

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Beethoven: The Nine Symphonies

Symphony no. 1 in C major, op. 21

1. *Adagio molto – Allegro con brio*
2. *Andante cantabile con moto*
3. *Menuetto. Allegro molto e vivace*
4. *Adagio – Allegro molto e vivace*

Symphony no. 2 in D major, op. 36

1. *Adagio – Allegro con brio*
2. *Larghetto*
3. *Scherzo. Allegro*
4. *Allegro molto*

In the opening bars of Beethoven's First Symphony, expectation sits high – the lack of a sure harmonic base tantalizing the ear, the tricky wind and pizzicato string chords teasing and testing out orchestral ensemble. There is, as we launch into the famous Nine, an almost mesmeric sense of things about to be. The Allegro itself settles sonorously down in C major, the tension of the slow introduction giving way to a settled, assured mood. (Beethoven's ability to assure his listeners is to be one of his more popular assets.) The gait is unmistakably his, taut and alert; and when the music threatens to settle into conventionality, it soon begins marvellously to spread and expand. The second subject, too, avoids lapsing into conventional utterance by conjuring a late-flowering theme on the oboe, haunting in G minor, just when interest is beginning to slacken. Scherzo and finale – the latter with its mock-serious start and irresistible motion – are also *echt* Beethovenian, full of joy, urgericy, and good humour. Although Beethoven was not to write an obviously recognizable minuet movement in the symphonies until the sublimely expansive Menuetto of the Eighth Symphony, there is certainly nothing conventional about this present one; and the Trio, with its skirling strings and pulsing winds, has an hypnotic power which has fascinated many musicians (the young Edward Elgar actually copied it out for further study and contemplation). The second movement does, perhaps, fall a little below expectation. The theme was probably originally conceived as a fugue subject, unsuited to the kind of melodic ramifications Beethoven had in mind; and though Beethoven makes the quiet intrusions by trumpets and drums inimitably his own, one has only to go back to, say, the Andante of Mozart's *Linz* Symphony to recognize that in matters of lyric pathos, Mozart was, by a fair margin, the finer composer.

The première of the First Symphony was a typically gargantuan musical feast which included music by Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven and also brought before the public Beethoven's Septet. The year was 1800. No century could have begun more propitiously, from the musical point of view. Oddly, according to one critic, the symphony flourished, despite a very lax reading of the concluding movements ("For all the conductor's efforts, no fire could be gotten from the orchestra"). Happily, this is not the case on the present recording, which brings playing of much fire and polish to the two final movements and prefaces them with a beautifully shaped account of the difficult-to-articulate first movement.

Contemporary taste was not entirely happy with the Second Symphony. The fashionable *Zeitung für die elegante Welt* argued that "the First Symphony is better than the Second because it is

developed with a lightness and is less forced, whereas in the Second the striving after the new and the surprising is already more apparent". It is certainly true that the Second Symphony is altogether the more formidable proposition. In writing "a grand symphony in D major", Beethoven cannot have been unaware of Mozart's luminously expansive *Prague* Symphony or the last symphony of Haydn, lyrical, exuberant and full of rustic wit. In the slow introduction of his own D major Symphony (which had its première on 5 April 1803, putting it shortly after the great Heiligenstadt Testament and during the gestation period of the *Eroica*), one senses Beethoven leaning massively out, sculpting the musical lines with a serene and ample touch. There are grimmer intrusions – that formidable D minor scale near the end of the slow introduction which looks out over the years to the first movement of the Ninth Symphony – but for the most part the Second Symphony is joyous and expansive, the earth firm beneath its feet. That it was conceived in the wake of Beethoven's recognition of impending deafness and the near suicidal despair of the Heiligenstadt Testament is only further proof of the resources of the human spirit and the capacity of Beethoven to listen for the resilient and joyful mood within.

The third movement again shows Beethoven experimenting with rhythm and blocks of sonority. It is full of intriguing patterns and sudden dynamic contrasts – witty contrasts of instrumental volume conceived long before Stravinsky wrote *Pulcinella*. Its lovely bucolic Trio has in its midst an extraordinarily rude pother of string tone launched on an abrupt unison F sharp. As it happens, the finale begins on an F sharp – with a skittish skip and a lurching trill which the composers of *Falstaff* (the opera of the symphonic poem) probably admired – and subsequently makes much ado about a note (the unison F sharp punctuates the coda) whose first rude entrance was clearly not for nothing. The polyphonic riches of the finale and, again, the generous reach of its themes – not to mention the richness of its workings-out – are wholly characteristic of this wonderfully serene and expansive piece, whose slow movement (an obvious inspiration to Schubert) is one of Beethoven's most elaborate and heartwarming inventions. As for Karajan's performance, it is appropriately radiant and expansive, full of lovely wind playing and a masterly way with the symphony's perpetually fascinating string writing, the tonal and harmonic possibilities of a symphony in D major richly exploited.

