

SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

May 24, 25, 26, and 27, 2007

BEETHOVEN

Prometheus Overture, Opus 43

Violin Concerto in D Major, Opus 61

Allegro ma non troppo

Larghetto

Rondo: Allegro

INTERMISSION

Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Opus 55 “Eroica”

Allegro con brio

Marcia funebre: Adagio assai

Scherzo: Allegro vivace

Finale: Allegro molto

Overture to Prometheus, Opus 43

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
Born December 16, 1770, Bonn
Died March 26, 1827, Vienna

Beethoven had many reasons to accept, in 1800, a commission for a ballet score based on the Prometheus myth: he had long wanted to write a work for the stage, the ballet would be created by the distinguished ballet-master Salvatore Vigano, and frequent performances would mean increased income for the composer. Doubtless the Prometheus story itself, with its tale of a hero bringing enlightenment to mankind, appealed to the young composer. He began work on the score during the second half of 1800, shortly after the premiere of the *First Symphony* and at the same time he was writing the “*Spring*” *Sonata*.

Prometheus had its first performance at the Burgtheater on March 28, 1801, and—despite some critical carping about the suitability of Beethoven’s music for dancing—the ballet had a reasonable success: it was performed over twenty times during the next two seasons. Beethoven published the overture in 1804, and it quickly became one of his most frequently performed works, but the score to the rest of the ballet, which consists of sixteen separate numbers, was not published until long after his death.

The *Prometheus Overture* is extremely concise (it lasts barely five minutes) and powerful—it is easy to understand why this music was performed so frequently. Massive chords open the slow introduction, which leads without pause into the *Allegro molto con brio*. As that marking suggests, this goes at a blistering pace, introduced quietly by a *moto perpetuo* theme in the first violins. Woodwinds in pairs announce the bubbling second subject, by turns staccato and syncopated. Part of the reason for the conciseness of this overture is the fact that it has no development section: Beethoven simply introduces his ideas, recapitulates them, and the *Prometheus Overture* hurtles to its close.

Violin Concerto in D Major, Opus 61

In the spring of 1806 Beethoven finally found time for new projects. For the previous three years, his energies had been consumed by two huge works: the *Eroica* and *Fidelio*. Now with the opera done (for the moment), the floodgates opened. Working at white heat over the rest of 1806, Beethoven turned out a rush of works: the *Fourth Piano Concerto*, the *Fourth Symphony*, the *Razumovsky Quartets*, and the *Thirty-Two Variations in C Minor*. He also

accepted a commission from violinist Franz Clement for a concerto, and—as was his habit with commissions—put off work on the concerto for as long as possible. Clement had scheduled his concert for December 23, 1806, and Beethoven apparently worked on the music until the last possible instant—legend has it that at the premiere Clement sightread some of the concerto from Beethoven’s manuscript.

Beethoven’s orchestral music from the interval between the powerful *Eroica* and the violent *Fifth Symphony* relaxed a little, and the *Fourth Piano Concerto*, *Fourth Symphony*, and *Violin Concerto* are marked by a serenity absent from those symphonies. The *Violin Concerto* is one of Beethoven’s most regal works, full of easy majesty and spacious in conception (the first movement alone lasts 24 minutes—his longest symphonic movement). Yet mere length does not explain the majestic character of this music, which unfolds with a sort of relaxed nobility. Part—but not all—of the reason for this lies in the unusually lyric nature of the music. We do not normally think of Beethoven as a melodist, but in this concerto he makes full use of the violin’s lyric capabilities. Another reason lies in the concerto’s generally broad tempos: the first movement is marked *Allegro*, but Beethoven specifies *ma non troppo*, and even the finale is relaxed rather than brilliant. In fact, at no point in this concerto does Beethoven set out to dazzle his listeners—there are no passages here designed to leave an audience gasping, nor any that allow the soloist consciously to show off. This is an extremely difficult concerto, but a non-violinist might never know that, for the difficulties of this noblest of violin concertos are purely at the service of the music itself.

The concerto has a remarkable beginning: Beethoven breaks the silence with five quiet timpani strokes. By itself, this is an extraordinary opening, but those five pulses also perform a variety of roles through the first movement—sometimes they function as accompaniment, sometimes as harsh contrast with the soloist, sometimes as a way of modulating to new keys. The movement is built on two ideas: the dignified chordal melody announced by the woodwinds immediately after the opening timpani strokes and a rising-and-falling second idea, also first stated by the woodwinds (this theme is quietly accompanied by the five-note pulse in the strings). Beethoven delays the appearance of the soloist, and this long movement is based exclusively on the two main themes.

The *Larghetto*, in G major, is a theme-and-variation movement. Muted strings present the theme, and the soloist begins to embellish that simple melody, which grows more and more

ornate as the movement proceeds. A brief cadenza leads directly into the finale, a rondo based on the sturdy rhythmic idea announced immediately by the violinist. But this is an unusual rondo: its various episodes begin to develop and take on lives of their own (for this reason, the movement is sometimes classified as a sonata-rondo). One of these episodes, in G minor and marked *dolce*, is exceptionally haunting—Beethoven develops this theme briefly and then it vanishes, never to return. The movement drives to a huge climax, with the violin soaring high above the turbulent orchestra, and the music subsides and comes to its close when Beethoven—almost as an afterthought, it seems—turns the rondo theme into the graceful concluding gesture.

Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Opus 55 “Eroica”

In May 1803, Beethoven moved to the village of Oberdöbling, a few miles north of Vienna. At age 32, he had just come through a devastating experience—the realization that he was going deaf had driven him to the verge of suicide—but now he resumed work, and life. To his friend Wenzel Krumpholz, Beethoven confided: “I am only a little satisfied with my previous works. From today on I will take a new path.” At Oberdöbling over the next six months, Beethoven sketched a massive new symphony, his third.

