

NORTHWEST Sinfonietta

A FLAIR FOR THE CLASSIC

All Beethoven

October 3, 2003 - Town Hall Seattle

October 4, 2003 - Rialto Theater Tacoma

Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 3

Beethoven: Symphony No. 7

Program Notes by Ron Drummond

Aperçu of Apotheosis

The Piano Concerto No. 3 in C Minor was written during an extremely well-documented period of Beethoven's life, yet determining the precise circumstances of its composition has proven difficult. It was long thought to have been composed in early 1800 for Beethoven's first benefit concert, but the recovery of the autograph score (lost during the Second World War) in 1977 revealed Beethoven's handwritten notation, "1803", which forced a reevaluation. What puzzled scholars was the fact that the Third Piano Concerto does indeed belong stylistically to the period around 1800 -- it has more in common with the First Symphony than with the Third Symphony or the "Waldstein" sonata. But it's precisely such apparent contradictions that inspire scholars to dig deeper.

What's now clear is that both dates are correct. During the fall and winter of 1799-1800, Beethoven did indeed start drafting the Third Piano Concerto, intending it for the benefit concert in April. These same months saw composition of the First Symphony, the Septet, and continued work on Beethoven's two-year project, the six string quartets of Opus 18. Yet he managed to complete the concerto's opening movement and much of the middle before realizing his compositional pace wouldn't allow him to make the fast-approaching performance date. So he set it aside and pulled out the score of Piano Concerto No. 1, something he'd been meaning to polish for some time - and that's what he played at the concert. It was almost two years before Beethoven worked again on the C Minor Concerto, in anticipation of another benefit. When that concert fell through, he once again put it aside. Finally, late in 1802, a concert benefit for the following April was firmly scheduled, and Beethoven went back to work on the concerto a third time, at last completing the slow movement and Rondo finale.

So much for heroic inspiration.

Yet clearly the practical inspirations are not to be underestimated. Emanuel Schikaneder, the librettist of Mozart's *Magic Flute*, had just hired Beethoven as "house composer" for the suburban Theater an der Wein, which meant a hefty salary, free rent on the theater's apartment (which Beethoven wasted no time moving into), and use of the theater for his own benefit. In return, Beethoven agreed to write an opera.

After completing the concerto, Beethoven, perhaps to warm up to the operatic commission, and recalling his attendance at the premiere of Haydn's *The Seasons* the year before, decided to try his hand at an oratorio. Written in less than a month, *Christ on the Mount of Olives* has not been treated kindly by posterity. Yet advertisements for the benefit in the *Wiener Zeitung* mention nothing but the oratorio. This is even more astounding when one realizes that, in addition to the Third Piano Concerto, the Second Symphony was also receiving its premiere at the same concert!

Perhaps one is inevitably caught up in the moment's heat. The morning of Tuesday, April 5th saw Beethoven awake before 5 a.m. When his student, Ferdinand Ries, arrived, he was still in bed, madly copying out the trombone parts for the oratorio. By 8 a.m., the orchestra and chorus were gathered in the theater, and re-

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hearsals commenced. As Ries later recalled, "It was a terrible rehearsal and by half-past two everyone was exhausted and unhappy. Prince Carl Lichnowsky [one of Beethoven's patrons] sent out for great hampers of bread and butter, cold meats and wine. In a friendly way he invited everyone to help themselves, which they did with both hands, so everyone was once again in a good humor. Then the Prince requested that the oratorio be tried once more, so that it might come off well in the evening and Beethoven's first work of this kind be presented to the public in a worthy manner. So the rehearsal began again." But time soon ran out, and final run-throughs of the other works on the program (which, typically for the time, likely received no more than two or three prior rehearsals, if that) were not possible, as the concert was set to begin at six o'clock.

Though no copy of the printed program has survived, we know that the First and Second Symphonies, the Third Piano Concerto, and the Oratorio were all performed - which meant the concert lasted well over three hours. During the concerto, the theater's new conductor, Ignaz Ritter von Seyfried, was recruited as Beethoven's page-turner, which, as Seyfried later recalled, "was easier said than done. I saw almost nothing but empty leaves; at the most on one page or the other a few Egyptian hieroglyphs wholly unintelligible to me scribbled down to serve as clues for him . . . He gave me a secret glance whenever he was at the end of one of the invisible passages and my scarcely concealable anxiety not to miss the decisive moment amused him greatly and he laughed heartily at the jovial supper which we ate afterwards."

There was much to laugh about, considering the size of Beethoven's take - 1800 silver florins, several times the annual salary of an average bureaucrat in the Hapsburg government.

Reports of the concert itself focus almost exclusively on the oratorio; its reception was decidedly mixed. As for the other works, one critic wrote that the Second Symphony wasn't as good as the First Symphony, but at least it was better than the Third Piano Concerto, which suffered because Beethoven, "who is otherwise known as an excellent pianist, failed to perform to the public's satisfaction." In comments from others, the concerto, when it's mentioned at all, is shrugged off or dismissed. Today we can only wonder at such a non-response. But the performance likely suffered from being grossly under-rehearsed and played by a composer who'd lost considerable sleep in the preceding weeks scrambling to complete another work. A second performance the following year, with Beethoven conducting and Ferdinand Ries as soloist, was much better received, the review in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* ranking it "among Beethoven's most beautiful compositions."

