

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

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

Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Opus 67 (1804-1808)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Vienna, 22 December 1808; Theater an der Wien; Ludwig van Beethoven, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 12 March 1896; Carnegie Music Hall; Frederic Archer

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 34 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo and contrabassoon, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings.

Surprisingly, for this symphony that serves as the *locus classicus* of orchestral music, little is known about its creation. There are vague hints that it may have been occasioned by an aborted love affair with either Therese von Brunswick or Giulietta Guicciardi. The theory has been advanced that it was influenced by a surge of patriotism fueled by an Austrian loss to the Napoleonic juggernaut. Even the remark attributed to Beethoven about the opening motive representing "Fate knocking at the door" is probably apocryphal, an invention of either Anton Schindler or Ferdinand Ries, two young men, close to the composer in his last years, who later published their often-untrustworthy reminiscences of him.

It is known that the time of the creation of the Fifth Symphony was one of intense activity for Beethoven. The four years during which the work was composed also saw the completion of a rich variety of other works: Piano Sonatas, Op. 53, 54 and 57; Fourth Piano Concerto; Fourth and Sixth Symphonies; Violin Concerto; the first two versions of *Fidelio*; Razumovsky Quartets, Op. 59; Coriolan Overture; Mass in C major, Op. 86; and Cello Sonata No. 3, Op. 69. As was his practice with almost all of his important works, Beethoven revised and rewrote the Fifth Symphony for years.

Beethoven's remarks about this Symphony are vague and elusive rather than concrete. The compositional problems he set for himself were abstract, musico-emotional ones that were little affected by external experiences, and not accessible to translation into mere words. In one of his few comments about the Symphony, he noted that, after the creation of the theme, "begins in my head the working-out in breadth, height and depth. Since I am aware of what I want, the fundamental idea never leaves me. It mounts, it grows. I see before my mind the picture in its whole extent, as if in a single grasp." By "picture" Beethoven meant not a visible painting, but rather an overview of the total structure of the Symphony, from its tiniest fragmentary component to the grand sweep of its total structure.

So completely did composition occupy Beethoven's thoughts that he sometimes ignored the necessities of daily life. Concern with his appearance, eating habits, cleanliness, even his conversation, all gave way before his composing. There are many reports of his trooping the streets and woods of Vienna humming, singing, bellowing, penning a scrap of melody, and being, in general, oblivious to the people or places around him. (One suspects that his professed love of Nature grew in part from his need to find a solitary workplace free from distractions and the prying interest of his fellow Viennese.) This titanic struggle with musical tones produced such mighty monuments as the Fifth Symphony. With it, and with the Third Symphony completed four years earlier, Beethoven launched music and art into the world of Romanticism.

In the history of music, Beethoven stands, Janus-faced, as the great colossus between two ages and two philosophies. The formal perfection of the preceding Classical period finds its greatest fulfillment in his works, which at the same time contain the taproot of the cathartic emotional experience from which grew the art of the 19th century. Beethoven himself evaluated his position as a creator in the following way: "Music is the mediator between intellectual and sensuous life ... the one incorporeal entrance into the higher world of knowledge which comprehends mankind but which mankind cannot comprehend." The Fifth Symphony is indeed such a "mediator." Its message of victory through struggle, which so deeply touches both the heart and the mind, is achieved by a near-perfect balance of musical technique and passionate sentiment unsurpassed in the history of music. This Symphony was the work that won for Beethoven an international renown. Despite a few early misunderstandings due undoubtedly to its unprecedented concentration of energy, it caught on very quickly and was soon recognized in Europe, England and America as a pathbreaking achievement. Its popularity has never waned.

Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, more than any work in the musical repertory, is the archetypal example of the technique and content of the form. Its overall structure is not one of four independent essays linked simply by tonality and style, as in the typical 18th-century example, but is rather a carefully devised whole in which each of the movements serves to carry the work inexorably toward its end. The progression from minor to major, from dark to light, from conflict to resolution is at the very heart of the "meaning" of this Symphony. The triumphant, victorious nature of the final movement as the logical outcome of all that preceded it established a model for the symphonies of the Romantic era. The psychological progression toward the finale — the relentless movement toward a life-affirming close — is one of the most important technical and emotional legacies Beethoven left to his successors. Schumann, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Mahler — their symphonies are indebted to this one (and to the Ninth Symphony, as well) for the concept of how such a creation could be structured, and in what manner it should engage the listener.

The opening gesture is the most famous beginning in all of classical music. It establishes the stormy temper of the *Allegro* by presenting the germinal cell from which the entire movement grows. Though it is possible to trace this memorable four-note motive through most of the measures of the movement, the esteemed English musicologist Sir Donald Tovey pointed out that the power of the music is not contained in this fragment, but rather in the "long sentences" that Beethoven built from it. The key to appreciating Beethoven's formal structures lies in being aware of the way in which the music moves constantly from one point of arrival to the next, from one sentence to the next. It is in the careful weighting of successive climaxes through harmonic, rhythmic and instrumental resources that Beethoven created the enormous energy and seeming inevitability of this monumental movement. The gentler second theme derives from the opening motive, but gives only a brief respite in the headlong rush that drives the movement. It provides the necessary contrast while doing nothing to impede the music's flow. The development section is a paragon of cohesion, logic and concision. The recapitulation roars forth after a series of breathless chords that pass from woodwinds to strings and back. The stark hammerblows of the closing chords bring the movement to its powerful end.

The form of the second movement is a set of variations on two contrasting themes. The first theme, presented by violas and cellos, is sweet and lyrical in nature; the second, heard in horns and trumpets, is heroic. The ensuing variations on the themes alternate to produce a movement by turns gentle and majestic.

The following *Scherzo* returns the tempestuous character of the opening movement, as the four-note motto from the first movement is heard again in a brazen setting led by the horns. The *fughetta*, the "little fugue," of the central trio is initiated by the cellos and basses. The *Scherzo* returns with the mysterious tread of the plucked strings, after which the music wanes until little more than a heartbeat from the timpani remains. Then begins another accumulation of intensity, first gradually, then more quickly, as a link to the finale, which arrives with a glorious proclamation, like brilliant sun bursting through ominous clouds.

The finale, set in the triumphant key of C major, is jubilant and martial. (Robert Schumann saw here the influence of Étienne-Nicolas Méhul, a prominent composer of the French Revolution.) The sonata form proceeds apace. At the apex of the development, however, the mysterious end of the *Scherzo* is invoked to serve as the link to the return of the main theme in the recapitulation. It also recalls and compresses the emotional journey of the entire Symphony. The closing pages repeat the cadence chords extensively to discharge the enormous accumulated energy of the work.

Concerning the effect of the "struggle to victory" symbolized by the structure of the Fifth Symphony, a quote that Beethoven scribbled in a notebook of the Archduke Rudolf, one of his aristocratic piano and composition students, is pertinent. The composer wrote, "Many assert that every minor [tonality] piece must end in the minor. *Nego!* On the contrary, I find that ... the major [tonality] has a glorious effect. Joy follows sorrow, sunshine — rain. It affects me as if I were looking up to the silvery glistening of the evening star."

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

PREMIERE OF WORK: Vienna, December 8, 1813; University of Vienna; Ludwig van Beethoven, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 6 January 1898; Carnegie Music Hall; Frederic Archer, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 42 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 that 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 former 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.”