

22. Beethoven's Symphonies

BEETHOVEN'S symphonies are among the greatest pieces of music ever written. To be more precise, the 3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th and 9th are *the* five greatest pieces of music ever written. Which is the greatest probably depends on the day of the week. Maybe today it is the 6th; tomorrow it might be the 7th. But aren't we lucky that he has left us such an embarrassment of musical riches?

Ludwig van Beethoven, the man in whom music reached its acme, was born in Bonn in 1770 into a family of court musicians, the second child of Johann van Beethoven and Maria Magdalena Leym, their first having died after only six days. His grandfather, who had moved from Malines in Flanders (today Mechelen in Belgium) at the age of 21 and settled in Bonn, was Kapellmeister at the electoral court and his father was a court tenor and music teacher.

The Beethoven family had a liking for alcohol, and Beethoven's grandmother and father were both alcoholics (it probably gave Beethoven himself the cirrhosis of the liver from which he died). Johann spent many an evening in the local tavern, often not returning home until the middle of the night. It was his grandfather, also called Ludwig, whom the young Beethoven idolised, though he died in 1773 when the grandson was only three. Beethoven had his portrait sent to him when he went to live in Vienna and kept it for the rest of his life.

The young Beethoven showed considerable musical talent and by the age of four he was being taught clavichord and violin by his father who drove him hard and even, according to some reports, beat him into submission. In 1780 or 1781, when Beethoven was around ten, his father took him out of school to concentrate solely on music. For the rest of his life Beethoven suffered from this inadequate education: his handwriting was almost illegible, his punctuation and spelling poor, and he was useless with figures.

Beethoven had already begun having music lessons. His only significant teacher until he left Bonn in 1792 was the composer and court organist Christian Gottlob Neefe who, in a piece written in 1783 for a music magazine, described his pupil thus: "this young genius deserves support so that he can travel. He would surely become a second Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, if he were to continue as he has begun". This was high endorsement indeed. Here was a professional musician in print saying that his young pupil was a musician of genius potentially the equal of Mozart, not merely as a pianist but also as a composer. For Beethoven had already, at the age of eleven, written his first piece, a set of variations on a march by the recently deceased German composer Ernst Dressler. The *Dressler Variations* were quickly followed by others in the years 1782 to 1785, including three piano sonatas, a piano concerto, three quartets for piano and strings and several songs and small keyboard works.



In 1784 Beethoven was appointed assistant court organist to Neefe. The Archbishop-Elector of Cologne (whose seat was in Bonn) died in that year and was succeeded by Max Franz, brother of Emperor Joseph II, who played a key role in the young Beethoven's development. He decided to pay him and reduce Neefe's salary. He also granted him leave to travel to Vienna in 1787, at the age of 16, to meet Mozart and probably covered the costs. They did briefly meet and, according to one uncorroborated account, Mozart said: "watch out for that boy, one day he will give the world something to talk about".

Yet it was to be another 16 years before Beethoven composed the work that was to change the course of music. In the late 1780s his output entered the first of its 'silent' periods. Family circumstances clearly contributed. His mother died of consumption in July 1787 which meant that, as the eldest son with a chronically alcoholic father, he was effectively head of the family and had to bring up his two younger brothers.

In 1792 Haydn, who had met him on a visit to Bonn, agreed to accept him as a student upon the request of the elector. Beethoven left Bonn for Vienna in November, never to return, even when his father died six weeks later. As he prepared to leave, another patron, Count Waldstein, wrote to him: "With the help of unceasing diligence you will receive the spirit of Mozart from the hands of Haydn" (Mozart had died in 1791 at the age of thirty five). But Beethoven was later quoted as saying that "I took lessons from Haydn, but never learned anything from him". Although he was quickly established as a virtuoso pianist, Beethoven had higher ambitions and when Haydn left for London in 1794 he began to compose in earnest.

It took Beethoven nearly another ten years to begin producing his greatest symphonies. By 1803 he had already written two symphonies, three piano concertos, four piano trios, six string quartets, several violin and piano sonatas and many other works, but it would be fair to say that nothing, except perhaps the *Pathétique Sonata*, presaged what was about to erupt on the musical world. Of course, it is true that Beethoven's music showed an organic development, and the music of every decade was arguably greater than its predecessor. But there was another factor – his increasing deafness.

