LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Symphonies No. 4 in B flat major, Op. 60 & No. 7 in A major, Op. 92

By Benjamin Gunnar Cohrs

Symphony No. 4 in B flat major, Op. 60

Hartmut Krones made the following observation about the way music was understood in Beethoven's day: "It must be stressed ... that people back then understood the term 'chamber music' as encompassing all genres not written for church or stage, but for the 'chamber', in other words, all symphonies, concertos and secular cantatas. Thus, even the Ninth Symphony was ultimately, in contemporary understanding of the genre, 'chamber music'. When one considers that the *Eroica*, for instance, was premiered in private houses (or palaces) the views of the time can be more readily understood." It was no different with the other symphonies, almost all of which were premiered in various aristocratic homes – including the Fourth Symphony in B flat major, dedicated to Count Franz von Oppersdorff. Beethoven was introduced to the Count during a summer excursion to Silesia together with his patron Prince Lichnowsky. Lichnowsky and Beethoven were welcomed to the Count's summer residence in Oberglogau with a performance of the Second Symphony; Oppersdorff was one of the few nobles who could afford to maintain his own household orchestra. Perhaps he commissioned Beethoven to write a new symphony then and there. Naturally Beethoven accepted the commission, not least on account of the handsome 500 Florin honorarium he was offered.

Beethoven had begun sketches for the symphonies in C minor and F major parallel with those for the *Eroica*; these drafts even go back as far as the years 1801 and 1803. Instead of doing what might have seemed the most obvious thing and completing the C-minor or F-major works, Beethoven began an entirely new work in B flat major: The dark struggles of what would later become the Fifth Symphony may perhaps not have suited the mood of what was for Beethoven, with considerable successes under his belt, a productive, positively charged period of rising fame. Almost no sketches for the Fourth have survived; perhaps a sketch book has been lost or remains unknown and in private possession. The symphony was apparently composed relatively easily and was probably completed by about the beginning of November, as most of the remainder of the year was spent completing the Violin Concerto and the Rasumowsky Quartets. On 3 Februar 1807, Beethoven signed for the receipt of the honorarium; a few weeks later the first known performance of the Fourth took place before a selected audience at the home of Prince Franz von Lobkowitz; the public premiere took place on 15 November 1807 at the Theater an der Wien. On 20 April 1807, Beethoven reached an agreement with the London composer, pianist and publisher Muzio Clementi to publish the Fourth and other works. Apparently, however, the courier despatch was lost. The parts of the symphony finally

appeared in 1808 with the Kunst- und Industrie-Comptoir Wien; the first edition of the score was brought out by Simrock in 1823. The autograph score today is held by the Music Division of the Berlin State Library; a copy of the score with Beethoven's corrections, used as the printer's proof, lies in Vienna in the Archives of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde.

The Fourth has long been the poor cousin among the Beethoven symphonies. This may have to do with the fact that the ideologically driven music history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries found far less to say about the work than about the two works on either side of it, the very problematically burdened *Eroica* and the *Fate Symphony*. In the *Eroica*, Beethoven retells the Prometheus myth in symphonic language. The Fourth establishes and deepens what is the outcome of this story – in other words, drawing on the recognition of its inherent divinity, the capacity of mankind to rethink or re-orientate itself. There are numerous hints. That the Fourth is related to the *Eroica* in several respects is betrayed by the key used, B flat major, the dominant of the E flat major of the Third. Accorded to the key symbolism set out by C. F. D. Schubart in his *Ideen zu einer Aesthetik der Tonkunst* (Ideas Concerning the Aesthetics of Musical Composition), B flat is an expression of "hope for a better world". This apparently involves the notion that Beethoven was now revisiting music written prior to 1800, after having – in the acknowledged process in which student dissociates himself from mentor – very greatly distanced himself in personal terms from his teacher Joseph Haydn, to the latter's own regret. We now find here the slow introduction to the first movement, which one might have thought Beethoven, after the *Eroica*, had outgrown, as well as the typical *perpetuum mobile* character of many of Haydn's final movements. Three out of the four movements are in the home key; only the Adagio is in *Eroica* tonality of E flat major which Beethoven always uses in works expressing love, or the majesty of the divine. For the Romantic writers after Schumann, the Fourth was, *par excellence*, the "slender Grecian beauty", because, so they considered, it distanced itself from the more heavyweight *sinfonie caratteristiche* – the Third, Fifth, Sixth and Ninth.

