Symphony No. 7 in A major, Opus 92 • Ludwig van Beethoven

SCORED FOR TWO FLUTES, TWO OBOES, TWO CLARINETS,
TWO BASSOONS, TWO HORNS, TWO TRUMPETS, TYMPANY AND STRINGS

In the autumn of 1813, Johann Nepomuk Malzel, the inventor of the metronome, approached Beethoven with the proposal that they organize a concert to benefit the Austrian and Bavarian soldiers wounded at the recent Battle of Hanau. Beethoven had a new symphony that he was anxious to have performed (it had been over five years since the premiere of his *Sixth Symphony*) and he thought the potential financial reward worth the trouble, so he agreed. The concert consisted of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 7*, 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. Oddly enough, it was *Wellington's Victory*—with its topical interest (another battle featuring Napoleon's defeat), rousing drum rolls and brass fanfares—which roused the audience to abandoned ecstasy. Today, with time for perspective having elapsed, *Wellington's Victory* is regarded as laughable, if not downright ridiculous, and the *Symphony No. 7* is considered by many to be his finest symphonic work.

The orchestra assembled for this important occasion included some of the most distinguished musicians and composers of the day: Spohr, Schuppanzigh, Dragonetti, Meyerbeer, Hummel, and Salieri all lent their talents. Spohr, who played among the violins, has left us an account of Beethoven as conductor. "Beethoven had accustomed himself to indicate expression to the orchestra by all manner of singular bodily movements. So often as a *sforzando* occurred, he thrust apart his arms, which he had previously crossed upon his breast. At *piano* he crouched down lower and lower as he desired the degree of softness. If a *crescendo* then entered, he slowly rose again, and at the entrance of the *forte* jumped into the air. Sometimes, too, he unconsciously shouted to strengthen the *forte.*"

The *Seventh Symphony* is a magnificent creation in which Beethoven displayed several technical innovations that had a profound influence on the music of the nineteenth century: he expanded the scope of symphonic structure in formal aspects and through the use of more distant tonal areas within each movement; he continued to expand the orchestral palette with his instrumental color combinations; and he gave a new awareness of rhythm as the vitalizing, if not unifying, 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.

A slow introduction, almost a movement in itself, opens the symphony. This section features three melodic ideas: a simple triadic tune first played by the woodwind instruments, a rising scale passage tossed around the string section, and an elegant tune for the oboe. The first two ideas are combined, while the oboe solo serves as delightful foil set apart. The transition to the main part of the first movement is accomplished via the controlled repetition of a single pitch. This device not only connects the introduction with the proper beginning of the movement but also establishes the simple rhythm that dominates throughout. The rousing *Vivace*, begins with a sparking melody first played by the flute. This tune is the basis of the entire first movement and is continually elaborated and developed as only Beethoven can do.

The second movement Allegretto is the most famous of the symphony, with its eternal insistent pulse and its deliberate, yet simple minor melody. It so impressed the listeners at the premiere that they demanded that it be repeated—something that rarely occurred with slow movements! It begins pianissimo with the low strings, which present the melody unadorned. In subsequent repetitions countermelodies are introduced, new accompaniment patterns are presented, and the overall dynamic rises, until a gentle contrasting section in the parallel major is revealed. The original thematic material returns with greater intensity and complexity; at one point Beethoven shows his muscle as a master of counterpoint by turning his simple opening theme into a four-voiced fugue.

The movement ends with a sudden unsettling *sforzando*, perhaps preparing the listener for the dynamism of the *Scherzo* to follow.

The third movement is an ebullient *Scherzo*, a lightening fast movement in ¾ meter. The traditional form of this movement had three parts: *Scherzo, Trio* (a contrasting section, typically more lyrical in nature), and then a return to the *Scherzo*. Beethoven, the constant innovator, was so taken with his own *Trio* material, that he alters the form so that it can be presented again. Thus the movement is technically cast in a form that looks like: *Scherzo-Trio-Scherzo-Trio-Scherzo*. Right before the movement ends it sounds as though we are returning to the *Trio* section yet again, but this is only a musical joke for Beethoven. For as quickly as we realize where he is taking us, he changes the mood with five hammer-stroke chords that catapult the movement to an impatient close.

Wagner described Beethoven's Seventh Symphony as "the apotheosis of the dance... the loftiest deed of bodily motion incorporated in an ideal world of tone," and indeed there is little to contradict that remark when listening to the final movement, Allegro con brio. The typically reserved English musicologist Sir Donald Tovey exclaimed that this movement of virtually unmatched rhythmic energy was "a triumph of Bacchic fury!" So intoxicating is this music that some of Beethoven's contemporaries were sure he had composed it in a drunken frenzy. The whirling energy of the movement may suggest to some a ballet dancer performing a series of dazzling steps, or perhaps a rustic peasant stomping dance with ladies' dresses spinning round in a blur of color. Musicologist Klaus G. Roy wrote that "Many a listener [and performer] has come away from a hearing [playing] of this symphony in a state of being punch-drunk. Yet it is intoxication without a hangover, exhilaration without decadence." Perhaps it is best and most telling to give the final word to the composer: "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."