



BEETHOVEN
"EROICA"

MONTEUX / VIENNA PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA



Rubens—Study of a Nude Male Torso

Everytime I conduct Beethoven's Eroica
I am deeply impressed by the magnitude
of its profoundly human qualities, its nobility
and its grandeur

Pierre Monteux

Most of the legend of the *Eroica* is true. It could hardly be otherwise, with this symphony that carries its own truth so high and mightily. Even its true story is almost needless to tell—it tells its own so much better—but it is an interesting one. Beethoven conceived the symphony with Napoleon in mind. Throughout the work's composition its title page bore only the word "Bonaparte." Then, in 1804, the First Consul of the French Republic made himself Emperor. The hero had chosen to become a tyrant. Beethoven tore up his title page and rewrote it: "Heroic Symphony composed to celebrate the memory of a great man."

But the symphony is historic in more than its background alone. It was the first product of a task this strange, great man had set for himself, which was to turn music into what I must call (for want of a more exciting term) a philosophical and psychological instrument. Beethoven was not only a consummate artist. He was a philosopher; he belonged to the liberal line of thought that extended a lifetime from John Locke to the framers of the American Constitution. These men thought Man was perfectible, that the human spirit was essentially noble and needed only freedom to achieve the heights. It was a thrilling doctrine, one full worthy of the services of Western culture's greatest art. Beethoven thought music might do something that close-reasoned words sometimes cannot: strike directly and explicitly at the emotions. Thus, in a very real sense, his task was to create a whole new language. And, beginning with the *Eroica*, he did.

The Bonapartist dedication was in a way superficial. Napoleon—as First Consul—was a hero to all

European republicans. But as Beethoven pondered and worked, more and more the nobility in his measures spread to take in every man. Napoleon was given the dedication; the message was for us.

"Nobility" is an inescapable word when one speaks of the *Eroica*. You will note that Pierre Monteux uses it in his statement above. It is more fitting than "heroism." Nobility is what begets heroism. The action in the last two movements of the symphony is not gigantically heroic, but the nobility is there, the kind that Beethoven hoped was latent in every human mind and heart.

The main theme of the first movement shows one of Beethoven's most remarkable gifts: to be simple. It is not really a tune. It is very much like what little boys make up to whistle as they frolic home at twilight. It is natural. It grows up, going through tremendous adventures. It is victorious, and it is the assurance of victory to its hearers.

In the Funeral March, the Hero is still with us: this is mourning for someone great and good who is gone. And yet to me it still seems a little too big for one man. Then Beethoven relieves and revives us with a Scherzo of electric energy, pure rhythmic drive. In its middle is a wonderful Trio—a contrasting little movement—with virtuoso horns making it sound like a hunting party, sunny and full of pleasant peril, especially for the horn players.

Some critics have professed puzzlement about the Finale, which consists of an introduction, theme and variations. They note that Beethoven had used the theme before: in a set of contra dances, a set of piano variations, and in the finale of the ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus*. I cannot feel baffled at all by this.

Beethoven used dances in a serious way all his life. It seems to me that the key is in Prometheus, who stole god-fire and brought soul to the clods which were to become Man, whereupon they clumsily started their move toward full humanity. Note the introductory theme in the *Eroica* finale. It is a passage of the loveliest, most earnest stumbling imaginable. Prometheus, the kindly Titan (our Hero), has moved on, his task done. Now it is up to the Creatures, so to speak.

Notes by JOHN CONLY

Mr. Conly is an editor of *The Atlantic* and a contributing editor of *High Fidelity*.

PIERRE MONTEUX

The great French conductor is one of the most famous and beloved figures in the entire musical world. Dean of living conductors, Monteux has led virtually every great symphony orchestra both here and abroad. He began his podium career in 1911 as conductor of Diaghileff's Ballet Russe, and won quickly his reputation as a superb technician of the baton. Since then he has become equally renowned as a conductor of the symphonic literature and opera.

After touring the United States in 1916 with the Diaghileff ballet, Monteux remained here to conduct at the Metropolitan Opera for two seasons, and then to conduct the Boston Symphony Orchestra for five years. After a decade of activity in Europe, he returned to America as conductor of the San Francisco Symphony. He resigned in 1952 to devote his time to guest conducting; however, in 1961, at the age of eighty-six, he accepted the directorship of the London Symphony.

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