

Symphony No. 3 in E-flat major, Op. 55, "Eroica"

Ludwig van Beethoven  
Born December 16, 1770 in Bonn  
Died March 26, 1827 in Vienna

Beethoven's Third Symphony was written in 1802-04, dedicated to Prince Franz Joseph von Lobkowitz. Its world premiere was given in the second half of 1804, in private performances at Lobkowitz's palace in Vienna. The first public performance took place on April 7, 1805, at Vienna's Theater an der Wien, with the composer conducting. It is scored for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 3 French horns, 2 trumpets, timpani and strings.

In May 1804, Napoleon, who had been acceptable to Beethoven as a military dictator as long as he called himself First Consul, had himself crowned Emperor, and the disappointed and angry composer scratched out the words "intitolata Bonaparte" on the title page of his newly completed symphony, leaving a hole in the paper in the process. The resulting score of the Third Symphony as printed in October 1806 tells us that this is a *sinfonia eroica*, a "heroic symphony . . . composed to celebrate the memory of a great man." The work is some 50 minutes in length, nearly twice that of his first two symphonies. "I'll pay another Kreuzer if the thing will only stop," called out an audience member at the public premiere of the Eroica in 1805. One reviewer conceded that in this "tremendously expanded, daring, and wild fantasia" there was no lack of "startling and beautiful passages in which the energetic and talented composer must be recognized," but he felt that the work "loses itself in lawlessness." Another critic, deploring the composer's ways of achieving "a certain undesirable originality" and proclaiming the new symphony with its "inordinate length" to be "unendurable to the mere music lover," expressed the wish that "Herr van B. would employ his admittedly great talents in giving us works like his symphonies in C and D, his ingratiating Septet in E-flat, the intellectual Quintet in C, and others of his early works that have placed him forever in the ranks of the foremost instrumental composers."

Indeed, Beethoven had given his audience plenty to be upset about—a symphony half again as long as any they would have known, and one unprecedented in demands on orchestral virtuosity that were almost certainly inadequately met, unprecedented as well in the complexity of its polyphony, in the unbridled force of its rhetoric, in the weirdness of details like the famous "wrong" horn entrance in the first movement (the horn has already reached the home chord of E-flat while the violins are still preparing its arrival with a dissonance), and with the radical disintegration of the theme at the end of the monumental Funeral March. Another innovation in the Eroica is the shift in structural importance from the first movement to the Finale. Even to the most historically oriented listener, the Eroica, with its aim of offering a finale that is not just an ending but a culmination and a place of resolution for an enormous range of accumulated tensions and questions, comes across as a new breed of symphony.

Facing a new challenge in his finale, Beethoven turned to old music; that is, he made a set of variations on a theme he had first used in a group of contradances in 1800-01, which he had introduced at about the same time in the finale of his ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus*. In the symphony he provides a grand, rhetorical introduction or "frame." After the witty exploration of the possibilities of the bass alone comes a powerful set of variations on the combined melody and bass. He then infuses his variations with polyphony throughout their course. The vitality of texture that this gives him is one of the chief sources of the propulsive energy of the movement. True to classical tradition for variations, Beethoven slows the tempo near the end. The slow variations here are an apotheosis, a climax of towering force. Carefully Beethoven dismantles this structure. The music is almost an echo of the disintegration" of the Funeral March. Then he resumes speed—returns in fact to a quasi-variation of the initial "frame"—to close, to fulfill his "heroic symphony" in a triumphantly affirmative fanfare.

--adapted from notes by Stephen Larmore