The first symptoms probably appeared in 1798 because he wrote to a friend in 1801 that "for the last three years my hearing has become weaker and weaker" and "my ears continue to hum and buzz day and night". He wrote another letter to the same friend five months later in which he made the memorable statement: "I will seize fate by the throat – I shall not allow it to bend or crush me completely". Francis Bacon wrote: "Prosperity doth best discover vice, but adversity doth best discover virtue". In Beethoven's case adversity discovered greatness. ↪

It was not, however, without a struggle. Beethoven had periodic fits of depression, and one of the worst occurred in 1802 while he was staying in the nearby village of Heiligenstadt. He expressed his despair in an undelivered letter to his two brothers in what has become known as the *Heiligenstadt Testament*. He refers to the affliction “in a sense I once possessed in the highest perfection, a perfection such as a few in my profession have or have ever possessed”. He says that he contemplated ending his life but “it was only my art that held me back”. So, although he was writing a *cri de coeur* and even talked about suicide, he was clearly not about to commit it. Instead, he seemed to become aware within himself of an indomitable creative energy that nothing could destroy. By creating music he could sustain the will to live and give meaning to his life.

He told a friend around this time that “I am not very satisfied with my work thus far. From this day on I shall forge a new path”. Herein lies another factor in Beethoven’s greatness as a composer. Throughout his life he displayed a pathological hatred of all authority. His early rebellion against the strictness of his father, who disliked his improvisations and tried to turn him into a second Mozart, laid the foundation of a lifelong revolt against all authority and tradition, whether in music or in life. He decided that he would compose what *he* wanted, not what any rich patron or the public desired. For he was not a servant of anyone but an artist who would speak for all humankind through his art.

His attitude is encapsulated in the anecdote about an incident when Beethoven met Goethe in 1812 in Teplitz, now in the Czech Republic (commemorated in an 1887 painting, *The Incident At Teplitz*, by Carl Rohling, right). The two men were walking in the park together when Goethe spotted the imperial royal family walking towards them. As the Emperor and Empress passed, arm in arm, Goethe stood to the side, removed his hat and bowed. Beethoven, however, slammed his top hat down on the back of his head and, hands held tightly behind his back, stomped off in the opposite direction. Archduke Rudolph, the emperor’s younger brother and Beethoven’s main patron, hat in hand, looked on in astonishment.

His natural talent, growing deafness, dedication and stubborn defiance of all authority were perfect ingredients for the earth-shattering music that Beethoven composed from 1803 onwards. It began with his third symphony, one of the most striking examples of his ‘new path’. He jotted down some ideas in 1802 but plunged into full-time work in the winter of 1803-4. The final product is the result of many revisions and sketches. It grew to a length that dwarfed any previous symphony by him or anyone else – 50 minutes or longer if all the repeats are taken. The first movement alone is almost as long as many classical symphonies. But what marks the *Eroica* is not only its epic length but also its explosive power, complex harmonies, fierce dissonances and overwhelming sense of liberation.

Beethoven himself gave it the title of ‘Eroica’. The symphony was originally dedicated to Napoleon as someone who had led the people of France in a new era of liberty, equality and brotherhood. But when Napoleon proclaimed himself emperor in 1804 Beethoven flew into a

rage. Napoleon would now trample on the rights of man and just satisfy his own ambition. “Is he then, too, nothing more than an ordinary human being?”, he reportedly shouted out. Such was Beethoven’s fury that he not only crossed out the dedication, but a portion of the title page was also ripped out in the process.

The *Eroica* is an essentially humanist work celebrating the heroism of the individual spirit, including a testament to Beethoven’s own capacity to overcome suffering. In the first movement there is the grandeur, struggle and nobility of spirit of the hero; in the second there is the dark night of the funeral march as the hero suffers a metaphorical death; then comes the resurrection of the spirit in an upsurge of creative energy; and finally the depiction of the Promethean gift of artistic and scientific creation.

