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### Sinfonia Eroica: Beethoven's Third Symphony

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SINFONIA EROICA  
Beethoven's Third Symphony.

A Study Presented  
To Miss Faye Holiman  
For Completion of  
H-491 Honors Special Studies  
March, 1973

by  
Rex Moreland Terry

## SINFONIA EROICA

### Beethoven's Third Symphony

**Thesis:** In giving his musical concept of a hero, Beethoven produced music which for grandeur, spaciousness, majesty and eloquence, dwarfs any of his other works.

#### Introduction

#### I. Origin of the Eroica

- A. Napoleon Bonaparte, the hero
- B. Influence of Napoleon's proclaiming himself Emperor

#### II. The Symphony itself

- A. Allegro
- B. Funeral march
- C. Scherzo
- D. Finale

#### Conclusion

## SINFONIA EROICA

### Beethoven's Third Symphony

✓ "If you wish to understand Beethoven, one of the things that must remain deeply rooted in your musical conscienceness is the opening of the Eroica Symphony, with its marvellous results in the recapitulation."<sup>1</sup>

In 1803 young Europe regarded Napoleon I as its Messiah and apostle of liberty, very much as it was destined for a short time, one hundred and fifteen years later, to regard Woodrow Wilson.<sup>2</sup>

The ambassador of the French Republic to the Austrian court was at that time General Bernadotte. His salon was frequented by distinguished persons of all ranks among whom was Ludwig van Beethoven, who had already expressed great admiration for the First Consul of the Republic. The suggestion was made by the General that Beethoven should honor the greatest hero of the age in a musical composition. The idea soon became a reality which the master, having battled with his political scruples, gave to the world under the title of "Sinfonia Eroica," or Heroic Symphony.

Beethoven's admiration for Napoleon was not based so much of that general's countless military victories as on his success in bringing, within a few year's space, political order out of the chaos of a bloody revolution. And the fact

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<sup>1</sup>Donald Francis Tovey, Beethoven, (New York, 1945), p. 48.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Haven Schauffler, Beethoven, The Man Who Freed Music, (New York, 1933), p. 122.

that this new order was founded on republican principles, even if they were not dictated by the First Consul himself, could only raise Bonaparte and the new regime in Beethoven's estimation. For Beethoven already held strong republican sympathies, personally inclined as he was towards unimpeded freedom and independence.<sup>3</sup>

"In the Eroica Symphony (says Ferdinand Ries), Beethoven had Buonaparte in his mind, but as he was when he was First Consul. Beethoven esteemed him greatly at the time and likened him to the greatest Roman consuls. I as well as several of his more intimate griends saw a copy of the score lying upon his table, with the word 'Buonaparte' at the extreme top of the title-page and at the extreme bottom 'Luigi van Beethoven', but not another word. Whether, and with what the space between was to be filled out, I do not know. I was the first to bring him the intelligence that Buonaparte had proclaimed himself Emperor, whereupon he flew into a rage and cried out, 'Is then he, 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!' Beethoven went to the table, took hold of the title-page by the top, tore it in two and threw it on the floor. The first page was rewritten and only then did the symphony receive the title 'Sinfonia Eroica.'<sup>4</sup>

Beethoven's original score of this symphony is, from beginning to end, disfigured by erasures and corrections, and the title-page is as follows:

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<sup>3</sup>Anton Felix Schindler, Beethoven As I Knew Him, (Chapel Hill, 1966), pp. 111-112.

<sup>4</sup>Alexander Wheelock Thayer, The Life of Ludwig van Beethoven, Vol. II, (Illinois, 1960), p. 24.

(At the top:) N.B.1. Cues for the other instruments are to be written into the first violin part.