On the other hand, the Fourth has a pronounced dark side: already the gloomy introduction is rather ambivalent in mood and a touchstone for the conductor when it comes to getting the introductory pizzicato of the strings precisely together with the wind entries. It begins in B flat minor, the tragic *Tonus* of doubt. Schubart calls it an "unusual key, clad mostly in the raiment of the night. It is somewhat morose and very rarely shows a pleasing mien. Complaints against God and the world; displeasure with itself and with everything; preparation for suicide." Consequently, the symphony begins with two pregnantly descending tonal symbols of the cross in all the strings in unison, followed by a circular, stammering 'helplessness' motive (four notes ascending, four notes returning). But instead of heading towards a tragic outburst, light suddenly breaks through the darkness and precisely the same two motives – cross and helplessness – now form, in radiant B flat major, the main theme of the brilliant *Allegro vivace* (mm. 43–46). The tonal cross idea, especially, becomes an absolute leitmotiv for the whole symphony; it emerges, for instance, in the passage beginning with a conspicuous bassoon solo (m. 107) and in the various ideas which crop up in

the transition to the second theme, which is then based on the – now-cantabile – helplessness motive (m. 141). Further cross motives can be found in the persistent tapping of the second violins with which the Adagio begins, in the Scherzo theme and in the Trio theme. The Finale begins in the opposite order, first working with the helplessness motive in a lively, playful manner, before the cross motive takes over again (accompaniment figures from m. 12, flute motive, m. 16). The whole symphony is apparently a battle between light and darkness, power and helplessness, as the Adagio also indicates, being one of the few Beethoven slow movements to observe the dialectic of sonata form rather than song form. The Scherzo also has an innovatory aspect: for the first time Beethoven has the Trio played twice, resulting in a characteristic five-part Scherzo. Composers such as Brahms and Bruckner disregarded this idea; Gustav Mahler was the first to make further use of it. A particularly impressive aspect of the Finale is its remarkable vortex-like energy, which almost leads to catastrophe before rescuing itself at the last minute.

Researchers like Martin Geck, Constantin Floros and Peter Schleuning have shown extensively that Beethoven's compositions are to a great extent based on dramatic or poetic ideas or representations, as has been summarised by Hartmut Krones. According to this view, numerous surviving remarks of the composer himself and from his immediate circle "are nothing less than an indication that Beethoven, in working out his ideas ... in fact allowed himself to be directed by scenes, visions, narratives or pictures, without the understanding of which the performance of these works lose significant content, or in part actually has to be regarded as lost. ... He thus stood unmistakeably in that old tradition which – by virtue of the equivalence of music and language, based on rhetorical thinking, formulation and structure – regarded all music making as 'speaking' or even 'singing', and thus viewed 'all instruments' merely as 'imitations of singing', which continued, without doubt, to figure in the thinking of many authors well into the nineteenth century." Everything now indicates that the Fourth belongs to the *sinfonia caratteristica* genre as well and like the *Eroica* follows a hidden subject which until now, for want of interest or attentiveness, has not been decoded by musicology.

Carl-Maria von Weber had a keen sense for the almost disturbed, dramatic undertones of the Fourth, which occasioned a thoroughly malicious gloss on the piece. He wrote, directing his words to fainthearted orchestral musicians: "Do you think that in our enlightened times, where man somersaults over every kind of obstacle, a composer would fail in the realisation of his divine, stupendous ideas? God forfend! This is no longer about clarity and precision, the expression of emotion, as the old artists Gluck, Handel and Mozart believed. No, listen to the recipe for the latest symphony which I've just received from Vienna, and base your opinions on it: First a slow tempo, full of brief, disjointed ideas, where none of them is permitted to be connected with another, every quarter of an hour three or four notes – that builds tension! Then a muffled drum roll and mysterious viola passages, everything laden with a generous helping of general pauses and interruptions; finally, when the listener is ready to forego the Allegro out of sheer suspense, a raging tempo, in which the main intention must be to

avoid any principal ideas and to thus leave the listener all the more to discover for himself. Transitions from one key to another must not be absent; one needs only, for example, to run through the semitones like Paer in the *Leonore* and to stop where one will in order for the modulation to be complete. In general, one must avoid everything ordered, since rules only fetter genius."

One must give Weber his due in that he at least had an inkling of how far off the mark he actually was; the Fourth is, when one looks more closely, enormously unified in regard to its materials and very solidly put together. These words, which in Weber's alleged dream are delivered by a bellows blower to the assembled orchestra, end with the following: "Suddenly a string snapped on the guitar hanging over me and I woke in utter horror, since I had, through my dream, become a great composer in the newest genre, or – a fool"... The Janus-headed Fourth is thus a paragon for characteristics of a period which were clearly articulated by Roger Norrington: It sounds so fresh and lively, perhaps, because at the time, paradoxically, "newness was achieved precisely through a total command of the TRADITIONAL! Much of the wit and drama of Beethoven lies just in his juxtaposition of the expected and unexpected."