The *Eroica* was first performed for a private audience in August 1804 and received its first public performance in the Theater an der Wein, with Beethoven conducting, on 7th April 1805. It met with a decidedly mixed reception. One critic called it a ‘daring and wild fantasia’. Some described it as Beethoven’s masterpiece while others said it illustrated a striving for originality that did not come off. In our time, Leonard Bernstein has described the first two movements as ‘perhaps the greatest two movements in all symphonic music’.

The *Eroica* is not, however, the best known of Beethoven’s symphonies. That distinction lies with the 5th, described in E. M. Forster’s novel *Howard’s End* as ‘the most sublime noise that has ever penetrated into the ear of man’. It begins with what are now the most famous notes in all music: dum-dum-dum-dum – three short Gs and held E-flat, representing ‘fate knocking at the door’, as Beethoven himself said. It was composed during a period of sustained creativity in the years 1804-1808, which included the 4th, 5th and 6th symphonies, the 4th piano concerto, the violin concerto and three string quartets.

Both the 5th and 6th symphonies were premiered at a benefit concert that Beethoven presented on 22nd December 1808 at the Theater an der Wien. They share similarities including the use of cumulative instrumentation. The 5th adds three trombones, piccolo and contrabassoon in the finale, and the 6th adds two trumpets in the scherzo, and a piccolo, two trombones and timpani in the storm movement. In both the final movements (two in the 5th and three in the 6th) flow into each other without a break.

Yet, despite these and other similarities, the differences between the 5th and 6th are crucial. The 5th effectively dramatises Beethoven’s ‘C-minor mood’ and shares with the 9th a minor-mode first movement with a major-mode finale: the passage, as so often with Beethoven, is from a darkened world to the triumph of light, from despair to joy. The first movement is perhaps the clearest example of the inevitable progression that seems to characterise a Beethoven symphony. Every note seems so right, even if totally unpredictable, and there is not a single unnecessary bar. The scherzo, which begins with ‘a goblin walking over the universe’ (*Howard’s End*), suggests apprehension, a tortured mind that has abandoned hope. Suddenly, a crescendo slowly rises in wailing violins and drum taps as if ↗



searching frantically for the light, until it bursts forth in the exultant finale.

After the intensity of the 5th, the 6th is an idyllic repose in the tranquil world of nature. This 'Sinfonia Pastorale' evokes the quiet exhilaration that we feel in the fields, streams, trees and birds of the countryside. Beethoven himself gave a title to each movement. 'the awakening of joyous feelings on getting out into the countryside'; 'scene by the brook'; 'merry gathering of country people'; 'thunderstorm'; and 'shepherd's song, happy and thankful feelings after the storm'.

The *Pastoral* is one of Beethoven's most loved works, partly because it is more songful and flowing than the other symphonies. Apart from the storm, it is a wonderfully restful piece, demonstrating that the composer was not all fire and thunder but also, in the words of critic and composer Donald Tovey, 'knew how to relax'. In the *Pastoral*, Beethoven's genius weaves a marvellous tapestry of sound which, while providing acute sensuous pleasure, reaches to the heavens, spiritual without being religious, a magnificent paean to a sublime pantheistic vision.

The 7th symphony was completed in 1812 while Beethoven was staying at Teplitz. It was premiered in Vienna on 8th December 1813 at a charity concert for wounded veterans of the Napoleonic wars, with Beethoven himself conducting. The performance was rapturously received and the second movement allegretto had to be encored. It appeared subsequently in numerous transcriptions, including arrangements for winds, septet, string quintet and piano.

Beethoven himself later wrote that it was 'one of my most excellent works'. One critic thought that it must have been composed in a drunken state and Carl Maria von Weber considered the grinding ostinato basses in the coda of the first movement evidence that

Beethoven was 'fit for the madhouse'. But another wrote that "the final movement zips along at an irrepressible pace that threatens to sweep the entire orchestra off its feet and around the theatre, caught up in the sheer joy of performing one of the most perfect symphonies ever written". Ernest Newman described it as 'the upsurge of a powerful dionysiac impulse, a divine intoxication of the spirit'. Antony Hopkins has said that, perhaps more than any of the others, it "gives us a feeling of true spontaneity; the notes seem to fly off the page as we are borne along on a flood tide of inspired invention".