Symphony no. 3 in E flat major, op. 55 "Eroica"

1. *Allegro con brio*
2. *Marcia funebre. Adagio assai*
3. *Scherzo. Allegro vivace*
4. *Finale. Allegro molto*

Sinfonia grande, intitolata Bonaparte: a grand symphony dedicated to Bonaparte. So ran the *Eroica* Symphony's original dedication before news reached Vienna, in May 1804, that the great upholder of Republican ideals had declared himself Emperor. Beethoven flew into a rage, tore out the original inscription and substituted the words "composed to celebrate the memory of a great man". It was a bitter memory. Years later, when news of Napoleon's death reached Beethoven, his response was more temperate but no less terse: "I have already composed music for that catastrophe." But we must beware of making too much of this celebrated tale of two inscriptions. Though political idealism and the concept of heroism (Nelson's exploits had stirred Beethoven as much as Napoleon's) are important to the *Eroica*, many other strands went into the making of a symphony which bestrode the gateway to 19th-century orchestral music like the Colossus.

At the time of the conception of the *Eroica* Symphony, Beethoven – irrepressible, immensely successful, and quite determined to change the world – was brought face to face with the fact of his growing and debilitating deafness. In 1802 he wrote the great Heiligenstadt Testament, in which he openly contemplates suicide and, in terms which remain to this day majestic and awe-inspiring,

rejects them. “Plutarch taught me resignation”, he later said. “If it is possible, I shall challenge my destiny.” The fierce discords which cry out from the height of the first movement’s development section, not to mention the defiant opening chords of the symphony, speak of this pain and this resolution: “I was Hercules at the crossroads”, he said later. In other words, this symphony may have been dedicated to Napoleon, but it is, in another sense, a portrait of Beethoven – a portrait full of defiance and joy (“grant me at least one day *of pure joy*”, he wrote as a postscript to the Testament).

Looked at in this light, unproductive arguments about Beethoven’s “killing of the hero” at the end of the first movement are suitably side-stepped. Heroism involves death, hence the great *Marcia funebre* (Funeral March) with its muffled tread, its sombre colours and its strange disintegrating coda (offset by the sunlit oboe theme, in C major, and the stirring fugato, with its gloriously articulated horn line). It is a scene – solemn cortège against luring temples and crumbling Classical pediments – which David or Delacroix might have painted. But it is not all Beethoven has to say. Significantly, for the Finale Beethoven returned to a theme he had already used in his *Prometheus* ballet-music; Prometheus – another example of self-portraiture on the grandest scale? – the demi-god who made men out of clay, stole fire from Olympus and taught men to harness the creative force of the liberal arts. An heroic self-portrait in E flat, a kind of Beethovenian *Heldenleben*? Not quite. Richard Strauss’s great symphonic poem may have been directly inspired by the *Eroica*, but it fails to meet its great predecessor on one essential point: *Ein Heldenleben* is not a symphony. And putting aside Napoleon, Beethoven, and anyone or anything else commentators are eager to drag in, the *Eroica* is first and last a radically fine example of the symphony, loftiest and most powerful of musical forms.

The scope, the symphonic reach, of the *Eroica* is immense. The first movement is itself an epic journey, something which is partly a matter of length, principally a matter of tonal farsightedness. Here, range is matched with an uncanny structural poise. How superb, for instance, are the opening chords, not only as a gesture, but also in the way they redeploy the rhythmic stresses, allowing the E flat major theme itself an ease and impulsion which it cannot possibly have if you try to start the symphony at bar 3. Note also the unexpected C sharp in bar 5, an unusual cadence. Yet at the point of recapitulation, it swings the music loftily and serenely into the broad acres of F major, the violins adding a trill to their theme, the solo horn singing lyrically out.

