



ABOUT THE MUSIC

Road to 100: The Complete Beethoven Symphonies, Year 1

June 9, 2024

Program notes by Elizabeth Schwartz

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Symphony No. 1 in C major, Opus 21



COMPOSER: born December 17, 1770, Bonn, Germany; died March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria

WORK COMPOSED: 1799-1800. Dedicated to Baron Gottfried van Swieten

WORLD PREMIERE: Beethoven conducted the first performance on April 2, 1800, at Vienna's Hofburgtheater

INSTRUMENTATION: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, and strings

ESTIMATED DURATION: 25 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Ludwig van Beethoven's first symphony is a musical snapshot of the composer at age 29: a self-confident young man, comfortable working within the established musical and societal parameters of his day. At this point in his life, Beethoven had not yet assumed the persona for which he is best known: the iconoclastic deaf genius, possessed of a fiery temper and an irascible personality.

In 1800, as Beethoven worked on his first symphony, he was also establishing himself in the high-pressure world of musical Vienna. In 1800, Beethoven was known primarily as an excellent pianist who played for the most select aristocratic audiences. His skill as a performer also brought him many pupils, and his connections among the aristocracy and other important leaders in Vienna assured him entry into the most desirable strata of society. Although Beethoven had begun publishing his own music five years earlier, at this point in time he had yet to make an indelible name for himself as a composer. In 1800, Beethoven's catalogue of works included ten piano sonatas, two sonatas for cello and three for violin, five string trios, and six string quartets. For his first symphony, Beethoven turned to the musical language he had learned from Franz Joseph Haydn, with whom he had briefly studied.

The audience at the premiere of Opus 21 heard a typical Classical-era symphony: four movements scored for an orchestra of strings, timpani, trumpets, and pairs of woodwinds. The structure of each movement also conforms to those of a Mozart or Haydn symphony: a fast first movement in traditional sonata-allegro form; a slower, freer second; a so-called "minuet" (although even in this early symphony we can hear hints of a true Beethovenian scherzo lurking beneath) and an exuberant, up-tempo finale. However, Beethoven upends all expectations in the symphony's opening

measures, by featuring a strange three-chord introduction that resolves to the “wrong” key (F major), instead of the C major indicated in the score.

Beethoven was roundly criticized for this shocking introduction, but responded in what became typical fashion by beginning his very next work, the overture to the ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus*, the very same way. Aside from the unusual opening, however, critical reception was generally favorable, and the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* (General Musical Paper) praised the symphony’s “considerable art, novelty and ... wealth of ideas.”

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Symphony No. 3 in E-flat major, Opus 55, *Eroica*



WORK COMPOSED: 1802-04. Dedicated to Beethoven’s patron, Prince Franz Joseph Maximilian Lobkowitz

WORLD PREMIERE: Beethoven conducted the premiere on April 7, 1805, in Vienna’s Theater an der Wien

INSTRUMENTATION: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 3 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, and strings

ESTIMATED DURATION: 47 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Ludwig van Beethoven admired Napoleon Bonaparte, whose early exploits as First Consul of France reaffirmed the motto of the French Revolution, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.” It had been Beethoven’s intention to dedicate his third symphony to Napoleon, but when the composer heard Napoleon had declared himself Emperor in May 1804, Beethoven was outraged. So vehement was his desire to rid his third symphony of any association with the French general that Beethoven erased the words “intitulata Bonaparte” from the title page with a knife, leaving a hole in the paper. When the score was first printed in 1806, the title page read only, “A heroic symphony ... composed to celebrate the memory of a great man.”

Today, the “Eroica” is considered one of the groundbreaking musical events of the 19th century, but in Beethoven’s time it received a great deal of criticism. Its length alone challenged the audience (depending on the conductor’s tempos and observations of marked repetitions in the score, the “Eroica” runs 45 – 60 minutes, much longer than a typical symphony of the time). Beethoven acknowledged this, noting in the 1806 edition of the score, “This symphony being purposely written much longer than is usual, should be performed nearer the beginning rather than at the end of a concert ... if it is heard too late it will lose for the listener, already tired by previous performances, its own proposed effect ...”

One reviewer, using words that today we would consider praiseworthy, criticized Beethoven’s “undesirable originality,” and went on to say, “Genius proclaims itself not in the unusual and fantastic but in the beautiful and sublime” and further, that the symphony was “unendurable to the mere music-lover.”

From our vantage point in the 21st century, today’s listeners recognize “Eroica’s” importance. Like Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, the influence of “Eroica” reverberated through all the symphonic music of the century that followed it.

Beginning with the one-two punch of “Eroica’s” opening chords, Beethoven obliterated the concept of the Classical-style symphony and earned for himself the adjective “revolutionary.” Everything about this lengthy first movement confounds expectation: its unexpected and continuous development of melodic fragments, its “wrong key” tonalities, and Beethoven’s idiosyncratic use of rhythm, which at times verged on the eccentric. Certainly, this was shocking to audiences accustomed to the more predictable pace of Mozart and Haydn. Of particular note is the notoriously “early” entrance of the horn towards the end of the first movement. Beethoven’s student and biographer Ferdinand Ries recalled, “At the first rehearsal of the Symphony, which was terrible – but at which the horn player made his entry correctly – I stood beside Beethoven and, thinking that a blunder had been made I said: ‘Can’t the damned hornist count? – it sounds horribly false!’ I think I came pretty close to getting a box on the ear. Beethoven did not forgive that little slip for a long time.”

The solemn, majestic Marcia funebre (funeral march) can be heard as Beethoven mourning his disappointment in Napoleon, and his vanished dreams of heroism.

The buoyant Scherzo departs from the intensity of the previous two movements. Here is Beethoven's mocking sense of humor at play, as when the strings return with their signature theme and stomp all over their previously playful rhythm. The insistent pulse of the strings and the incessant bounce of this movement suggest a puppy chasing its own tail.

The final movement, a set of themes and variations, uses music from Beethoven's own Overture to *The Creatures of Prometheus* from 1801, as well as an 1802 solo piano work, known today as the "Eroica" Variations. A virtuoso blast from the horn section signals the symphony's conclusion, a glorious reaffirmation of Beethoven's heroic ideals.

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Elizabeth Schwartz is a writer and music historian based in the Portland area. She has been a program annotator for more than 20 years and works with music festivals and ensembles around the country. Schwartz has also contributed to NPR's "Performance Today," (now heard on American Public Media).