Sinfonia Grande  
(Here two words are erased)  
804 im August  
del Sigr  
Louis van Beethoven  
Sinfonie 3 Op. 55

(At the bottom:) N.B.2. The third horn is so written that it can be played by by (sic) a primario as well as a secundario.<sup>5</sup>

One of the two words erased from the title was "Bonaparte;" and just under his own name Beethoven wrote with a lead pencil in large letters, nearly obliterated but still legible, "Composed on Bonaparte."<sup>6</sup>

The beliefs that the opening Allegro is a description of a naval battle, and that the funeral march was written in commemoration of Nelson or General Abercrombie, are mistakes, and the date "804 im August," is not that of the composition of the symphony. It is written with a different ink, darker than the rest of the title, and may have been inserted long afterwards, Beethoven's memory playing him false.<sup>7</sup> In the end, Beethoven consented to the publication of the work under the title "Sinfonia Eroica" with the sub-title 'Per festeggiare

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Elliot Forbes, Thayer's Life of Beethoven, (New Jersey, 1964), p. 25.

il souvenir d'un grand Uomo.' (To honor the memory of a great man).<sup>8</sup>

The Eroica symphony is actually a sonata for orchestra. It follows the sonata form, and consists of four movements: Allegro, Funeral March, Scherzo, and Finale. The first movement of the Eroica Symphony is the longest movement that Beethoven ever wrote, with the exception of the E flat Concerto, Op. 73.<sup>9</sup>

The epic character of the symphony becomes evident with the first two abrupt, powerful chords. Then comes the Hero theme, in the cellos, a simple four-bar melody. As it passes on to the different sections of the orchestra it gathers strength and erupts proudly and defiantly in full orchestra. The second theme is a sequence of exquisite chords in the woodwinds and violins. The idyllic nature of this passage suggests resignation, but the storm and stress are by no means over. A climax is reached as the orchestra hurls one piercing chord after another until there is only jarring dissonance. Then comes a new melody, gentle and tender, in the woodwinds. So it goes through the movement: turmoil alternating with repose. The concluding section, the coda, arrives as a kind of summation; the struggle now assumes monumental proportions. "It is," commented Romain Rolland, "the Grand Army of the soul that will not stop until it has

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<sup>8</sup>Romain Rolland, Beethoven the Creator, (New York, 1929), p. 116.

<sup>9</sup>Emil Ludwig, Beethoven, Life of a Conquerer, (New York, 1943), p. 48.

trampled the whole earth."<sup>10</sup>

Wilhelm von Lenz was convinced that the thirty-two great bangs in the syncopated portion of the development of the first movement meant that the hero, whoever he was, perished, like Caesar in the Capital, of thirty-two dagger thrusts. This of course would transpose the second half of the Allegro to the ethereal heights of the Hereafter.<sup>11</sup>

The second movement is a funeral march, the first ever to be incorporated into a symphony, although Beethoven had previously used a funeral march in a piano sonata. Never had a composer evoked a lament of such majesty. The violins introduce the death theme against throbbing surges of anguish in the basses. This grows into a plaintive melody for the strings. The death march is temporarily over. Now comes a calm and introspective trio, almost as if the hero's past accomplishments were being reviewed objectively. Against quivering triplets in the violins, an elegiac song is heard in the flutes and clarinets; after a brief emotional upheaval the song is finally unfolded in the violins with even greater poignancy. There is a short suggestion of the march theme again, and a powerful fugue emerges, its vigorous theme first pronounced by the second violins. This is the climax of the

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<sup>10</sup>Milton Cross and David Ewen, "Ludwig van Beethoven," Milton Cross' Encyclopedia of the Great Composers and Their Music, (1962), I, p. 57.

<sup>11</sup>Schauffler, op. cit., p. 123.



movement. The death theme returns, at last, in the first violins--given by fits and starts, even as the voice breaks when the pain of grief grows intolerable.<sup>12</sup>

Dr. Charles Wood discovered that if we take the first two full measures of the funeral march, undress them of their mere ornaments, revise their rhythm, and hum them backwards (a proceeding for music about death, which is a reversal of the forward drive of life) we have the beginning of the Hero theme, appropriately transposed to the minor.<sup>13</sup>

In the second movement, the theme of the middle section in C major was supposed to represent a new star of hope in Napoleon's reversed fortunes (his return to the political stage in 1815), and finally the great hero's powerful decision to withstand fate until, at the moment of surrender, he sinks to the ground and allows himself to be buried like any other mortal.<sup>14</sup>

After music of such intense feeling, the gay and brisk scherzo, with its middle section of hunting calls played by the horns, comes as a welcome relief.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Ludwig Misch, Beethoven Studies, (Norman, 1953), p. 57.

