

## PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

### Ludwig van Beethoven

Born December 16, 1770, Bonn, Germany.

Died March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria.

### Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Op. 55 (*Eroica*)

Beethoven composed his third symphony in 1803 and conducted the first public performance on April 7, 1805, in Vienna. The score calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, three horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. Performance time is approximately fifty minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Beethoven's Third Symphony were given at the Auditorium Theatre on January 15 and 16, 1892, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on March 26, 27, and 28, 2009, with Daniele Gatti conducting. The Orchestra first performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival on July 16, 1936, with Willem van Hoogstraten conducting, and most recently on July 30, 2008, with Sir Andrew Davis conducting.

The story of how the *Eroica* Symphony got its title is nearly as famous as the music itself. We know that Beethoven intended to name his third symphony for Napoleon Bonaparte and his fight against political tyranny, that he tore up the title page in a fit of rage when he learned that Napoleon had appointed himself emperor, and that he opted for the title *Sinfonia eroica* (Heroic symphony) instead. The subtexts—idealism and disillusionment, personal greed and the lust for power, the struggle between art and politics, among others—are intense, and they have come to overshadow one of the most remarkable, even revolutionary works of art we have. A century after Beethoven, Toscanini tried to restore reason, famously brushing aside a hundred years of connotations: "Some say it is Napoleon, some Hitler, some Mussolini. For me it is simply Allegro con brio."

Beethoven had been contemplating a symphony inspired by General Bonaparte since 1798. Most of the music was composed in the summer of 1803, only months after Beethoven wrote his most revealing nonmusical work—the Heiligenstadt Testament—a painful confirmation of worsening deafness and thoughts of suicide. It was one of the lowest points in a life that understood despair only too well. The composition of an important and substantial new symphony was Beethoven's great rallying cry—a heroic act in itself. The first draft was probably completed by November 1803. Beethoven's extensive sketches, nicely preserved and often studied, confirm that the new symphony gave its composer a lot of trouble. In May 1804, when the news reached Vienna that Napoleon had declared himself emperor, Beethoven felt betrayed. According to the account later written by his student Ferdinand Ries, when he broke the news to Beethoven, the composer "went to the table, took hold of the title page by the top, tore it in two, and threw it to the floor."

What Ries didn't mention was that Beethoven's own motives were sometimes suspicious themselves. Although Beethoven had long intended to name the symphony after Bonaparte, he quickly dropped that plan when he learned that Prince Lobkowitz would pay him handsomely for the same honor. Later, after he had ripped up the title page, Beethoven temporarily recanted when he realized that a Bonaparte symphony would be just the thing for his upcoming trip to Paris.

In 1806, when it came time to publish the E-flat major symphony, Beethoven suggested "*Sinfonia eroica*, composed to celebrate the memory of a great man," without mentioning Napoleon. Beethoven's last reputed words on the subject, full of the anger and resentment he surely felt, came later, after Napoleon's victory at Jena: "It's a pity I do not understand the art of war as well as I do the art of music. I would

conquer him!" History doesn't tell us what, if anything, Napoleon thought of Beethoven's music. When Cherubini, whom he did admire, once suggested that Napoleon knew no more about music than he knew of battle, the emperor immediately stripped him of his offices and power, leaving him with virtually no income.

The *Eroica* is perhaps the first great symphony to have captured the romantic imagination. It's not as openly suggestive as the later *Pastoral*, with its bird calls and thunderstorm, nor as specific as the Ninth, with its unmistakable message of hope and freedom. But to the Viennese audience at the first performance, on April 7, 1805, Beethoven's vast and powerful first movement and the funeral march that follows must have sounded like nothing else in all music.

Never before had symphonic music aspired to these dimensions. We're told that a man in the gallery shouted down: "I'll give another Kreutzer if the thing will only stop!" Audiences then, just as today, brought certain expectations to the concert hall, and knowing the length of a piece is one of them. But Beethoven's Allegro con brio was longer—and bigger, in every sense—than any other symphonic movement (the first movement of Mozart's *Prague* Symphony comes the closest). It's also a question of proportion, and Beethoven's central development section, abounding in some truly monumental statements, is enormous.

It has been suggested that Beethoven was writing without themes at the beginning of the first movement; the comment is not meant disparagingly, but as proof that the essence of Beethoven's language is not melody, but tension and movement. Donald Tovey insisted that many of Beethoven's themes "can be recognized by their bare rhythm without quoting any melody at all." The very opening of the *Eroica* consists of no more than two E-flat major chords, played forte, followed by the cellos jumping back and forth over the notes of an E-flat triad. The first exceptional event comes when the cellos stumble on C-sharp, a note we never expected to hear, and one that opens unforeseen vistas only seven bars into the piece. From there, Beethoven continues to spread his wings, even settling comfortably in the very remote key of E minor just moments before he whisks us back to the E-flat major chords with which he began.

Beethoven's writing, in the most expansive piece he had yet composed, is tight and closely unified. Although analysts often point out the unprecedented use of a new theme in the development section, it's not unique (see Mozart's Thirty-third Symphony), nor is the theme truly new.

Ries was perhaps the first person to be misled by the "premature" entry of the horn four bars before the start of the recapitulation, and he lost Beethoven's respect forever when he rushed up to tell him that the player had come in at the wrong place. It's one of Beethoven's little jokes, all the more effective for being told at a whisper. The coda is as big and important as a movement in itself, but something of this stature is needed to bring us back to earth before we move on.

The Adagio is a funeral march of measured solemnity, pushed forward by the low rumble of the basses, like the sound of muffled drums. Beethoven raised some eyebrows by placing the funeral music so early in the symphony, but this is music, not biography, and chronology is beside the point. The two interludes are particularly moving—the first because it casts a sudden ray of sunlight on the grim proceedings; the second, because it carries the single thread of melody into a vast double fugue of almost unseemly magnificence. The music ends with some consolation, but even more grief.

Beethoven's funeral music gives way to a brilliant (though often very quiet) scherzo, just as the prisoners in *Fidelio* emerge from the dungeon into the blinding daylight. For the first time, the modest minuet of Haydn and Mozart has become something truly symphonic in scope, and it's safe to say that the third movement of the symphony would never be the same again.

Beethoven's finale is a set of variations on a theme he had used several times before, principally in his ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus*. This is an unusually complex and multifaceted piece of music. It's not just the conclusion, but the culmination, of all that came before. Beethoven begins with a simple, unattached bass line before introducing the theme itself. The variety and range of style are extraordinary:

a fugue on the bass line, a virtuoso showpiece for flute, a swinging dance in G minor, an expansive hymn. Beethoven moves from one event to the next, making their connections seem not only obvious, but inevitable. Some of it is splendid solemnity, some high humor, and Beethoven touches on much in between. A magnificent coda, which continues to stake out new territory even while wrapping things up, ends with bursts of joy from the horns.

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

### **For the Record**

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded Beethoven's Third Symphony in 1954 with Fritz Reiner conducting for RCA, and in 1973–74 and in 1989 with Sir Georg Solti conducting for London.

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