Beethoven is said to have loved the *Eroica* more than any of his symphonies apart from the Ninth, which it interestingly resembles, in its move from defiant tragedy to transfigured joy, in its use of theme, variations, fugue, lyrical transformation and presto coda as the Finale’s substructure and, above all, in its revolutionary ability (in the first movement particularly) to generate a fierce rhythmic charge by the use of tersely formulated and tersely juxtaposed thematic material. There is also immense skill in the working-out. True, Beethoven later distilled the form of the Funeral March, making it even more succinct and expressive in the Allegretto of the Seventh Symphony; but the Seventh has a less magical transition to its Scherzo. In the *Eroica*, the horn-thronged Trio unequivocally reasserts E flat major, the home key; but the way the Scherzo dances stealthily in, *sempre pianissimo e staccato*, hushed and furtive in B flat under the shadow of the Funeral March, is a masterly stroke; and like the very end of the symphony, the Scherzo has a thrilling coda, horns and timpani gloriously voiced. As for the Promethean variations, they are full of wit (the spare, skeletal opening, all bass and no theme), eloquence (the theme itself), and power (the fugato that later drives the theme thrillingly forward). As for the great oboe-led Poco Andante (“the opening of the gates of Paradise” was Sir Donald Tovey’s description of this moment, which Karajan and his oboist realize with a rare, and rarely encountered, accuracy and reach on this present recording), here the theme, shorn of its bass, is transfigured, just as the world was by the shortly-to-be-scotched Prometheus.

All these points are here to ponder in this gloriously played and gloriously projected performance under Karajan. Recorded, along with the Ninth Symphony, at the very end of the famous 1962 Berlin sessions, this *Eroica* is one of the pinnacles of a justly celebrated cycle.

Symphony no. 4 in B flat major, op. 60

1. *Adagio – Allegro vivace*

2. *Adagio*

3. *Allegro vivace*

4. *Allegro ma non troppo*

The poet William Blake was fond of commending to his friends the “fiery line” of the paintings of Michelangelo. And it is the fiery line – the living, singing pulse of the music – which we most readily attend to in the symphonies of Beethoven and, above all, in the sublime Fourth Symphony. As poet and dreamer Beethoven was (in his early and middle periods at least) only partially successful.

In the symphonies it is arguable that Beethoven’s reflective genius is best seen in moments of temporary stasis, in brief pools of quiet at the storm’s eye – which partly helps explain why the first movement of the Fourth is so characteristic a ruirole: the play of darkness and light, energy and reflection, held in the sweetest, finest kind of dramatic and aesthetic balance. It was the German musicologist Walter Riezler who observed that the consummate harmony of the Fourth is founded in darkness. At the symphony’s start, the waters move strangely over the face of the earth. It is brooding, disorientating music, close kin to the start of the third *Rasumovsky* quartet. (Carl Maria von Weber was driven to distraction by it – “Every quarter of an hour”, he wrote in a famous polemic, “we hear three or four notes. It’s exciting!”) Yet, like all great artistic craftsmen, Beethoven had an unerring instinct as to how to begin a work. The slow, descending minims in bars 2 and 3, and the strange chromatic shift from B flat to G flat in the symphony’s very first phrase, are germ cells, seeds which, once planted, bear remarkable fruit. What follows is richly various, a movement which is both expansive and abrupt, playful yet controlled, skittish yet inveterately responsible, exuberant yet given to moments of hypnotic quiet. Shakespeare’s Peter Quince’s guileless phrase “very tragical mirth” would suit the music well.

It is a movement which is full of surprises. I know of no more eloquent melody in all Beethoven than the one which briefly emerges at the start of the development: violins and cellos, flutes, clarinets and bassoons in D major over a pizzicato bass, soaring angelically upwards and outwards, Here dreams and reality mysteriously twine (in this present performance with a special magic, for Karajan, like Furtwängler before him, gives us beautifully expansive long appoggiaturas in bars 223 and 227). Yet, apart from the merest ghost of an echo later on, the theme never returns. Then there are the silken chromatic descents and quiet hypnotic drum rolls with which Beethoven paves the way for the recapitulation. (How skilfully Beethoven uses the drum, as Bruckner was later to do: rock and lighthouse in the midst of strange harmonic seas.) And after such expansiveness, the briefest of codas – a mere sixteen bars which even Haydn, most economical of symphonists, must have wondered at.

Of the Adagio Berlioz wrote: “This movement seems to have been sighed by the Archangel Michael one day when, seized with a fit of melancholy, he stood upon the threshold of the Empyrean and contemplated the world.” It is Beethoven in Apollonian mood, with sublimely beautiful scoring which even the composer of the ballet score *Apollo* must have admired (Stravinsky was more generous to Beethoven than Shaw ever was to Shakespeare). And yet even this movement, the loveliest of the Beethoven symphonic adagios, is essentially an essay in the interplay of stillness and motion – the serene opening melody, that still unravished bride of musical quietness, made the more calm by the very persistence of the rocking accompaniment beneath it.

The third movement, boldly and wittily extended to contain a further return of the Trio, also involves a fascinating play of metres, two against three; and the finale, which allots a special role to the bassoon, who is tested and teased almost beyond measure, is a movement which also makes much play of the fact that its sweet-singing melodies seem to be constantly challenged (or harmoniously fused?) with the most animated figurations.