Everyone knows the story of how Beethoven had intended to dedicate the symphony to Napoleon, whose reforms in France had seemed to signal a new age of egalitarian justice. But when the news reached Beethoven in May 1804 that Napoleon had proclaimed himself emperor, the composer ripped the title page off the score of the symphony and blotted out Napoleon’s name, angrily crying: “Is he then, too, nothing more than an ordinary human being? Now he, too, will trample on all the rights of man and indulge only his ambition. He will exalt himself above all others, become a tyrant!” (This sounds like one of those stories too good to be true, but it is quite true: that title page—with Napoleon’s name obliterated—has survived.) Countless historians have used this episode to demonstrate Beethoven’s democratic sympathies, though there is evidence that just a few months later Beethoven intended to restore the symphony’s dedication to Napoleon, and late in life he spoke of Napoleon with grudging admiration. When the symphony was published in 1806, though, the title page bore only the cryptic inscription: “Sinfonia eroica—dedicated to the memory of a great man.”

The new symphony was given several private performances before the public premiere on April 7, 1805. Early audiences were dumbfounded. Wrote one reviewer: “This long

composition, extremely difficult of performance, is in reality a tremendously expanded, daring and wild fantasia. It lacks nothing in the way of startling and beautiful passages, in which the energetic and talented composer must be recognized; but often it loses itself in lawlessness . . . The reviewer belongs to Herr Beethoven's sincerest admirers, but in this composition he must confess that he finds too much that is glaring and bizarre, which hinders greatly one's grasp of the whole, and a sense of unity is almost completely lost." Legend has it that at the end of the first movement, one outraged member of the audience screamed out: "I'll give another kreutzer [a small coin] if the thing will but stop!" It is easy now to smile at such reactions, but those honest sentiments reflect the confusion of listeners in the presence of a genuinely revolutionary work of art.

There had never been a symphony like this, and Beethoven's "new directions" are evident from the first instant. The music explodes to life with two whipcracks in E-flat major, followed immediately by the main ideas in the cellos. This slightly-swung theme is simply built on the notes of an E-flat major chord, but the theme settles on a "wrong" note—C#—and the resulting harmonic complications will be resolved only after much violence. Another striking feature of this movement is Beethoven's choice of 3/4 instead of the duple meter customary in symphonic first movements; 3/4, the minuet meter, had been thought essentially lightweight, unworthy of serious music. Beethoven destroys that notion instantly—this is not simply serious music, it is music of the greatest violence and uncertainty. In it, what Beethoven's biographer Maynard Solomon has called "hostile energy" is admitted for the first time into what had been the polite world of the classical symphony. This huge movement (longer by itself than some complete Haydn and Mozart symphonies) introduces a variety of themes and develops them with a furious energy. It is no accident that the development is the longest section of this movement. The energy pent up in those themes is unleashed here, and the development—much of it fugal in structure—is full of grand gestures, stinging dissonances, and tremendous forward thrust. The lengthy recapitulation (in which the music continues to develop) drives to a powerful coda: the main theme repeats four times, growing more powerful on each appearance, and finally it is shouted out in triumph. This truly is a "heroic" movement—it raises serious issues, and in music of unparalleled drama and scope it resolves them.

The second movement brings another surprise—it is a funeral march, something else entirely new in symphonic music. Beethoven moves to dark C minor as violins announce the

grieving main idea over growling basses, and the movement makes its somber way on the tread of this dark theme. The C-major central interlude sounds almost bright by comparison—the hero’s memory is ennobled here—but when the opening material and tonality return Beethoven ratchets up tensions by treating his material fugally. At the end, the march theme disintegrates in front of us, and the movement ends on muttering fragments of that theme.

Out of this silence, the propulsive scherzo springs to life, then explodes. For all its revolutionary features, the *Eroica* employs what was essentially the Mozart-Haydn orchestra: pairs of winds, plus timpani and strings. Beethoven makes only one change—he adds a third horn, which is now featured prominently in the trio section’s hunting-horn calls. But that one change, seemingly small by itself, is yet another signal of the originality of this symphony: the virtuosity of the writing for horns, the sweep of their brassy sonority—all these are new in music.

The finale is a theme-and-variation movement, a form originally intended to show off the imagination of the composer and the skill of the performer. Here Beethoven transforms this old form into a grand conclusion worthy of a heroic symphony. After an opening flourish, he presents not the theme but the bass line of that theme, played by pizzicato strings, and offers several variations on this line before the melodic theme itself is heard in the woodwinds, now accompanied by the same pizzicato line. This tune had special appeal for Beethoven, and he had already used it in three other works, including his ballet *Prometheus*. Was Beethoven thinking of Prometheus—stealer of fire and champion of mankind—when he used this theme for the climactic movement of this utterly original symphony? He puts the theme through a series of dazzling variations, including complex fugal treatment, before reaching a moment of poise on a stately slow variation for woodwinds. The music pauses expectantly, and then a powerful *Presto* coda hurls the *Eroica* to its close.

The *Eroica* may have stunned its first audiences, but audiences today run the greater risk of forgetting how revolutionary this music is. What seemed “lawlessness” to early audiences must now be seen as an extraordinary leap to an entirely new conception of what music might be. Freed from the restraint of courtly good manners, Beethoven found in the symphony the means to express the most serious and important of human emotions. It is no surprise the composers over the next century would make full use of this freedom. Nor is it a surprise to learn that late in life—at a time when he had written eight symphonies—Beethoven named the *Eroica* as his own favorite among his symphonies.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger