

SYMPHONY No. 7 IN A MAJOR, Op.92

Ludwig Van Beethoven

Born: December 16, 1770, Bonn

Died: March 26, 1827, Vienna

After a summer spent at the Bohemian spa of Tplitz, Beethoven returned refreshed to Vienna in the fall of 1811, to begin work on his *Seventh Symphony*, completing it the following spring and dedicating it to Count Moritz von Fries. The Symphony was not performed, however, until December 8, 1813, when it opened a concert held in the great hall of the University of Vienna for the benefit of the Austrian and Bavarian soldiers who had been wounded fighting Napoleon's troops at Hanau.

Participating in the concert were some of the most celebrated artists of the day, only too glad to lend their services for such a patriotic cause. The leader of the violins was Schuppanzigh, first violinist of Europe's most distinguished quartet. Composer Ludwig Spohr also played the violin, while famed bassist Domenico Dragonetti marshaled the lower strings. The emperor's own Kapellmeister, Antonio Salieri, "did not scruple to beat time for the drummers and salvos." In his percussion section were the pianists, Ignaz Moscheles and Johan Nepomuk Hummel, while young Jacob Beer, later to take the name Giacomo Meyerbeer, helped as best he could. Beethoven, of course, directed.

The program was as follows:

- I. "An entirely new Symphony," by Beethoven (the Seventh in A)
- II. Two marches played by Maelzel's Mechanical Trumpet with full orchestral accompaniment—the one by Dusek, the other by Pleyel.
- III. "Wellington's Victory, or the Battle of Vittoria" by Beethoven

The program had been engineered by Maelzel, an inventor of such creations as the metronome, an ear-trumpet (probably tried out on his friend Beethoven), various musical toys, an automatic chess player, and his latest music mechanism, the panharmonicon, a mechanical orchestra, operated by pins in a revolving cylinder, and powered by giant bellows. If the "Battle Symphony" turned out to be the success Maelzel thought it was bound to be, it could later be transcribed for the machine. Then the inventor would take it to England, where it would make his fortune playing *Wellington's Victory* for patriotic occasions. Beethoven too, whose finances had been wrecked by the war with France, was not averse to making a profit if things worked out.

The concert, of course, went splendidly, with Beethoven's masterpiece and potboiler on the same program. The audience was aroused to shouts of enthusiasm, but the cheering was not all for *Wellington's Victory*; much of it was for the *Seventh Symphony*. Spohr said that the new pieces gave "extraordinary pleasure, especially the Symphony; the wondrous second movement was repeated at each concert; it made a deep enduring impression on me. The performance was a masterly one, in spite of the uncertain, and often ridiculous,

conducting of Beethoven.” The music correspondent of the *Wiener Zeitung* reported that ‘the applause rose to a point of ecstasy.’

By demand the concert was repeated four days later in the same hall. After deducting the necessary costs, Beethoven and Maelzel were able to hand over 4006 gulden to the War Administration. On February 14, Beethoven gave the concert once more, and this time it included his new *Eighth Symphony*. Fortune again smiled on the box-office, and this was especially pleasing to Beethoven because the concert was a Beethoven benefit.

The *Seventh Symphony* is distinguished by persistent rhythmic patterns that dominate all four movements. The first movement is prepared by a spacious introduction, itself seeming to acquire symphonic proportions. Great solemn chords precede the introduction’s two recognizable themes, both of which show considerable development. Scale passages abound as accessories, and the transition to the first movement proper (*Vivace*) is accomplished by a pulsating pattern that gathers its forces for a swing into the main body of the movement.

Beethoven admitted that he wished he had marked the slow movement *Andante* rather than *Allegretto*, as it stands. It goes with a relentless musical tread that possesses the listener. It is more rhythm than melody. “One might say that the harmony is the melody,” wrote R.H. Schauffler. Violas and cellos will later enrich this theme by entwining it with added melody.

Then follows a short impetuous *Scherzo*, its *Trio* said to be based upon an old Austrian pilgrim hymn. The *Finale* has been compared to a peasant Kermis, and even to a bacchanal. Revelry it surely is. Beethoven furnishes no clues, claiming to be dead set against programs. According to Edward Downs, this movement is a sort of ‘cosmic commotion,’ and to Martin Bookspan, it is “one of the great whoops in symphonic literature.”

By Margery Derdeyn