How untroubled is the Fourth Symphony? Not, I think, entirely. To hear a Fourth Symphony which is, in the best sense of the word, naively happy, we must go to Mahler's G major "Symphony of Heavenly Life". Beethoven's B flat major Symphony may eventually arrive at a state of gamesome, gambolling joyfulness, but it is, as I have already observed, a symphony founded in darkness. Significantly, the Fourth Symphony was written whilst the Fifth was put aside. It was only after the completion in 1806 of the Fourth, in which joy is unambiguously won out of the most ambiguous promptings, that Beethoven was able to go back to the Fifth and complete it – the transition from ghostly scherzo to victorious finale, martial and full of splendour, wrought now with an incomparable mastery that its smiling predecessor had so generously bestowed.

Of Herbert von Karajan's recordings of this symphony, the present one is perhaps the fieriest and the most obviously lyrical, Grecian and golden-toned, the spirits of Dionysus and Apollo held in a rapturous balance.

Symphony no. 5 in C minor, op, 67

1. *Allegro con brio*
2. *Andante con moto*
3. *Allegro*
4. *Allegro*

The transition from scherzo to finale in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is one of the tautest and truest of all musical transformations. Yet, as with so much in Beethoven, it was a hard-won victory. The transformation is, in every sense, a critical moment, whether one sees it as an enactment of the revolutionary age's transcendent spirit; or as Beethoven's own personal ascent from within, the moment in which the composer – increasingly deaf and increasingly isolated – moves from the gloom of the mind's inner landscapes to greet with joy the public world; or, simply, as a wonderful appropriation of the force of minor and major tonality. All these things are here. Sonata form, with its theme, counter-theme, crisis and synthesis, is the perfect mirror of the Hegelian dialectic, a significant enactment, in music, of the political and philosophical spirit of the age.

The beginning of the scherzo of the Fifth Symphony fascinates, as Berlioz once put it, like the gaze of a mesmeriser; and the pizzicato link to the passage on the drum takes us into a spectral, twilight world from which there seems to be no escape. Against this background the drum sounds its repeated low C, a note so laden with the feel of C minor at this point in the score that at each new hearing, all thoughts of a resolution are, to normal sense, more or less unthinkable folly (and there are some harmonically ambiguous asides on the basses and cellos to reckon with, too). At each new hearing the psychological weight of all these factors is such that we feel afresh the impossibility of the task of transformation. Yet a swift, short crescendo, and the launching of a wonderfully proud march, by turns confident and expansive, is utterly compelling. The C of C minor, we realize with hindsight, was also the C of C major. In the midst of sorrow there is joy, and out of despair victory springs. In a fallen world in which pain so strangely and necessarily coexists with happiness, Beethoven's music rings true in terms which a great mass of people intuitively understand. "Gusts of splendour, gods and demi-gods contending with vast swords, colour and fragrance broadcast in the field of battle, magnificent

victory, magnificent death” – E. M. Forster’s description catches the majesty of the march, the *éclat terrible* of its war-born mood.

Not that the march is itself enough; for at the moment of recapitulation Beethoven has still more to say. The music boils to white heat and we find ourselves intoxicated, exhilarated beyond measure – until a doubt begins to nag. For surely the dominant preparation for the return of the march is too protracted? And so it proves, for the spectral dance of the third movement makes its ghostly return. It is an inspired touch, adding perspective to what might otherwise be too liberal a romp. It is precisely because the goblins are there amid the gusts of splendour, threatening presences in a cosmos which is far from stable, that we, like the ever-aware Mr. Forster, are able to feel that, as far as this world goes, Beethoven is an artist who will always tell us the truth. Beethoven’s sketchbooks show how manfully he laboured over the celebrated first movement, how persistently he worked on the fermatas – the held notes of the opening – until they became like tidal barriers holding back the potent onrush of sound. (No wonder Wagner thought them imbued with force enough “to arrest the waves and lay bare the very ground of the ocean”!) How boldly Beethoven eventually lopped off an array of concluding chords, leaving the coda after the final statement of the motto wonderfully terse, the oboe crying out plaintively. As a movement it is both grand and economical. Even the lyrical second subject retains a tautness; and when the music slows mid-way and a sublime oboe cadenza sings its way through the texture, the mood is heightened, not diminished: passion and pathos become one until, with a lovely outflow of feeling, the music moves off once more on a short, singing crescendo. And yet in the midst of so much drama – “Fate knocking at the door”, as Beethoven is said to have remarked to his friend and biographer, Anton Schindler – one notices with surprise how harmonically stable much of the exposition is; and how it is a movement, for all its dynamism, which is wholly bereft of syncopation – a movement which conjures rhythmic tension (in the mystically beautiful passage for alternating chords on winds and strings) with a simplicity of means on which the composer of *The Rite of Spring* gazed with awe.

