

SYMPHONY NO. 7 IN A MAJOR, OP. 92

By LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
Born December 16, 1770, in Bonn;
died March 26, 1827, in Vienna

Beethoven began work on his Seventh Symphony in 1811 and completed it in either the spring or early summer of the following year. He did indicate the exact date of completion on the manuscript; however, a careless binder inadvertently trimmed it off. The composer's sketchbooks for that time also include themes for the Eighth Symphony, with which the Seventh shares an adjoining opus number, as well as the monumental Ninth Symphony, which he would not complete until nearly a dozen years later.

The first performance of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony took place on December 8, 1813, at a gala concert in the Great Hall of the University of Vienna, with the composer himself conducting. This concert was Beethoven's last public appearance as a conductor for, by this time, he was almost totally deaf and could hear only the loudest sounds. The concert had been organized by Beethoven's friend Johann Nepomuk Maelzel, the inventor of, among other things, the metronome, as a benefit for the Austrian and Bavarian soldiers who were wounded in the battle against Napoleon at Hanau. For this occasion, a number of musical notables contributed their services. Antonio Salieri and Johann Nepomuk Hummel served as assistant conductors, Ludwig Spohr and Joseph Mayseder were in the first violin section, and Domenico Dragonetti was one of the double bass players. Because of their limited instrumental abilities, Ignaz Moscheles and Giacomo Meyerbeer were relegated to the percussion section, where they played the cymbals and bass drum respectively.

The symphony shared the program with Beethoven's noisy potboiler *Wellington's Victory, or the Battle of Vittoria*, which he had written to celebrate Napoleon's then recent defeat at Waterloo. Although the symphony was favorably received (the second movement was even encored), it was this latter piece, with its French and English bugle calls, imitations of cannons and musketry, and concluding "Victory Symphony" which incorporated the melody of "God Save the King," that was the hit of the evening.

Although there have been countless efforts to read into Beethoven's Seventh Symphony an incredible variety of "programs" ranging anywhere from a rustic wedding to a battle of giants, the work is "absolute" music in its purest sense. Perhaps the most perceptive commentary about the symphony came from Richard Wagner, who called it "the apotheosis of the dance," suggesting that, upon hearing it, "tables and benches, cans and cups, the grandmother, the blind, and the lame - even the children in the cradle - fall to dancing." To be sure, the symphony contains no actual dance forms; however, it certainly is permeated with vitality, propulsive energy, and a strong sense of rhythm.

The symphony opens with an exceptionally long introduction marked *Poco sostenuto* that is almost a complete movement unto itself. Though certainly impressive in its own right, it hints of even greater things to come. The transition to the first movement proper is provided by one of Beethoven's most daring passages - the note "E" repeated in varied rhythms by the strings and winds no less than sixty-one times! The main section of the movement is a rollicking *Vivace* in traditional sonata form. Dotted rhythms predominate, and they are strong and vibrant. With its tremendous energy, sharp dynamic contrasts, and unsuppressed bursts of Beethovenian jollity, this is probably the music that prompted Carl Maria von Weber to pronounce its composer "ripe for the madhouse."

The second movement is an ingratiating, processional-like *Allegretto* written in variation form. It is music that is at once both simple in its complexity and complex in its simplicity. After a soft chord from the woodwinds, the low strings introduce the principal theme. As the movement progresses, Beethoven subjects this theme to subtle transformations and adds counter-melodies to it, thereby changing its character with each repetition. Marked *Presto*, the third movement is the customary scherzo and trio. The main section is boisterous and energetic. The legendary British conductor Sir Thomas Beecham, who was never at a loss for a *bon mot*, once waggishly described it as sounding "like a lot of yaks jumping about." The trio, the main theme of which was derived from an old pilgrims' hymn from Lower Austria, is slower and somewhat solemn in character. Following a repeat of the main section, Beethoven expands the structure of this movement by unexpectedly adding a repeat of the trio and yet another repeat of the main section. After all this, the woodwinds and strings attempt one more go-around of the trio, but are quickly cut short by five emphatic chords from the full orchestra.

In the finale, Beethoven gives full vent to his rough, "unbuttoned" humor. Marked *Allegro con brio*, this movement is one continuous outpouring of unchecked energy and vitality from beginning to end. There are two "false starts," then, the orchestra takes off on a veritable symphonic steeplechase. The movement is in traditional sonata form, but things go by so fast that one is rarely conscious of formal structure. Occasionally, the Dionysian frenzy subsides slightly, but the sense of forward momentum is never lost. The movement concludes with an exciting coda of substantial length, the final pages of which are of such abandon that, after hearing this symphony, one is usually left feeling slightly giddy and light-headed.

-Kenneth C. Viant