Rhythmic vitality and élan drive the whole symphony from beginning to end. Wagner rightly described it as 'the apotheosis of the dance', in which Beethoven takes ordinary tunes, including Celtic folk elements, and lifts them up into a higher spiritual plane in a series of supercharged cosmic dances, culminating in the headlong ecstasy of a bacchanalian orgy that simply takes the breath away. Beethoven's 7th is truly an awesome, uplifting masterpiece that makes you feel glad to be alive.

After the 7th and 8th were finished in 1812, there was a gap of 12 years before his last symphony, and the one that seemed to summarise the very essence of Beethoven's art. Like many of his works, he composed different elements of the 9th over several years. The idea of setting the German poet Schiller's *Ode to Joy* (1785) celebrating the brotherhood and unity of mankind to music occurred to Beethoven before he left Bonn for Vienna, and his sketch-

books indicate that some of the material was written as early as 1811. What finally emerged was a symphony with a choral finale incorporating the *Ode to Joy*. It was actually commissioned by the Philharmonic Society of London in 1817 but most of the work was done from 1822 on. After the first performance to a packed hall on 7th May 1824, at which Beethoven shared the conducting, the contralto walked over and turned the composer round to see the audience's applause because, being now profoundly deaf, he couldn't hear it and was still conducting.

Beethoven's 9th is the classic symphonic journey from darkness to light, from chaos to order, from despair to joy. Its message of aspiring human optimism, peace and brotherhood is quite simply overwhelming. More castaways on *Desert Island Discs* have chosen the 9th than any other piece of music. It was also chosen as the anthem of the European Union and played at the concert led by Leonard Bernstein on 25th December 1989, celebrating the collapse of the Berlin Wall. It is traditionally performed in Japan during the New Year Celebrations: in December 2009 alone, for example, there were 55 performances by various Japanese orchestras and choirs.

That testifies to Beethoven's universality and humanism. For his symphonies are recognised everywhere as the supreme musical expressions of the indomitable power of the human spirit. God is largely absent, though in his book on *Beethoven* (Norton, 2003) Lewis Lockwood suggests that there is a religious dimension to the 9th, and

Maynard Solomon writes that it exemplifies Beethoven's desire to hold both religious and secular-humanist ideas in one hand (*Beethoven Essays*, 1988). Yet it is certainly not a conventional religious sense. Although brought up a Catholic, Beethoven never attended religious services. Haydn thought he was an atheist. His

friend and biographer Anton Schindler considered him to be a deist, especially due to the Enlightenment's strong influence in Bonn as Beethoven came of age.

When his friend Moscheles at the end of his arrangement of *Fidelio* (1805) wrote, "Fine, with God's help", Beethoven added, "O man, help thyself". Sir George Macfarren speaks of him as a 'free thinker', saying the *Mass in C* "might scarcely have proceeded from an entirely orthodox thinker". As John Suchet says (*Beethoven: The Man Revealed*, Elliott and Thompson, 2012), in the *Heiligenstadt Testament* "God gets barely a look in", and when it happens the reference is to 'Divinity' or 'Providence'. On his death-bed Beethoven is reported to have said: "Applaud, my friends, the comedy is over", and he clenched his fist at the end, as if in defiance of a deity.

Whether Beethoven was a Christian, a deist or a pantheist, or even a confused mixture of all three, he clearly regarded music not only as a means of self-expression but also as a moral power and used essentially humanist themes such as freedom, democracy, hope, compassion and human brotherhood. Even *The Ode to Joy*, despite Schiller's allusions to God, is turned into a secular hymn.

It is a great source of secular pride that the 3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th and 9th symphonies – the five greatest works in musical history by the greatest composer the world has ever seen – are sublime exemplars of noble humanist aspirations. They are the peak of spiritual pleasure and a major defence against the darkness. □

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