Herbert von Karajan made his London début with the Philharmonia Orchestra in 1948 in a concert which included the C minor Symphony. It is a work he has always conducted with a thrilling directness and unforced splendour, the music’s formidable interpretative difficulties squarely faced and brilliantly resolved with no recourse to spurious “traditions”. This celebrated Berlin recording soon proved to be one of the outstanding records of its time. Played with consummate skill by the Berlin Philharmonie, it moves from the outset like a sped arrow from the bowstring, soaring, majestic, ineffably certain of aim.

Symphony no. 6 in F major, op. 68 “Pastoral”

1. *Erwachen heiterer Empfindungen bei der Ankunft auf dem Lande*

Allegro ma non troppo

2. *Szene am Bach*

Andante molto mosso

3. *Lustiges Zusammensein der Landleute*

Allegro

4. *Gewitter – Sturm*

Allegro

5. *Hirtengesang. Frohe und dankbare Gefühle nach dem Sturm*

Allegretto

“Nature I loved, and next to Nature, Art.” This famous epigram by the English essayist, Walter Savage Landor, would have been approved of by Beethoven. Stories of Beethoven’s devotion to the countryside are legion. “He loved to be alone with nature, to make her his only confidante”, wrote the

Countess Therese von Brunsvik. In Vienna he once refused to take lodgings in a house when he discovered there were no trees around it. "I love a tree more than a man", he is said to have retorted tersely. Like Dr. Johnson, who had so sturdily trodden the highways and byways of Scotland, Beethoven liked to experience nature in all its moods, to feel the wind, rain, and sun on his face. At Baden it is said that he once angrily refused the offer of an umbrella, though only his eminence can have induced hostesses to smile at his unendearing habit of shaking the water off the brim of his hat all over the furniture after one of his umbrellaless walks.

On his many walks round Heiligenstadt and Nussdorf, beyond Vienna, it was the broad meadows, rocky clefts, elm-girt woodland paths and murmuring, rushing brooks which were Beethoven's constant delight. The beauty of the natural scene often moved him to religious fervour. "O God, what majesty is in woods like these", he wrote in his diary in 1815. "In the height, there is peace – peace to serve Him." It is a remark which explains the benedictory mood of the coda of the *Pastoral* Symphony's finale before the horn's final, muted, autumnal call.

Of earlier efforts at natural scene painting by composers as various as Vivaldi and Haydn, Freystädler and Knecht, Beethoven was largely contemptuous, rather as the poet or landscape painter is contemptuous of the photographer. It is true that he had made his own detailed observations: "The deeper the water, the deeper the note", he scrawled on a sketch for the symphony's "Scene by the Brook", with a care that Leonardo da Vinci would have admired. But it was not Beethoven's intention to use the symphony for purely realistic ends. Even the storm, which Beethoven evokes with a sublimity and force that makes the efforts of Rossini and Verdi seem puerile, and the opening of *Die Walküre* casual, is, in essence, no more than an extended introduction to 'the finale, a formally cogent opportunity for another of his great imaginative moments of transition (a moment realized with a special beauty and intensity in this present performance). And the unlikely congregation of bird sounds at the end of the "Scene by the Brook" is as much a Classical cadenza as it is a piece of pictorial realism.

Beethoven summed all this up when he wrote, in a famous sentence, "more a matter of feeling than of painting in sounds", In other words, it was the spontaneous activity of mind and imagination in which Beethoven was interested; and in this he was at one with his exact and eminent contemporary, William Wordsworth. When Wordsworth revised his long, autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, he clearly saw in retrospect what Beethoven, writing his *Pastoral* Symphony, was immediately aware of: that his art was charting, not landscape as an end in itself, but the interrelationship between landscape and the conscious mind. Thus Wordsworth's revised poem is stripped of narrative filling – more feeling than painting.

Wordsworth had to evolve a form; Beethoven's was to hand – for the *Pastoral*, a perfectly wrought Classical symphony, uses Classical forms and Classical harmony with great resourcefulness. Here, Classical form and Romantic feeling – a variation on the age-old polarity between metropolitan sophistication and provincial spontaneity – are perfectly fused in a way which Wordsworth, who was not above patronizing his subjects, never quite achieved. In the finale of the *Pastoral* Symphony Beethoven, the skilled musician, *becomes* the songful shepherd, inhabits the landscape. It is a miraculous act of union – something which only music can achieve – as well as being a great song of thanksgiving.

