

Beethoven's first two symphonies are often seen as an artistic unity. Cheerful and happy in tone, classical in form and demeanor, they represent the best that the composer could achieve before he really found his own voice. Or so the story often goes, especially since that voice is so powerfully expressed in the composer's next symphony, the epochal "Eroica."

It is hard for us today to remember that Beethoven's contemporaries found the second symphony both challenging and somewhat forbidding. "A level of difficulty... unlike any symphony that has ever been made known." "Powerful, fiery...colossal..." "A work full of new, original ideas, of great power." These were some of the comments that this music provoked at its earliest performances. It was also frequently found "strange," "shrill," and "bizarre." It is clear that many audiences were puzzled by the piece, and that its first performers were not always prepared to meet its challenges.

In short, when the Bureau of Arts and Industry published this symphony in 1804, it was new music, in the best sense. Its rich instrumentation, its extravagant size, and its often mocking spirit marked it out as a work to be reckoned with, by a composer whose growing international reputation allowed him to get away with things that a lesser man could not.

It is important to remember these facts if we are to hear this music today in terms of War, Resistance, Reconciliation and Hope. At the time he wrote this work, in 1802, Beethoven was involved in a poignant internal battle that mirrored the growing turmoil of Napoleonic Europe. His famous "Heiligenstadt Testament" is an intensely private that has become once of the cornerstones of the Beethoven legend. Addressing his two brothers, the composer acknowledges his growing deafness and his yearning for death. In words that resonate with the self-consciousness of the modern artist, Beethoven asserts that he has chosen to live a life of suffering so that he can continue to respond to the creative urge.

Does the symphony tell a different story, as is often suggested? Or can we still hear it today as a work of brilliance and self-assertion, in which the composer's will to create becomes a powerful end in itself, brushing aside the conventions of the 18th century symphony with arrogant indifference? This is exactly what Beethoven's contemporaries heard, and they found it both startling and provocative. Let us listen tonight with their ears.