

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Symphony No. 3 in E-Flat major, Op. 55, *Eroica*

BORN: December 16, 1770, in Bonn

DIED: March 26, 1827, in Vienna

WORK COMPOSED: 1803–04

WORLD PREMIERE: April 7, 1805, in Vienna. The composer conducted an orchestra assembled especially for the concert.

It is nearly impossible to speak of Beethoven's Third Symphony, *Eroica*, without resorting to superlatives. More than a singular masterpiece, it is one of those rare compositions that came as a true breakthrough, not only for its creator but for an entire era.

Beethoven's first two symphonies had extended the classical procedures of Mozart and Haydn, and the composer, now in his early 30s, might well have continued writing in that vein. But the world of the nascent 19th century was not the same one in which his illustrious predecessors had lived and worked. The aristocracy that ruled Europe was under siege both politically and intellectually. Revolutions in America and France had turned the theories of the Enlightenment into practical reality, and a heady sense of new possibilities was in the air. It was a time of idealism and, in a broad sense, of heroism.

Beethoven was strongly affected by these new currents. He applauded the French Revolution and remained an ardent democrat throughout his life. Numerous anecdotes recount his refusal to defer to members of the nobility, even those who were his patrons. It is not surprising, therefore, that he should have planned a work honoring a popular hero like Napoleon, which was his original intention in writing his Third Symphony. (We must recall that when the composer began work on this piece, early in 1803, the brilliant general and First Consul was widely perceived as the defender of the French Revolution and an embodiment of a new and hopeful political order. Napoleon the emperor and scourge of Europe was still a thing of the future.)

Nor is it startling that Beethoven should have outgrown the comparatively restrained musical forms and language of the previous generation. By the turn of the century, the composer had begun moving towards larger, more potent modes of expression. His Second Symphony and Third Piano Concerto seem to strain the boundaries of their Classical-period models. These pieces, however, hardly foretold the extraordinary leap taken in the "*Eroica* Symphony." Its length alone, nearly twice that of most Mozart or Haydn symphonies, far exceeded any similar work. Yet it was not so much its outer dimensions as its inner life, its tremendous power and propulsive drive, that placed the *Eroica* beyond the pale of 18th century musical comportment.

Beethoven maintained that this was his finest symphony, and while it is difficult to choose among his works in this genre, there is reason to agree. Nowhere, even in his Fifth and Ninth Symphonies, was the composer more successful in welding a wide array of thematic ideas into a cohesive whole, in developing those ideas to fill out an expansive compositional frame, or in extracting from them an arresting musical drama.

From this point of view, the well-known account of how the composer angrily changed the title on his score from *Buonaparte* to the anonymous *Sinfonia eroica* ("Heroic Symphony") after learning that Napoleon had declared himself emperor hardly bears retelling. Today, the connection between this music and the Corsican general is not particularly apparent. Like all art, the Third Symphony really tells

us of the artist who conceived it. Beethoven himself, who overcame the adversity of his growing deafness to compose the work, can rightly be considered the heroic figure to which its title alludes.

What to Listen For

The first movement's principal theme begins prosaically by outlining that most commonplace harmony, a major triad, but then drops unexpectedly two notes, gaining tension and energy. Immediately the violins add a nervous figure that firmly establishes a sense of restless invention. These few gestures and those that follow present barely a fragment of recognizable melody, for Beethoven's creative fire keeps the music tumbling into unexpected harmonies, harmonies that the composer sometimes reduces to one- or two-note figures of unadorned power. Subsidiary themes, such as the one composed of three-note figures tossed among the woodwinds and violins, maintain the feeling of unstoppable momentum. That feeling only intensifies as Beethoven embarks on an extraordinarily imaginative fantasy based on the taut thematic material he has established. But these are not enough. At length, the music comes to a series of wrenching chords and a new, haunting, windswept melody introduced by the oboes.

Beethoven uses the oboe even more prominently in the second movement, entrusting to that instrument both the funeral march theme and the brighter subject of the consolatory central episode. The composer's gruff humor is absent from the ensuing scherzo. Instead he gives us a nimble, dance-like movement with a noble "horn-call" central section.

Following an initial flourish, the finale begins as a set of variations on a bass line plucked out by the strings, though the true thematic subject appears somewhat later as a melody presented by the oboe and endorsed, phrase for phrase, by the orchestra. But although Beethoven always favored the theme-and-variations procedure and worked it masterfully, his exuberance now proves too great for the comparatively confined architecture of strophic paraphrases. Before long, the subject spills out of the strict variation format into contrapuntal and other unexpected developments, and finally to a rousing conclusion.

Scored for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets and 2 bassoons; 3 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani and strings.

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