

## PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

### Ludwig van Beethoven

Born December 16, 1770, Bonn, Germany.

Died March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria.

### Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 36

Beethoven composed this symphony during the summer and fall of 1802 and conducted the first performance on April 5, 1803, in Vienna. The score calls for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, and trumpets, with timpani and strings. Performance time is approximately thirty-four minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Beethoven's Second Symphony were given at the Auditorium Theatre on December 1 and 2, 1893, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on February 14, 15, and 16, 2002, with Ingo Metzmacher conducting. The Orchestra first performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival on July 25, 1940, with John Barbirolli conducting, and most recently on July 17, 1977, with James Levine conducting.

A young man doesn't expect to go deaf. And so Beethoven was both surprised and frightened when he admitted to himself a musician's worst nightmare—that he was having trouble hearing. We can't be certain when he first acknowledged his cruel fate, but he apparently kept it a secret for a number of years. In June 1801, he finally confessed to his dear friend Franz Wegeler, who also happened to be a doctor: "For almost two years I have ceased to attend any social functions, just because I find it impossible to say to people: I am deaf."

By then Beethoven was worried. He had already sought treatment from a number of doctors, who prescribed hot and cold baths, olive oil, pills, and infusions, to no avail—his ears continued to hum and buzz. Young Carl Czerny, on his first visit to Beethoven, probably in 1800, noticed "with the visual quickness peculiar to children," as he later recalled, "that he had cotton, which seemed to have been steeped in a yellowish liquid, in his ears." Czerny didn't think of this again until he, like much of the music world, heard rumors that Beethoven was hard of hearing.

Beethoven found no relief until he turned to Dr. Johann Adam Schmidt, a professor of general pathology and therapy, who seemed full of sympathy and optimism. Apparently it was Dr. Schmidt, who, among his other prescriptions, recommended that Beethoven abandon Vienna for rural Heiligenstadt. In late April of 1802, Beethoven left for the pastoral suburb that to this day is known for the document he wrote there some six months later. The Heiligenstadt Testament, as it has come to be called, was begun on October 6 and finished four days later. It's addressed to the composer's brothers, Carl and Johann. Although Beethoven's hearing would deteriorate considerably in later years, 1802 marked the moment of crisis: the Heiligenstadt Testament includes Beethoven's admission that his malady was permanent and incurable. He didn't fail to see the horrible irony of "an infirmity in the *one sense* which ought to be more perfect in me than in others."

This, surprisingly, is the background for Beethoven's Second Symphony—one of his most energetic, cheerful, and outgoing works. Beethoven surely had begun the D major symphony before he packed for Heiligenstadt that spring. He finished it there sometime that autumn, in a setting very like the one he would later depict in the *Pastoral* Symphony. When his student Ferdinand Ries came to visit Beethoven, he

called his attention to a shepherd who was piping very agreeably in the woods on a flute made of a twig or elder. For half an hour Beethoven could hear nothing, and though I assured him that it was the same with me (which was not the case), he became extremely quiet and morose.

The D major symphony, like other music written at the time, shows no signs of Beethoven's obvious despair. It's possible that Beethoven put the finishing touches on the confident, rollicking finale of his Second Symphony only days before he confessed thoughts of suicide in the letter to his brothers.

After Beethoven returned to Vienna, his hearing and his spirits both unimproved, he began to make plans for a major concert of his music to be held on April 5, 1803, which would include not only his new symphony, but also the premieres of his Third Piano Concerto and the oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives*. That concert, conducted by the composer, achieved the combination (not unknown in our own time) of mixed reviews and a box office bonanza.

Although Beethoven and his audience considered *Christ on the Mount of Olives* the main attraction, the Second Symphony would ultimately triumph. One reporter decided on the spot that "the first symphony is better than the later one," although he did acknowledge that Beethoven seemed to be "striving for the new and surprising." Around this time, Beethoven said to a friend, "I am only a little satisfied with my previous works. From today I will take a new path." That path was forged primarily by the daring venture of the *Eroica* Symphony, but the Second Symphony is already a sign of fresh things to come, and it's a great advance over the First. The influential Beethoven biographer Maynard Solomon calls it "both retrospective and prospective."

It's still Haydn's orchestra—pairs of winds, with horns, trumpets, timpani, and strings—and the layout of his last twelve symphonies—four movements, with a slow introduction and a rondo finale—that serve as Beethoven's starting point. This is music that Haydn would have understood but couldn't have written. Beethoven's slow introduction is a full thirty-three measures of powerful, expansive music, rich in the kind of dramatic gesture he would later exploit so famously. The ensuing Allegro con brio crackles with a nervous energy and maintains an all-business edge unprecedented in symphonic music.

The Larghetto, on the other hand, moves at a gracious and easy pace that's rare for this composer. Leisure wasn't to Beethoven's taste; several years later, when he devised the misguided notion of arranging this symphony for piano trio, he added "quasi andante" to the larghetto marking to keep things moving.

Instead of the minuet-and-trio combination third movement of the Haydn model (it served Beethoven well in his own First Symphony), Beethoven now writes scherzo, forever changing the complexion of the standard symphonic design. Beethoven's scherzo, more compact than many of Haydn's minuets, is wildly playful, with just enough weight to suggest the drama that's always present in Beethoven, even when he's playing games. The explosive finale is what we now call pure Beethoven, although audiences in 1803 didn't yet know what that meant, and no doubt found it shocking and unpredictable, with its coltish movement and energy, and its uninhibited, nose-thumbing sense of humor.

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

### **For the Record**

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded Beethoven's Second Symphony in 1974 and 1990 with Sir Georg Solti conducting for London. A 1962 performance conducted by Leopold Stokowski is included on *Chicago Symphony Orchestra in the Twentieth Century: Collector's Choice*, and a 1977 performance conducted by James Levine is included on *From the Archives*, vol. 18: *A Tribute to James Levine*. A 1954 performance (for television) conducted by Fritz Reiner was released by VAI.

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