Some early critics, baffled by music at once revolutionary and simple, complained of the length of the work and of its repetitiveness. Yet Beethoven's use of repeated figures, especially in the first movement, is one of the secrets of its greatness. The brief, organically changing themelets, the bare tonic-and-dominant shapes, the bold deployment of diatonic harmonies, matched to a slow rate of harmonic change and a most ingenious overlapping of phrase lengths – all make for a sense of natural

continuity and, in this urgent Berlin reading of 1962, a live, near-apprehensive joy in the wonder of the scene as it bursts on our all too bemused gaze.

Everywhere, in fact, Beethoven's craft is breathtaking. In the "Scene by the Brook", the detached violin phrases seem to set the observer apart, while the lower strings, which include two solo cellos, conjure the sound and continuity of the brook itself. Voices enter in sequence (a characteristic effect in this symphony) as the movement unfolds, diversifying melodic and harmonic interest. Expressive turns, arpeggios and a series of beautifully judged key changes all add to the effect: B flat major (well established already in the first movement and thus effecting a sense of natural continuity), G major, and the subdominant, E flat major, associated elsewhere in Beethoven with heroism but here, as Tovey brilliantly observed, "the key of shade".

The scherzo's genius is self-explanatory; and yet how Beethoven laboured, as Dvorák was later to do, over what seem to be the most winningly spontaneous of his effects – such as the exquisite contouring of the oboe's principal theme. This joyous, drowsy scene (the bassoon asleep, the players prodding themselves into action as Beethoven watched rural musicians doing in Heiligenstadt on high days and holidays), a scene which Bruegel could have painted, is, like the rest of the *Pastoral* Symphony, superbly crafted. Debussy, who once grumpily observed that it was more profitable to see the sun rise than to listen to Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony, should have known better.

Symphony no. 7 in A major, op. 92

1. *Poco sostenuto – Vivace*

2. *Allegretto*

3. *Presto*

4. *Allegro con brio*

There is a celebrated letter of the year 1810 in which Bettina Brentano enthuses to the poet Goethe about a recent meeting with Beethoven. "When I open my eyes", Beethoven had announced to her, "I must sigh ... I must despise the world which does not know that music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy." "Music", he continues, in words which will interest all those who feel in the finale of the Seventh Symphony a certain Bacchanalian element, "is the wine which inspires us to new generative processes, and I am the Bacchus who presses out this glorious wine to make mankind spiritually drunken."

According to Beethoven's effusive amanuensis, Anton Schindler, the Seventh Symphony's première was "one of the most important moments in the life of the master, the moment at which all the hitherto divergent voices united in proclaiming him worthy of the laurel". Though the whole symphony was received with acclaim, it was the second movement, the elegiac *Allegretto*, which struck the most responsive chord in the minds and imaginations of the audience. It was encored and demanded *da capo* wherever and whenever it was played. In Paris, it was used to sustain the (then ailing) Second Symphony; and it was even inserted into the Eighth, ousting the popular *Allegretto scherzando*. The influential *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* hailed the movement as "the crown of modern instrumental music", and Schubert, ever alive to Romantic pathos, used its metre and its mood in several of his most highly-charged orchestral, instrumental and chamber works. This enormous popularity is interesting. In form, the *Allegretto* is not unlike the Funeral March of the *Eroica*. There is the same march pulse, a similar overall plan, a central fugato and a disintegrating end. But the quicker pulse (scrupulously observed by Karajan in this present performance), the austere beauty of the scoring – something which is a feature of the entire symphony – and, above all, the sense of this being a rare distillation of the mood of heroic pathos, all seem to have made for a swifter than usual osmosis between the composer's and the public's own inner imaginings.

