PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

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

Symphony No. 7 in A Major, Op. 92

Beethoven’s first sketches for this symphony date from late 1811; the work was completed on April 13, 1812, and first performed on December 8, 1813, in Vienna, under the composer’s direction. The score calls for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, and trumpets, with timpani and strings. Performance time is approximately thirty-six minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony were given at the Auditorium Theatre on November 28 and 29, 1892, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on April 17 and 18, 2008, with Esa-Pekka Salonen conducting. The Orchestra first performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival on July 3, 1936, with Ernest Ansermet conducting, and most recently on July 9, 2008, with Leonard Slatkin conducting.

Here is what Goethe wrote after he first met Beethoven during the summer of 1812:

His talent amazed me; unfortunately, he is an utterly untamed personality, who is not altogether in the wrong in holding the world to be detestable, but surely does not make it any the more enjoyable either for himself or for others by his attitude.

We’re told that the two men walked together through the streets of Teplitz, where Beethoven had gone for the summer, and exchanged cordial words. When royalty approached, Goethe stepped aside, tipping his hat and bowing deeply; Beethoven, indifferent to mere nobility, walked on. This was a characteristic Beethoven gesture: defiant, individual, strongly humanitarian, intolerant of hypocrisy—and many listeners find its essence reflected in his music. But before confusing the myth with the man, consider that, throughout his life, Beethoven clung to the “van” in his name because it was so easily confused with “von” and its suggestion of lofty bloodlines.

Without question, Beethoven’s contemporaries thought him a complicated man, perhaps even the utterly untamed personality Goethe found him. He was a true eccentric, who adored the elevated term Tondichter (poet in sound) and refused to correct a rumor that he was the illegitimate son of the king of Prussia, but looked like a homeless person (his outfit once caused his arrest for vagrancy). There were other curious contradictions: he was disciplined and methodical—like many a modern-day concertgoer, he would rise early and make coffee by grinding a precise number of coffee beans—but lived in a squalor he alone could tolerate. Certainly modern scholarship, as it chips away at the myth, finds him ever more complex.

We don’t know what Goethe truly thought of his music, and perhaps that’s just as well, for Goethe’s musical taste was less advanced than we might hope (he later admitted he thought little of Schubert’s songs). The general perception of Beethoven’s music in 1812 was that it was every bit as difficult and unconventional as the man himself—even, perhaps, to most ears, utterly untamed.

This is our greatest loss today. For Beethoven’s widespread familiarity—of a dimension known to no other composer—has blinded us not only to his vision (so far ahead of his time that he was thought out of fashion in his last years) but to the uncompromising and disturbing nature of the music itself.
His Seventh Symphony is so well known to us today that we can’t imagine a time that knew Beethoven, but not this glorious work. But that was the case when the poet and the composer walked together in Teplitz in July 1812. Beethoven had finished the A major symphony three months earlier—envisioning a premiere for that spring that did not materialize—but the first performance would not take place for another year and a half, on December 8, 1813.

That night in Vienna gave the rest of the nineteenth century plenty to talk about. No other symphony of Beethoven’s so openly invited interpretation—not even his Sixth, the self-proclaimed Pastoral Symphony, with its bird calls, thunderstorm, and frank evocation of something beyond mere eighth notes and bar lines. To Richard Wagner, Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony was “the apotheosis of the dance.” Berlioz heard a ronde des paysans in the first movement. (Choreographers in our own time have proven that this music is not, however, easily danceable.) And there were other readings as well, most of them finding peasant festivities and bacchic orgies where Beethoven wrote, simply, vivace.

The true significance of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony is to be found in the notes on the page—in his distinctive use of rhythm and pioneering sense of key relationships. By the time it’s over, we can no longer hear the ordinary rhythm of a dotted eighth note followed by a sixteenth note in the same way again, and—even if we have no technical terms to explain it—we sense that our basic understanding of harmony has been turned upside down.

Take Beethoven’s magnificent introduction, of unprecedented size and ambitious intentions. He begins decisively in A major, but at the first opportunity moves away—not to the dominant (E major) as historical practice and textbooks recommended, but to the unlikely regions of C major and F major. Beethoven makes it clear that he won’t be limited to the seven degrees of the A major scale (which contains neither C- nor F-natural) in planning his harmonic itinerary. We will hear more from both keys, and by the time he’s done, Beethoven will have convinced us not only that C and F sound comfortably at home in an A major symphony, but that A major can be made to seem like the visitor! But that comes later in his scheme.

First we move from the spacious vistas of the introduction into the joyous song of the Vivace. Getting there is a challenge Beethoven relishes, and many a music lover has marveled at his passage of transition, in which stagnant, repeated E’s suddenly catch fire with the dancing dotted rhythm that will carry us through the entire movement. The development section brings new explorations of C and F, and the coda is launched by a spectacular, long-sustained crescendo that is said to have convinced Weber that Beethoven was “ripe for the madhouse.”

The Allegretto is as famous as any music Beethoven wrote, and it was a success from the first performance, when a repeat was demanded. At the indicated tempo, it is hardly a slow movement, but it is sufficiently slower than the music that precedes it to provide a feeling of relaxation.

By designing the Allegretto in A minor, Beethoven has moved one step closer to F major; he now dares to write the next movement in that unauthorized, but by now familiar, key. And he can’t resist rubbing it in a bit, by treating A major, when it arrives on the scene, not as the main key of the symphony, but as a visitor in a new world. We don’t need a course in harmony to recognize that Beethoven has taken us through the looking glass, and that everything is turned on its head.

To get back where we belong, Beethoven simply shatters the glass with the two fortissimo chords that open the finale and ushers us into a triumphant fury of music so adamantly in A major that we forget any past harmonic digressions. When C and F major return—as they were destined to do—in the development section, they sound every bit as remote as they did in the symphony’s introduction, and we sense that we have come full circle.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.
For the Record
The Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded Beethoven's Seventh Symphony in 1955 with Fritz Reiner conducting for RCA, in 1971 with Carlo Maria Giulini conducting for Angel, and in 1974 and 1988 with Sir Georg Solti conducting for London. A 1954 performance (for television) conducted by Fritz Reiner was released by VAI, and a 1979 performance conducted by János Ferencsik is included on Chicago Symphony Orchestra in the Twentieth Century: Collector's Choice.