribute to its amorphous power. It is also, on the side of the interpreters, a testament to human creativity, ingenuity—and folly. The vaunted universality of Beethoven's achievement encompasses the sublime and the ridiculous.

Not that he didn't try to warn us. In 1855, an unknown writer felt compelled to make a handwritten addition to a copy of Anton Schindler's biography of Beethoven: "Something about the beginning of the C minor Symph[ony]. Many men were disturbed over the beginning of the Fifth. One of them ask[ed] Beethoven about the reason for the unusual opening and its meaning. Beethoven answered: 'The beginning sounds and means: You are too dumb.'"

— Matthew Guerrieri (adapted from the prologue to *The First Four Notes*)

From [Booklist](#)

Music critic Guerrieri traces the cultural history of the most famous musical motif, recognized from its

rhythm alone—da-da-da-dum (you know the tune). Identified with revolution right out of the gate, partly because “La Marseillaise” opens with the same rhythm, it was made to signify Fate by Beethoven’s German literary contemporaries, to point to the ultimate by both Hegel’s nationalizing epigones and the individualist American Transcendentalists, to be the repository of repressed Victorians’ emotions, and to sound the death knell of the Third Reich (in Morse code, da-da-da-dum denotes V, as in victory). Guerrieri closely inspects those developments, bogging down some in the effusions of the notoriously recondite Hegel, Nietzsche, and Adorno, to be sure, before concluding with “Samples,” on the many uses pop culture has found for da-da-da-dum—the disco hit, “A Fifth of Beethoven,” is not the least consequential, he avers. For readers taught not to pile philosophical and literary baggage on music, the most enjoyable chapter may be the first, which places the motif in strictly music-historical context, but the others definitely have their fascinations. --Ray Olson

From Bookforum

Matthew Guerrieri, a critic and frequent contributor to the *Boston Globe*, has turned up a vast array of artifacts, from the profound to the perfunctory, in an enjoyable and at times surprising cultural history of those first four notes from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. —Eric Banks

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