March 21, 22 2015

Ludwig van Beethoven
German composer and pianist
born: December 17, 1770, Bonn; died: March 26, 1827, Vienna

Symphony No.1 in C major, Op.21
Adagio molto; Allegro con brio
Andante cantible con moto
Menuetto e Trio
Finale, Adagio; Allegro molto e vivace

First Classics performance: February 23, 1937, conducted by Franco Autori; most recent performance: March 9, 1997, conducted by Christopher Wilkins; duration 25 minutes

A program featuring Beethoven's first and last symphonies offers listeners a candid chance to compare the early style of 'Master Ludwig' with that of 'Beethoven the Master.' However, we must note that Beethoven was at the top of his game in both cases, and that he was essentially in lock step with the evolution of music in general, although he was clearly the greatest protagonist of his time. Moreover, with regard to his daily life, the subject of his hearing loss had relevance to the creation of both symphonies.

It is often remarked that Beethoven suffered from a hearing disability that left him virtually deaf by the time he wrote his last work for large orchestra - the great ***Symphony No.9 in D Minor***. But, given the content of a letter he wrote to a friend in June of 1801, the truth is even more difficult to comprehend:

"For the last three years my hearing has become weaker and weaker. I must confess that I lead a wretched life. For almost two years I have ceased to attend any social functions just because I find it impossible to say to people "I am deaf." If I had any other profession I might be able to cope with my infirmity; but in my profession it is a terrible calamity. Heaven alone knows what is to become of me. Already I have cursed my Creator and my existence...I beg you not to say anything of my condition to anyone."

This letter predates Beethoven's well-known 'Heiligenstadt Testament' which he wrote in despair to his brothers in the fall of 1802. The significance of this is that all of the composer's nine symphonies, including the current work, were scored under a storm of gathering silence. In ***The Story of Civilization*** the historians Will and Ariel Durant present an intriguing portrait:

"As the years saddened him he yielded more and more to the amnesia of wine. In Vienna his stature at five feet five inches invited wit, and his face was no fortune; his hair thick, disheveled, bristling; his heavy beard spreading up to sunken eyes. He once cried 'Oh God! what a plague it is to have so fatal a face as mine!' He was also a misanthrope, judging every man base but fondly loving every pretty pupil. He gave to nature the unquestioning affection that he could not offer to mankind. He frequently fell into melancholy moods, but almost as frequently had spells of raucous jollity, with or without wine."

Symphony No.1 was completed in 1800, Beethoven's twenty-ninth year, a relatively late product from a composer of such profound ability. By that age Mozart had scored thirty-seven symphonies, Haydn forty-four. But on this point one should not conclude that Beethoven's

hearing impairment was to blame. Something else was going on which changed all the rules in the prevailing Zeitgeist. Music was poised for revolution - the Romantic Age was at hand and suddenly it was a lot more complicated to write a sonata, a concerto or a symphony (decades later, even Johannes Brahms felt compelled to wait until his fortieth year to score his own ***Symphony No.1***).

The curtain for Beethoven's first symphonic drama opens with a very noble, slow introduction, in the manner so often favored by Haydn. But we sense something different here; the bearing is classical and formal, no doubt, but there is something beguiling, something evocative in the scoring, as if C Major were about to be imbued with subtle new shades. Perhaps Beethoven himself was not aware of the Romantic hue that just had just escaped from his pen. No matter. In a wink of the baton, the *con brio* momentum takes to the wind in traditional sonata-allegro form, breezing from one mood to the next, at moments urgent and commanding, at times joyful and full of verve.

Set in F major, the second movement *Andante cantabile* presents a demure and courtly stroll in three-quarter time, quaint and comfy. Again we are reminded of Haydn in style and motif. It is almost as if Beethoven were inviting the comparison with the elder Franz Joseph, who was very much in the forefront of the musical life in Vienna. Yet it must be noted that the true hero of the era was already Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who had died nine years earlier. In any case, Beethoven was doubtless happy to defer to Haydn for public comparison.