In spite of being programmed at its première with the much less demanding *Wellington's Victory* symphony, pictorial and patriotic (a work whose literalism might have made even the composer of the *Sinfonia Domestica* stare), and in spite of Beethoven's antics on the rostrum, faithfully chronicled for us by Spohr ("as a *sforzando* occurred, he tore his arms with great vehemence asunder ... at the entrance of a *forte* he jumped in the air", and so on), the première was a great success. The orchestra, led by Schuppanzigh, and including such men as Spohr, Hummel, Meyerbeer, Salieri, Romberg and the great doublebass virtuoso Dragonetti, played (according to Beethoven himself) with great fire and expressive power. And yet, the charismatic Allegretto apart, is not this a fierce, revolutionary work which one might have expected to daunt contemporary audiences, just as Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* did almost exactly one hundred years later? When Weber heard the chromatic bass line in the coda of the first movement, he declared the composer ripe for the madhouse; and there are, in the finale, undertones of war, a terrible eruptive power which may well remind us that 1812 was as traumatic a year in European history as, say, 1916. Yet for all its fire, the Seventh is not at all an iconoclastic work. "Myself I must remake", wrote W. B. Yeats, greatest of all the 20th-century poets; and Beethoven, writing at a white heat of inspiration, seems to echo that cry in the Seventh Symphony. For there is about the finished work – so organic, so inevitable – a self-evident and self-delighting wholeness. The finale may well be Bacchic, but there is here nothing of the purely destructive frenzy of the Maenads in Sophocles' great drama on the subject. In this, respect, it is interesting to note how often C major crops up during the symphony (it first appears just 22 bars into the searingly beautiful slow introduction, sung rapturously out on the oboe), with a force, a subtlety and an inevitability to which the Fifth Symphony, for instance, can hardly lay equal claim.

Like Toscanini before him, Herbert von Karajan has always had a special affection for the Seventh Symphony and a special genius in interpreting it. "Karajan's Seventh is magnificent", wrote the influential *Record Guide* of Karajan's early Philharmonia recording of the symphony. "The playing throughout the evening was truly superb, every instrumentalist bowing and blowing as though for dear life ... We could hear things in the score which usually we are obliged to seek out by eyes reading it", wrote Neville Cardus in *The Guardian* when, shortly before making this present recording, the Berliners played the symphony in London in 1961. As a young conductor, Karajan was convinced that traditional interpretations of the symphony had taken from it much of its elemental fire. Remembering Mahler's dictum that the clear articulation of every note marks the upper limit of a quick tempo; Karajan has striven to bring a fiery tempo and a vital articulation of every note into harmony with one another. In achieving this, he has produced a fierce, yet intensely lyrical, reading of the symphony, a true apotheosis of the dance, a telling example of the reconciliation of orchestral virtuosity with the deep, dark, dionysiac forces which sustain this most elemental of Classical symphonies.

Symphony no. 8 in F major, op. 93

1. *Allegro vivace e con brio*
2. *Allegretto scherzando*
3. *Tempo di Menuetto*
4. *Allegro vivace*

Few symphonies are launched in a more exhilarating fashion than Beethoven's Eighth. Like the poet Donne, Beethoven tosses his material down before us with an irresistible plainness. The sketches show Beethoven paring everything into shape, removing a launching ostinato figure, tightening tripartite excursions, giving the music its lean athletic shape, its snapping vitality, its coruscating wit. Foreshortening of material was not Beethoven's only concern, though. The Eighth Symphony, for all its apparent brevity, is at times generously expansive. The wonderful Menuetto is started by a

powerfully ruminative preamble on strings and bassoons; the Trio, with its bucolic horn writing, is as leisurely as anything you will find in the length and breadth of the *Pastoral* Symphony. Beethoven referred to himself as being in an unbuttoned mood – *aufgeknöpft* – in the Eighth Symphony; and so he is, though in a host of different ways. At times he is as expansive as a well-fed alder-man. At other times the humour is rough, abrupt, taunting, teasing the listener almost beyond endurance. What are we to make of the C sharp which interrupts the finale after just 17 bars? As the movement goes its high-spirited way, its progress seems to be a model of decorum, albeit touched with the drollest effects. (The transition on timpani and bassoons is an effect which Haydn would have delighted in.) The C sharp remains, though, a spectre at the feast. And it returns, along with a cluster of remarkable alarms and excursions, precisely at the point at which we imagine the movement to be drawing to its close. At its behest, the music switches alarmingly into F sharp minor, silencing drums and natural brass, who are unable to utter in so foreign a key. Of course, all ends happily, though the recklessness of the coda and its sheer length (the tail more or less wagging the dog) are themselves comical in a symphony which everywhere purports to be a model of decorum, economy, and (in the close of the first movement and the Allegretto scherzando) wit.

No wonder that Goethe, when he encountered Beethoven for the first time, thought him “an entirely uncontrolled person”! Artistically, though, Beethoven is thrillingly in control. How irresistibly he builds towards the first movement’s central *fortissimo* (*fff*), a fearsome point of arrival (Sir George Grove calls it “a wild tornado”) with cellos and basses singing out the movement’s principal theme in the cellarage. Yet Beethoven’s triple *forte* is achieved with the standard Classical orchestra (no trombones), and how deftly the woodwinds assuage the storm with theme and counter-theme. All this puts the music more or less unequivocally in the line of its great predecessor, the Seventh Symphony – a point which has not been lost on Herbert von Karajan, whose reading of the Eighth has always been intensely thrilling, a performance which abates no jot of the outer movements’ inexorable energy, yet which is wonderfully easy and assured within.

