

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born December 16, 1770 in Bonn; died March 26, 1827 in Vienna

Symphony No. 7 in A major, Opus 92 (1811-1812)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Vienna, December 8, 1813

Ludwig van Beethoven, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 36 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs, timpani and strings

In the autumn of 1813, Johann Nepomuk Mälzel, the inventor of the metronome, approached Beethoven with the proposal that the two organize a concert to benefit the soldiers wounded at the recent Battle of Hanau — with, perhaps, two or three repetitions of the concert to benefit themselves. Beethoven was eager to have the as-yet-unheard A major Symphony of the preceding year performed, and he thought the financial reward worth the trouble, so he agreed. The concert consisted of this “Entirely New Symphony” by Beethoven, marches by Dussek and Pleyel performed on a “Mechanical Trumpeter” fabricated by Mälzel, and an orchestral arrangement of *Wellington’s Victory*, a piece Beethoven had concocted the previous summer for yet another of Mälzel’s musical machines, the “Panharmonicon.” The evening was such a success that Beethoven’s first biographer, Anton Schindler, reported, “All persons, however they had previously dissented from his music, now agreed to award him his laurels.”

The Seventh Symphony is a magnificent creation in which Beethoven displayed several technical innovations that were to have a profound influence on the music of the 19th century: he expanded the scope of symphonic structure through the use of more distant tonal areas; he brought an unprecedented richness and range to the orchestral palette; and he gave a new awareness of rhythm as the vitalizing force in music. It is particularly the last of these characteristics that most immediately affects the listener, and to which commentators have consistently turned to explain the vibrant power of the work. Perhaps the most famous such observation about the Seventh Symphony is that of Richard Wagner, who called the work “the apotheosis of the Dance in its highest aspect ... the loftiest deed of bodily motion incorporated in an ideal world of tone.” Couching his observation in less highfalutin language, John N. Burk believed that its rhythm gave this work a feeling of immense grandeur incommensurate with its relatively short forty-minute length. “Beethoven,” Burk explained, “seems to have built up this impression by willfully driving a single rhythmic figure through each movement, until the music attains (particularly in the body of the first movement and in the Finale) a swift propulsion, an effect of cumulative growth which is akin to extraordinary size.”

A slow introduction, almost a movement in itself, opens the Symphony. This initial section employs two themes: the first, majestic and unadorned, is passed down through the winds while being punctuated by long, rising scales in the strings; the second is a graceful melody for oboe. The transition to the main part of the first movement is accomplished by the superbly controlled reiteration of a single pitch. This device not only connects the introduction with the exposition but also establishes the dactylic rhythm that dominates the movement.

The *Allegretto* scored such a success at its premiere that it was immediately encored, a phenomenon virtually unprecedented for a slow movement. Indeed, this music was so popular that it was used to replace the brief slow movement of the Eighth Symphony at several performances during Beethoven’s lifetime. In form, the movement is a series of variations on the heartbeat rhythm of its opening measures. In spirit, however, it is more closely allied to the austere chaconne of the Baroque era than to the light, figural variations of Classicism.

The third movement, a study in contrasts of sonority and dynamics, is built on the formal model of the scherzo, but expanded to include a repetition of the horn-dominated Trio (Scherzo–Trio–Scherzo–Trio–Scherzo).

In the sonata-form finale, Beethoven not only produced music of virtually unmatched rhythmic energy (“a triumph of Bacchic fury,” in the words of Sir Donald Tovey), but did it in such a manner as to exceed the climaxes of the earlier movements and make it the goal toward which they had all been aimed. So intoxicating is this music that some of Beethoven’s contemporaries were sure he had composed it in a drunken frenzy. An encounter with the Seventh Symphony is a heady experience. Klaus G. Roy, the distinguished musicologist and program annotator for the Cleveland Orchestra, wrote, “Many a listener has come away from a hearing of this Symphony in a state of being punch-drunk. Yet it is an intoxication without a hangover, a dope-like exhilaration without decadence.” To which the composer’s own words may be added. “I am Bacchus incarnate,” boasted Beethoven, “appointed to give humanity wine to drown its sorrow.... He who divines the secret of my music is delivered from the misery that haunts the world.”

