PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

Ludwig van Beethoven
Born December 16, 1770, Bonn, Germany.
Died March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria.

Symphony No. 8 in F Major, Op. 93

Beethoven began this symphony in 1811, completed it the following year, and conducted the first performance on February 17, 1814, in Vienna. The score calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-five minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Beethoven's Eighth Symphony were given at the Auditorium Theatre on March 25 and 26, 1892, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on June 5, 6, and 7, 2003, with Sir Andrew Davis conducting. The Orchestra most recently performed this symphony at Orchestra Hall on a special musicians' pension fund benefit on April 23, 2004, with William Eddins conducting. The Orchestra first performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival on July 5, 1936, with Rudolph Ganz conducting, and most recently on August 2, 2002, with Christoph Eschenbach conducting.

In a life characterized by difficulties—with people, work, romance, and more—1812 may well have been the most difficult year Beethoven ever had. In any case, the toll was great: in October, shortly after he finished his Eighth Symphony, Beethoven sank into a serious depression, finding creativity a tiresome effort. Over the next two years, he wrote only the two cello sonatas, op. 102 and a handful of occasional pieces.

The main problem of 1812 involved an unknown woman, who has come to be known as the “immortal beloved.” Conjecture about her identity is one of the favorite games of Beethoven scholarship. (In his watershed Beethoven biography, Maynard Solomon suggests Amalie Brentano, who is certainly the most plausible.) The evidence is slight—essentially little more than the astonishing letter Beethoven wrote on July 6 and 7, which was discovered among his papers after his death. It’s Beethoven’s only letter to a woman that uses the informal German du, and, in its impassioned, unsparing tone, it tells us much about the composer, if nothing at all about the woman in question. This wasn’t the last time Beethoven would find misery and longing where he sought romance and domestic harmony, but it’s the most painful case we have record of, and it certainly helped to convince him that he would remain alone—and lonely—for life. The diary he began in late 1812 finds him despondent at the failure of his relationships and more determined than ever in his single-minded dedication to music. It also admits thoughts of suicide.

Beethoven’s Eighth Symphony quickly followed his Seventh, and, particularly in light of its predecessors, it was misunderstood from the start. When Beethoven was reminded that the Eighth was less successful than his Seventh, he is said to have replied: “That’s because it is so much better.” Contemporary audiences are seldom the best judges of new music, but Beethoven’s latest symphony must have seemed a letdown at the time, for, after symphonies of unexpected power and unprecedented length, with movements that include thunder and lightning and that lead directly from one to another, the Eighth is a throwback to an easier time. The novelty of this symphony, however, is that it manages to do new and unusual things without ever waving the flag of controversy.

The first movement, for example, is of modest dimensions, with a compact first theme—its first two quick phrases like a textbook definition of antecedent-consequent (question-and-answer) structure. The next subject comes upon us without warning—unless two quiet measures of expectant chords have tipped us
off. The whole moves like lightning, and when we hit the recapitulation—amid thundering fff timpani, with a new singing theme high above the original tune, we can hardly believe we're already home. But just when Beethoven seems about to wrap things up, he launches into a giant epilogue that proves, in no uncertain terms, just how far we've come from the predictable, four-square proportions of the works by Haydn and Mozart.

For early nineteenth-century audiences who were just getting used to Beethoven's spacious slow movements, the second movement of the Eighth was a puzzle, for it's neither slow nor long. It is also, through no fault of its own, nothing like the second movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, which had been an instant and tremendous hit. The incredible nineteenth-century practice of inserting that beloved slow movement into the Eighth Symphony says more about the tastes of earlier generations than about any supposed deficiencies in Beethoven's Allegretto. The scherzo that follows isn't a scherzo at all, but a leisurely, old-world minuet, giving us all the room and relaxation we missed in the Allegretto. As always, there's method in Beethoven's madness, though it was often only the madness that got noticed.

In the context of the composer's personal sorrows of 1812, it's either astonishing or perfectly predictable—depending on your outlook on human nature—that the finale is one of the funniest pieces of music Beethoven ever wrote. The tone is jovial from the start—a light, rambunctious theme—and the first real joke comes at the very end of that theme, when Beethoven tosses out a loud unison C-sharp—an odd exclamation point for an F major sentence. Many moments of wit follow: tiny whispers that answer bold declarations; gaping pauses when you can't help but question what will happen next; places where Beethoven seems to enjoy tugging on the rug beneath our feet. But he saves his best punch line for last, and he has been working up to it all along. When that inappropriate C-sharp returns one last time—as it was destined to do, given the incontestable logic of Beethoven's wildest schemes—it's no longer a stumbling block in an F major world, but a gateway to the unlikely key of F-sharp minor. It takes some doing to pull us back to terra firma: the trumpets begin by defiantly hammering away on F-natural, and Beethoven spends the last pages endlessly turning somersaults through F major, until memories of any other sounds are banished for good.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

For the Record
The Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded Beethoven's Eighth Symphony in 1973 and 1988 with Sir Georg Solti conducting for London. A 1958 performance conducted by Fritz Reiner is included on From the Archives, vol. 11: The Reiner Era II; a 1966 performance conducted by Kirill Kondrashin is included on From the Archives, vol. 17: Beethoven; and a 1966 performance conducted by Leopold Stokowski is included on From the Archives, vol. 5: Guests in the House. A 1961 performance (for television) conducted by Pierre Monteux was released by VAI.

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