

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Symphony No. 7 in A Major, Op. 92

- I. *Poco sostenuto – Vivace*
- II. *Allegretto*
- III. *Presto – Assai meno presto*
- IV. *Allegro con brio*

During the years 1807 and 1808, Ludwig van Beethoven was at work contemporaneously composing two of his greatest works, the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies. They even had their first performances together along with the Fourth Piano Concerto, the Choral Fantasy and other short works by Beethoven on December 22, 1808 at the Theatre an der Wien in Vienna. One can only imagine what a marathon that was. Four years later found Beethoven again working on two symphonies simultaneously. This time it was the Seventh and the Eighth. A number of composers used this approach, Brahms comes to mind, with some retaining the one work that they considered superior, while the other was consigned to the grates of their fireplace, Brahms again. In the case of these four symphonies, thankfully all survived. Each pair is a study in contrasts.

The Seventh and Eighth were composed in 1811 and 1812. They share the same instrumentation, but little else. The Seventh is a big, vital, energetic symphony of tremendous scope and grandeur, while the Eighth is much smaller in scale and intimately more humorous. Richard Wagner proclaimed the Seventh “the Apotheosis of the Dance in its highest aspect.” But it would be incorrect to attempt to superimpose a program upon it. It is absolute music at its best. As Donald Francis Tovey has noted “There is no ‘programme’ to the Seventh Symphony, and no reason why we should not call it heroic except that Beethoven has bespoken that title elsewhere. The symphony is so overwhelmingly convincing and so obviously untranslatable, that it has for many generations been treated quite reasonably as a piece of music, instead of an excuse for discussing the French Revolution.” During its composition, the writer Klaus George Roy considers Beethoven to have been possessed “with a power that is granted to few mortals: to sustain during the hard work of musical creation and notation a sense of motion so irresistible that he sets his listeners afire with him, every time and all the time.” Tovey concludes “Probably of all Beethoven’s works the Fifth and Seventh Symphonies are at present the best understood both in details and as wholes. This does not make either of them the less exacting for orchestras or conductors; the scoring is exceedingly full of pitfalls, though the deaf composer’s imagination never fails in the essentials of his miraculous inventions.”

Beethoven began serious composition of the Seventh in the latter part of 1811, although earliest sketches for the work date from 1809. It was completed in April of 1812. The first performance took place at the University of Vienna on December 8, 1813, the composer conducting, although he was almost totally deaf at the time. It was a stunning success, one of the greatest in Beethoven’s career.

The Seventh Symphony is set in the traditional four movements the first of which begins with a slow, powerful introduction. This first theme is later accompanied by pulsating scales which then leads to a gentle second theme first heard in the oboe. Beethoven then seamlessly leads this introduction into the ensuing *Vivace* in 6/8 time. From this point onward, the

movement is propelled by its rhythmic vitality through the development and recapitulation sections to a coda built relentlessly over an ostinato in the cellos and basses to a thunderous conclusion. This passage caused the notable German composer Carl Maria von Weber to declare that Beethoven was “ripe for the madhouse.”

The second movement is one of the most popular that Beethoven ever composed; it was even encored at the first performance. Not the typical slow movement, rather it is a brisker *Allegretto* with a march-like theme that is heard in several variations. It was in fact so popular in Beethoven’s time that it was often substituted for the slow movement in other Beethoven symphonies.

The bright and lively third movement is a Scherzo that finds the composer in a humorous mood. The famous middle Trio section incorporates accordion-like sequences from the winds as well as the coughing fit presence of the second horn.

As Tovey has written “The Finale is and remains unapproached in music as a triumph of Bacchic fury.” And what a fury it is from the beginning to the end. This sonata form movement finds Beethoven running at full throttle. Here he took a classical form and drove it to the extreme; a riveting conclusion to a monumental work. And what were Beethoven’s thoughts about the Seventh? “A grand Symphony in A, one of my best works.” Indeed!

--*Stephen Larmore*