Having made his respectful homage in the first two movements, the real Beethoven steps onto the stage at the opening of the third movement. Something unusual is at hand: although marked as a traditional minuet and trio, the regal or stately presence is absent. Moreover, the tempo is far too fast for a dance step, and there are just too many scampering, tuneful episodes on the wing. Indeed, Beethoven offers a coy gambit: we are in the midst of a scherzo (which means 'joke'). Beethoven used the device repeatedly in his later symphonies, emulated ever since by legions of composers.

With the slightest pause, the fourth movement opens with a stentorian G major chord as if warning us that something serious was on the horizon. Hardly. In a moment the truth is out in a happy storm of fresh color - carried by that certain gypsy swagger that often sparkles from Beethoven's pen. But there is even more from behind the scene, as the tunes and rhythmic nuance were surely inspired in part by Mozart's ***The Marriage of Figaro***, which at the time was all the rage in Vienna.

Ludwig van Beethoven

Symphony No.9 in D minor Op.125 "Choral"

Allegro ma non troppo, un poco maestoso
Scherzo: Molto vivace
Adagio molto e cantabile
Presto; allegro assai

First Classics performance: March 16, 1943, conducted by Franco Autori; most recent performance: October 3, 2009, conducted by JoAnn Falletta; duration 67 minutes

Epic grandeur, artistic power and great themes - perhaps the only name that comes to mind is Ludwig van Beethoven - the great German/Viennese master who engraved metaphysics into music with every stroke of his pen. His messages are persistent, even urgent, altogether less fate-bound than spiritual, less worldly than idealistic. Moreover the sheer resonance of his music sounds as if it were charged by an Olympian who stole lightning from the gods. Of this Franz Liszt wrote "The music of Beethoven is like the sun to guide our days, a column of fire to brighten our nights".

In sum, Beethoven's full catalog reveals a surprising variety of music: volumes of folk settings, including even a few drinking songs and others on light Irish and Scottish lyrics), an abundance of chamber music, i.e. the great sonatas, quartets, etc., an opera titled ***Fidelio***, a ballet titled ***Prometheus***, various tonal-poetic overtures, oratorios, five magnum concertos for piano, another for violin, and nine grandiose symphonies, among hundreds of related scores.

Symphony No.9 received its premiere in May of 1824 in Vienna, in the presence of Beethoven who was unable to hear a single note. The great man stood on-stage at one side, gesturing with great excitement near the end. But one of the players had to stop him and turn him toward the audience, which was already on its feet in a frenzy of enthusiasm - Beethoven was not aware that the piece had already ended. Heartbreaking.

Yet the music of the **Ninth** is altogether uplifting. For almost two centuries listeners have been escorted through one of the most inspired statements in all of music. The first movement opens with an inscrutable motif, setting a tone which is both spiritual and heralding via wide open intervals of 4ths and 5ths, as if the orchestra were tuning-up to the 'music of the spheres.' We feel that a great question is at hand.

The term *Scherzo* usually means 'joking' or 'playful.' But here the second movement bears a sense of irony and determination. And just what is that cryptic little march about mid-way? Clearly something is up, but the composer never explained. No matter. In a brief moment the bluster retakes the scene and races to the impetuous close.

'Celestial Adagio' could fairly describe the unearthly loveliness of the third movement. Beethoven presents two themes, at first intertwined but then in separate, alternating variations, flowing in a timeless, poetic retreat.

Like an alarm, the last movement begins with a bolt of dissonant lightning, shredding the air as if the Last Judgment were at hand. Then follows a declamatory statement from the low strings and brief souvenirs from the earlier movements. But in fact, things are just warming up. Waiting in the wings is the magnificent melody upon which Beethoven has lofted Schiller's *Ode to Joy* (with a recitative-prologue of his own). The complement of soloists and chorus then floods the score with all the glory of a cathedral oratorio. Magnificent..!

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program notes by Edward Yadzinski
