

Beethoven SYMPHONY No. 2, IN D, Op. 36

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The general nature of the second of Beethoven's symphonies has been a source of wonder to those who would examine the circumstances of its creation. Completed in 1802, in the composer's thirty-second year, this essentially joyous expression emerged as a fierce negation of the depression and despair that enveloped him. This was the year of the famous *Heiligenstadt Testament*, directed to his brothers, that letter of suicidal gloom which bewails the composer's increasing deafness.

"Born with a fiery, lively temperament," he wrote, "inclined ever for the amusements of society, I early was forced to isolate myself, to lead a solitary life. I now and again I tried for once to give the go-by to all this, O how rudely was I repulsed by the redoubled mournful experience of my defective hearing; but not yet could I bring myself to say to people, 'Speak louder, shout, for I am deaf.' O how should I then bring myself to admit the weakness of a sense which ought to be more perfect in me than in others, a sense which I once possessed in the greatest perfection, a perfection such as few assuredly of my profession have yet possessed it in—O I cannot do it! Forgive me, then, if you see me shrink away when I would find mingle among you..."

The long and pathetic utterance from which we quote is dated October 6, and marks the end of the summer spent by the composer in the beautiful surroundings of Heiligenstadt near Vienna. Among other blows had come the crushing news that the young Giulietta Guicciardi, whose hand he had asked in marriage, was wedded to another. This only increased his misery and made him lonelier than ever.

"Yes," he ends, "the beloved hope that I brought here with me—at least in some degree to be cured—that hope must now altogether desert me. As the autumn leaves fall withered, so this hope too is for me withered up; almost as I came here, I go away. Even the lofty courage which often animated me in the summer days, has vanished..."

And yet, before and after these tragic words were written, Beethoven was engaged in writing his Second Symphony, a seemingly spontaneous expression of joy! In the lonely fate of almost insurmountable obstacles he turned to his teeming sketch-books, working and reworking with a determination born of some new, granite-like faith. Among other compositions of the same period find the three Violin Sonatas, Op. 30, the first two Sonatas of Op. 31 and the Bagatelles, Op. 33.

One year separated the composition of the *First* and *Second Symphonies*, but in that year the individual stamp of Beethoven was asserting itself. While the *First Symphony* (along with other works of its time) also spoke of lighthearted gaiety, it still represented a cautious working within the rococo framework of Haydn and Mozart. Flashes of the mature Beethoven dart

San Francisco
Symphony Orchestra
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Pierre Monteux
Conductor

through the robust pages of the *Second Symphony*, and even though the difference between the two does not seem as striking to us today, it was far too great a leap for the audiences of Beethoven's day. One critic maintained that the *First Symphony* was more valuable because it was "written with unaffected ease, while in the *Second*, the striving for new and striking movement is more conspicuous." This symphony is of much greater length than its predecessor.

The first performance took place on April 5, 1803, at Vienna. The orchestra was an improvised body of musicians recruited especially for the occasion. The *D Major Symphony* formed only a part of a lengthy program which also contained the *First Symphony*, a new *cantata* (*The Mount of Olives*) and a new piano-forte concerto (the *Third*, in *C Minor*). The final rehearsal, held in the day of the performance, and beginning at eight in the morning, was described by the biographer, Ries, as "terrible..." At half after two everybody was exhausted and more or less disoriented. "...Somewhere the performance was gotten through, the featured *cantata* not faring too well and the *Second Symphony* doomed to ruthless criticism. The concert did, however, net the composer a tidy sum.

The *Second Symphony* opens with a stately introduction (*Adagio molto*) of much more extended length (33 bars) than that of the *First* (12 bars). While the method of approach is still suggestive of Haydn's symphonic introductions, a bold element of romantic freedom unfolds itself here in the richness of the music's texture. In this introduction we also find a surprising anticipation of the *Ninth Symphony*. With the main body of the movement, *Allegro con brio*, a buoyant theme asserts itself, to dominate with energetic brilliance. The second subject has the character of military precision and reminded Rolland of a "revolutionary summons to arms." decidedly apropos of the restless Vienna of 1803. The

eventual development of these and other materials of the exposition section is filled with intricate harmonic and instrumental effects. The general summing up of the movement's main ingredients ends to present them in condensed form. A bright coda serves the first portion of the work.

In direct contrast to the sharp lines of the *Allegro con brio* is the elegant and luxuriant *Larghetto* which follows. The substance of this movement is also framed in sonata form. Strings and then wind instruments state the lovely first theme, which is then extended briefly. The secondary subject, which maintains the musical character as that of its predecessor, is further enhanced by the use of gentle syncopation. With the appearance of the closing material, given out by cellos and second violins, the poignant, almost mysterious, quality of the movement has been established. The development section begins with a modification of the first theme in the minor and continues with subtle ornamentation of all the materials involved. From here until the end of the movement its rich, songlike beauty reveals itself in exquisite detail. This movement has been arranged not only in instrumental chamber-music form, but for voices as well.

With the *Third* of the *Second Symphony*, one of Beethoven's greatest innovations comes into being—the movement of quick laughter and wild, headlong humor. Forshadowing the virile, dynamic scherzos to appear in later symphonies, that of the *Second* fairly dances in its varied color changes. The Trio section, continuing in the tonality already established, begins with a lightly textured melody that plunges almost immediately into a tremendously re-enforced repetition of the same. The sudden dynamic, instrumental and modulatory changes have caused one writer to comment of this movement, "The music sometimes seems almost to fly at your throat."

The *Finale*, *Allegro molto*, is technically in sonata form. Its first subject is a rollicking, forthright expression; its second, while not quite so lively, is filled, nevertheless, with the rhythmic motion which dominates the movement from the beginning. Bertini was to refer to it as "a second scherzo in two time, and its playfulness was perhaps something still more delicate, more piquant." Contemporary criticism called it "a gross monster, a pierced chord which will not die, and even in losing its blood, wild with rage, still deals vain but furious blows with its tail, stiffened by the last agony." To the first audiences who heard this work, the last movement in particular was much too capricious to be taken without shocked discomfort. Their difficulty in listening was merely shocked by the musicians' difficulty in mastering the entire composition, which, in Beethoven's day, was more demanding than is generally realized.

LONG 33 1/3 PLAY

Hand & O.E.A.
Long 33 1/3



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PIERRE MONTEUX
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