<sup>13</sup>Harold C. Schonberg, "The Man Who Set Music Free," Reader's Digest, June, 1970, p. 114.

<sup>14</sup>Schindler, op. cit., p. 116.

<sup>15</sup>Friedrich Kerst, Beethoven, The Man and The Artist, (London, 1926), p. 58.

The scherzo might conceivably be taken as a broad, brilliant fresco of common life. Possibly Beethoven's conscious mind may have thought of it as depicting the Dionysiac dance in which man's immortal will to live--carrying on in defiance of no matter what death and destruction--hands on the torch of exuberantly heroic vitality from generation to generation. Or, more concretely, the close relation of these principal themes with those of the first movement suggests that Beethoven may have had in mind an excited crowd of hero worshippers at a public festivity. To them enters the hero amid wild acclamations and turns toward them the most genial and human side of his rugged personality.<sup>16</sup>

In the finale the dramatic and emotional impact of the first movement returns. The preparations for the return to the home tonic are on as huge a scale as the rest, and the tension of hushed expectancy becomes at last so great that, while the faint remains of a dominant chord are vibrating in the air, a horn prematurely brings in the first theme with its tonic notes. Beethoven boxed the ears of one of his best friends who at a rehearsal exclaimed that the horn-player had come in wrong. This discord is one of the best illustrations of the fact that all Beethoven's harmonic devices depend for their very grammar upon their place in a highly organized and extended scheme.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Schauffler, op. cit., p. 124.

<sup>17</sup>Tovey, op. cit., p. 48.

The Prometheus theme is then plucked by the strings; this is the subject of a series of variations. The variations are climaxed by a fugal passage out of which comes a hymn for the woodwinds. It is as if the ultimate victory of the hero is being celebrated. Once, again, as in the first movement, the two main themes are developed to titanic dimensions. The opening surge returns, and after a series of vital chords the symphony comes to a powerful conclusion.<sup>18</sup>

The usually reserved Paul Henry Lang remarked that the Eroica is "one of the incomprehensible deeds in arts and letters, the greatest single step made by an individual composer in the history of the symphony and the history of music in general."<sup>19</sup>

When, in 1821, Beethoven heard of Napoleon's passing at St. Helena, he remarked with the satisfaction of a successful seer: "I composed the music for that sad event some seventeen years ago."<sup>20</sup> But, like his critics, the composer was mistaken. His music is too universal for the narrow scope of any one sad event.<sup>21</sup>

Goethe says: "The doers want to make the world secure; the thinkers want to make it logical."<sup>22</sup> The latter applies to Beethoven. He demanded logic for each political

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<sup>18</sup>Cross and Ewen, op. cit., p. 58.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>20</sup>Schauffler, op. cit., p. 124.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Schindler, op. cit., p. 112.

system according to the standards he had learned from Plato. Above all he hoped for a logical order of things in France, expecting Napoleon to apply, perhaps with some modifications, the main principles of the Platonic republic, thus laying the foundation--as he saw it--of general, world-wide happiness. May Beethoven not have had a second, more basic political objective: one which, for an intellectual like himself, was within the realms of possibility? May he not have wished to bring about a general political change in the world, including the world of art, such that the whole structure of social standards and relationships would be raised to a higher plane? We have only to remember the status of the artist in the society of that day.<sup>23</sup>

If a nation--yes, if all mankind were laid to rest it would need no more sublime strains. If the Eroica glorifies any one hero, it is Beethoven himself.

-Dr. Max Friedlander<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Schauffler, op. cit., p. 124.

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