Beethoven's first three piano concertos were all inspired by Mozart's piano concertos; all were an effort to transcend them. It was only with the Third that Beethoven finally succeeded. Though modeled on the Mozart C minor concerto, K. 491, Beethoven's work need make no apologies. The opening movement is spare, almost hungry, tight in structure, tensely dramatic, with sharp rhythmical contrasts. The E major slow movement is among Beethoven's most beautiful, a music of depths, sensuous yet, in the long suspended transitions, ethereal as well. A brief written-out cadenza leads into the punning Rondo Finale, with its fugal interlude and final rush to the long-sought musical goal.

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Wagner called Beethoven's Seventh Symphony "the apotheosis of the dance," and for its time and place it arguably was that. Dancelike rhythms permeate every measure. If they catch you up, it's all outdoors you want to dance in. Hearing Beethoven's most radiant symphony, it's hard not to think that he must have been in the full bloom of love when he wrote it. It took more than a century of scholarship to show us definitively what our hearts knew all along: that indeed he was. Beethoven completed the Seventh Symphony just weeks before writing the famous letters to his "Immortal Beloved," Antonie Brentano, in July 1812. Those letters and, it's now clear, that symphony, marked the height of a passionately mutual love that had been brewing for years but that ultimately was fated never to be consummated. In the Seventh Symphony, we have an epic

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expression, not of romantic love per se so much as of the vibrantly forward-looking and joyously celebratory outlook that fills the heart and mind and limbs of one who is immersed in such a love.

The Seventh had to wait a year and a half before receiving its premiere. The Napoleonic wars had been taking their toll for a long time. A decisive Allied victory in the battle of Leipzig had turned the tide against France, but the French invasion of Russia continued. In Vienna in the fall of 1813, Johann Nepomuk Mälzel, the inventor of the metronome and of a mechanical orchestra called the panharmonicon, convinced Beethoven to lend his name and music to a benefit concert for Austrians and Bavarians wounded in the battle of Hanau. The concert was held on 8 December 1813, in Vienna's old University Hall. With a worthy cause, Beethoven conducting, Vienna's finest musicians in the orchestra, and the flavor of imminent victory over Napoleon in the air, the hall soon filled with a boisterous crowd. The program was certainly appropriate: Beethoven's "entirely new" Symphony No. 7 in A Major; marches by Dussek and Pleyel played by Mälzel's "Mechanical Trumpeter" with full orchestral accompaniment; and Wellington's Victory, a programmatic "Battle Symphony" written by Beethoven for the panharmonicon but recast for a real orchestra for the occasion, a piece that, though wildly popular at the time, is now considered the absolute nadir of his mature orchestral works.

In all respects, the concert was a resounding success. A lot had changed in the ten years since the premiere of the Third Piano Concerto, and the Seventh Symphony was received rapturously by the audience. This was certainly helped by the orchestra's more extensive than usual preparations. Franz Glöggl, whom Beethoven allowed to attend rehearsals, tells how the violinists refused to play a passage, complaining that it was too difficult. Beethoven begged them to take the parts home, and practice there. "The next day at the rehearsal the passage went excellently," Glöggl writes, "and the gentlemen rejoiced that they had given Beethoven the pleasure."

Among the violinists was the composer Ludwig Spohr (1784-1859), who was astounded by Beethoven's conducting style, noting how he used "all manner of singular bodily movements. As a sforzando occurred, he tore his arms, previously crossed upon his breast, with great vehemence asunder. At piano he crouched down lower and lower to show the degree of softness. If a crescendo entered he gradually rose again and at a forte jumped into the air."

One can well imagine just how lively Beethoven's conducting must have been with a work like this. The symphony is prefaced by one of his longest and most elaborate slow introductions. But rather than foreshadow the thematic elements of the Vivace movement it prefaces, this Poco sostenuto contains a tonal blueprint for the entire symphony. The introduction ends with a long hush of intense anticipation; when the theme of the Vivace finally sounds, it's like coming home and setting out on an adventure all at once - the sheer energy of the 6/8 dotted rhythm is exhilarating.

The rhythms in each movement are obsessive, often hypnotic, but utterly individual. With a sigh we subside into the Allegretto slow movement, its funereal march rhythm pulsating unswervingly in a repeating theme of haunting beauty. In the first years of the symphony's existence, audiences almost always demanded a second hearing of the Allegretto, and the movement is no less tempting in an age with "Repeat" buttons on the remote. The Presto prances light-footedly through a delightful bacchanal, and the Finale's rhythms are almost literally pounding, as Beethoven seems to guide us to a place of lasting jubilation. Would that it were so. Still, the symphony's air of grateful welcome lingers long in the memory, reminding us of joy.