Symphony no. 9 in D minor, op. 125

1. *Allegro ma non troppo, un poco maestoso*

2. *Molto vivace*

3. *Adagio molto e cantabile*

4. *Presto*

Presto – “*Freunde, nicht diese Töne!*” – *Allegro assai*

Final chorus from Schiller’s “Ode to Joy”

At what point Beethoven finally settled on Friedrich Schiller’s *Ode an die Freude* (Ode to Joy) as a proper subject for the end of his grand new German Symphony is not wholly clear; but it was nearly thirty years after the first recorded reference to the Ode in connection with him. On 26 January 1793, the poet’s sister, Charlotte Schiller, had been told in a letter that “a young man whose talents are universally praised and whom the Elector has sent to Haydn in Vienna proposes to compose Schiller’s *Freude*”. The correspondent added: “I expect something perfect, for as far as I know the young man is wholly devoted to the great and to the sublime.” How apt the phrase is! All it neglects to note is that there is a tide in the affairs of men; that genius is often slow to mature; and that Europe would have to wait long and suffer much before Beethoven gave it the setting of Schiller’s Ode which remains to this day the emblem of its freedom and a mainstay of its will to survive.

Yet we must beware of regarding the finale of the Ninth Symphony as an Ode to Freedom inspired by liberation hymns of the period – a genre piece from an aspiring and war-torn age. The tenor’s breezy *Alla marcia* speaks of a hero going to conquest; but the passage is not about war. It concerns, rather, the motion of the stars across the heavens. Ralph Vaughan Williams thought the

passage impossibly vulgar: “Beethoven obviously considered that the stars were jolly good fellows, fond of a rousing chorus, a glass of beer and a kiss from the barmaid.” It was his little joke. Of course, Beethoven is concerned with common humanity. When he rejects the themes from the first three movements and fashions for the basses a passage of inimitable recitative, he is preparing the way for the baritone’s great cry of “Freude!”, a cry addressed to the whole of mankind. And the great melody which Beethoven so gloriously fashioned for the joy theme itself speaks to men and women of all complexions. Yet the finale of the Ninth Symphony in no way depicts, as do certain passages in the works of Berlioz and Mahler, blue-denimed workers marching and countermarching along the boulevards. Sublimity is the keynote, with Beethoven instinctively recognizing the depth of inspiration of Schiller’s Ode (a poem written out of profound joy in a deep and abiding friendship – “All who can call at least one soul theirs/Join in our song of praise”).

The result is a great spiritual drama arising out of a musical and theological dialectic already familiar from the *Missa Solemnis*. Here, an overwhelming sense of the majesty of God is pitted against suffering humanity, prostrate and self-abasing (one thinks of the timelessly beautiful Adagio in the Ninth Symphony’s finale, “Ihr stürzt nieder”, with its divided violas – lovingly attended to by Karajan – basses, clarinets, flutes and bassoons). Out of such conflict a new order is born: in Beethoven’s terms, a rousing fugue with perilously high lines for the sopranos, blazing with light and an intoxicated sense of joy.

Thanks to film and television, many people from many nations and creeds have not only heard this incomparable Karajan performance of the Ninth Symphony, but have seen it, too: an evidently joyous interpretation, the more potent for being born in Berlin, a beleaguered city whose great musical traditions radiate brightly out into a troubled world. Karajan’s reading of the first movement has great tragic intensity – a reading, like Toscanini’s, which catches in full measure the music’s essential force: “the broadest and most spacious processes”, as Sir Donald Tovey brilliantly asserts, “set side by side with the tersest and most sharply contrasted statements”.

The scherzo, too, has great demonic energy – how early audiences in Beethoven’s time were roused to fear and frenzy by the powerful timpani strokes; and the Adagio, with its marvellous sense of reaching out, its richly worked set of double variations and its quiet, circling motion only temporarily crossed by the sternest summons, is also finely served.

Had Beethoven followed his own precedent in the Piano Sonatas op. 109 and op. 111, he might have rested his case here, in a well of quiet. The Ninth Symphony, though, goes further, reaching out for that quality of joy which will unite all creation in ecstatic song. Here heaven and earth are joined as, towards the end of the finale, the soprano rises to a single, sublime high B, crowning the solo quartet’s *a cappella* meditation on joy’s mystic, hovering mood, before the music – in shapes happily reminiscent of the cavortings of Papageno and Papagena in Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte* – races and hosannas to its close, a joy and spiritual salve to all who hear it.

Richard Osborne