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No. 1 ∞ **BEETHOVEN SYMPHONIES** ∞ *No. 8*



MONTEUX / VIENNA PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

BEETHOVEN SYMPHONIES

No. 1 in C, Op. 21

No. 8 in F, Op. 93

Pierre Monteux

Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra

(Recorded in Vienna)



Beethoven was thirty and the nineteenth century had just begun when the First Symphony was given its world première in Vienna. One might say that in one powerful stroke he said goodbye to his youth and to the eighteenth century. Already the stamp of a new personality, bold, confident, mature, is on this symphony. Scholars may point to the influence of Mozart and Haydn that pervades its four movements. Beethoven, admittedly, is still in the debt of the two Austrian masters. To a large extent he retains the mould they so exquisitely perfected between them. Even the content, in its jovial rush of theme and sunny spontaneity, reminds one now of Haydn, now of Mozart. But the brave new voice is already audible. The strength and defiance of rhythm are the mark of a new master. So are the daring shifts of key and color, the mingling and alternation of choirs—the hearty impetus of motion. The over-all mood of the First Symphony is sprightly and willful. Blessed with life-loving vigor, Beethoven at thirty is ready for anything.

Ready, for one thing, for the critics who pounced wrathfully on his lapses from grace. How they screamed about his audacities of key and discord! “Confused explosions” and “barbaric dissonances” they said of the symphony in Vienna and Paris, as if it were a threat to the whole edifice of music. And what was this impertinent badinage that called itself a “Minuet”? There was the joker of Beethoven’s symphony, or, to be more precise, the “joke.” For with this third movement Beethoven launched the symphonic “scherzo” on its jocund path. The elegant form remains, but the brash, fresh spirit of caprice is new, and wholly Beethoven’s. The unprecedented modulations, the crisp colloquies of

winds and strings, the sly, good-hearted fun signal the birth of a new century in music and a new movement in the symphony. The thought of Haydn, more than of Mozart, darts fitfully through the bumptious finale. Something of Haydn’s bustling drollery is here—though again the shape and force of theme are Beethoven’s, as are the brisk expectancy and garrulous high spirits.

Here, then, was Beethoven’s manifesto. If there was no room in the eighteenth-century symphony for a tumultuous temperament like his, he would make it. With the First Symphony we already sense the loosening of bonds. The stamp of the rebel spirit is even deeper on the Second Symphony. With the “Eroica” the liberation is complete—for Beethoven and for music. There he achieves a startling new logic and grandeur of purpose, and moves on to new triumphs. Beethoven’s nine symphonies are the backbone of the repertory. Taken as a unit, they yield to nothing in creative magnitude—except perhaps the plays of Shakespeare and the mind of Da Vinci. Through all nine symphonies pulses the manifold spirit of affirmation that was Beethoven’s. Each bears a distinct personality of its own. Yet there are special affinities among them—the Third and the Seventh, the Fifth and the Ninth, the Second and the Fourth, the First and the Eighth.

Like the First Symphony, the Eighth is almost entirely cheerful in mood. After the epic pronouncements of the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Symphonies, we find Beethoven once more relaxed and playful. There is much bantering discourse, a jolting incongruity of mood at times, and in the rondo finale what can only be described as Homeric horseplay. The humor is by turns mischievous and boisterous,

always frank and joyous, and always within the grip of a robust esthetic design. Fourteen intervening years of struggle and suffering have brought Beethoven far from the blithe elegance and gleeful levity of the First Symphony. The unquenchable *joie de vivre* of a man given to jocular utterance and prankish humor now emerges in broader and richer form. And where, but in a setting of exalted banter, would one find such delicious drollery as the second movement—based, so we are told, on a facetious canon in honor of Maelsel, the inventor of the metronome? One senses the good-natured spoofing in the staccato ticking, as of a mechanical time-beater. The pert clock-like vivacity of the movement even brought a smile to the face of that bilious philosopher Schopenhauer. Like the rest of the symphony, this Allegretto scherzando may be relied on to induce a pervasive sense of well-being. Apart from its other attractions to the mind and the spirit, the Eighth Symphony is an invitation to fun.

Notes by LOUIS BIANCOLLI

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