

Symphony no. 7 in A Major, Opus 92-----Ludwig van Beethoven

(Born Bonn, 1770; died Vienna, 1827)

In his *Beethoven As I Knew Him* (1845), Beethoven's secretary Anton Schindler described a remarkable (if true) scene that took place in 1834 at the Paris Conservatory. Schindler had brought with him to Paris a portrait of Beethoven by Ferdinand Schimon. According to Schindler, following a rehearsal of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, the members of the orchestra were invited into an adjoining room where the portrait was on display:

Already extremely elated by the music, this announcement had the effect of an electric shock on all of them. With impetuosity and shouts of hurrah they all suddenly rushed to that room. And then what a scene there was to behold! Some of the crowd fell to their knees in front of the picture, others sat on tables and stools, and as from many the cry "Hats off!" was heard, there followed a long pause of just pure contemplation during which the countenance of Beethoven seemed to say: "You are my disciples; I am satisfied with you." It was one of the most moving moments that I have ever experienced in my life... After about a quarter of an hour and after a few of the older professors of the Conservatory had asked a few questions in hushed tones, as one would speak in a church, the group left the room in complete silence, obviously deeply moved by the image of their Ideal.

Schindler was not always objective in his reporting, but even if somewhat enhanced, the even he described resonates with the Beethoven-worship that swept Europe in the years following the composer's death. No other composer has inspired anything like the myth of Beethoven as the consummate Romantic artist-hero.

One upshot of nineteenth-century veneration of Beethoven was that his music was subjected to all manner of hyper-interpretation. Beethoven's music couldn't just be music; it had to be "about" something. Hence, commentators produced reams of fanciful, unprovable theories about the "meaning" of this or that composition. This is especially true of nineteenth-century commentaries on the Seventh Symphony. Berlioz, for example, called it a peasant dance, and to Wagner it represented an "apotheosis of the dance." Wilhelm von Lenz (*Beethoven et ses trois styles*, 1855) viewed the Seventh Symphony as a second Pastoral Symphony, with its own village wedding scene and peasant dances. Others found in it a political revolution, a festival of knights, a drunken masquerade, a "bacchic orgy," a pilgrimage to an old cathedral, and images of feudal times. The list goes on.

Today we take a more technical approach to musical analysis, and we smile at Romantic attempts to make musical compositions "say" things that were never intended. But in this case, Berlioz and Wagner and the rest may have been on to something. One notes a common thread, or rather two or three, running through any number of commentaries on this work – namely, rhythmic energy, liberation, and joy. To even the most casual listener, Beethoven's Seventh Symphony is celebration of something very positive and uplifting. One leaves the experience with a renewed sense of optimism and resolve. In part, the work achieves this affect through its powerful rhythmic vitality. Each movement is based on its own set of distinctive rhythmic figures, and, in fact, in many measures it is the rhythm (rather than the melody) that we notice first and remember the longest. Case in point: In the opening bars of the second movement – a frequently encored movement and surely one of the most striking items in the

orchestral literature – there is hardly any melody at all, only the underlying rhythmic pulse and those chilling open fifths. But more glorious music can scarcely be imagined.

Beethoven employs the standard four-movement scheme but (as always) with imagination. The first movement (*Poco sostenuto; vivace*) is preceded by a remarkable long slow introduction (the longest in any Beethoven symphony) whose massive tonal blocks and multiple rhythmic layers provide a fitting counterweight to the lengthy allegro that follows. A three-note dotted figure pervades the movement, and we notice an unusually broad dynamic range. The second (*Allegretto*) alternates solemn hues of A minor with brighter interludes in the parallel major key. (This movement is duly famous. If Beethoven had composed nothing else, he would still be assured a place in the history of music.) The third (*Presto; assai meno presto; presto*) is a scherzo. The theme of the trio is said to have been borrowed from an Austrian pilgrimage hymn. The fourth (*Allegro con brio*) is a boisterous sonata movement with a lengthy coda.

Beethoven composed the Seventh Symphony during the fall and winter of 1811-1812 and conducted the premiere in Vienna on 8 December 1813 at one of his numerous charity concerts. Not everyone was thrilled. One reviewer noted that “the whole thing lasts at least three-quarters of an hour, and is a true mixture of tragic, comic, serious, and trivial ideas, which spring from one level to another without any connection, repeat themselves to excess, and are almost wrecked by the immoderate noise of the timpani.” Nevertheless, Beethoven's Seventh Symphony quickly became one of his most popular works, and history has shown it to be one of the priceless gems of the orchestral literature. Beethoven himself regarded the Seventh Symphony as one of his finest works.

By Mark Whitney