Symphonie No. 7 in A major, Op. 92

Following the first performances of the Fifth (completed 1807) and Sixth (1808) symphonies, which Beethoven himself conducted at his Academy at the Theater an der Wien on 22 December 1808, the composer initially took some time out from symphonic composition. Along with a good deal of chamber music he wrote the fifth piano concerto and the two one-act singspiels *King Stephan* and *The Ruins of Athens*. Immediately following their completion in September 1811, Beethoven apparently began sketches for a symphony in A major which would become his Seventh, as he didn't assign a number to the battle symphony *Wellington's Victory*, Op. 91 (perhaps as the idea for writing it originated with Johann Nepomuk Mälzel). Numerous drafts for the Seventh have survived in a notebook nowadays referred to by researchers as the *Petters Sketchbook* after an earlier owner, a cashier by the name of Gustav Adolf Petter zu Wien. In 1984 the American musicologist John K. Knowles chronologically ordered these over one hundred pages of sketches, deciphered them, and assigned them to individual movements. In the process he also proved that motivic links can be established between the composition of the Seventh and the *Ruins of Athens*. It is quite possible that further sketches have been lost, as in ordering the drafts Knowles found that far less material has survived for the last two movements than for the first two. In addition to this comes the fact that in the Seventh Beethoven made recourse to material of much earlier origin: Beethoven had notated the sketches for the principal theme of the slow movement as early as 1806 for the slow movement of the third Rasumowsky Quartet, Op. 59, no. 3, but subsequently settled on another theme. Whether the surviving date in the autograph (13 April 1812) refers to the beginning or completion of the score is unclear. But as early as May Beethoven wrote to the publisher Breitkopf & Härtel in Leipzig: "I'm writing three new symphonies, one of which already complete." Beethoven immediately set about organising the premiere and prior to his summer vacation at the end of June commissioned a copy to be made by his friend, the Archduke Rudolph. No performance eventuated, however. In the summer of 1812 he sketched the F major symphony, later to become the Eighth. On 6 and 7 July he wrote the famous letter to the 'Immortal Beloved' and on 19 July met with Goethe. The score of the Eighth was begun in Linz in October 1812 in Linz and at the latest concluded in March 1813. As Beethoven did not use a draft notated in D minor for the third of the planned new symphonies, research largely accepts that this work was never taken up. But it is by no means unlikely that Beethoven regarded the *Wellington's Victory* symphony, Op. 91, still underestimated in its reception, as the third of the three.

On 21 April 1813, under the worst conditions imaginable, Beethoven conducted the Seventh and Eighth as well as the overtures to the two singspiels in Archduke Rudolph's palace: He was far from well due to a sprained leg and raging fever; moreover, only a few players were available. In an informative letter Beethoven stipulated the minimal requisite numbers of strings for this performance as being four each of the firsts, seconds and violas as well as two celli and two double basses – a significant clue as to the performance practice of these works. On the other hand: for the first public performance of the Seventh, which took place on 8

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December 1813 in the Aula of the University, Beethoven employed an exceptionally large orchestra: "For my last concert in the great Redoutensaal they had 18 first violins, 18 second, 14 violas, 12 violoncelli, 7 contrabassi and 2 contrafagotti." This shows how practically oriented musicians around 1800 were and just how ridiculous are dusty musicological conflicts over 'historically accurate' orchestral sizes. *Wellington's Victory* had been included in the programme of this academy, and the concert was ultimately such a sensational success, not least of all financially, that it had to be repeated on the 12th. Beethoven himself put paid to any remaining doubts that the three symphonies were closely linked, since at further, highly successful academy held on 27 February 1814 the Seventh and *Wellington's Victory* were again included in the programme alongside the first performance of the Eighth. Moreover, all three works later appeared with Steiner in Vienna as Opp. 91, 92 and 93.

The music publicist Berndt W. Wessling noted in 1991 that *Wellington's Victory* was the symphonic "roar of battle preceding the apotheosis of victory [the Seventh Symphony]. But the post-Napoleonic age separated the two works, left the 'battle' in the background and allotted the symphony its proper place in the concert repertoire." The Seventh and Eighth were then idealised, each in its own way, by the romanticism of music history. Any sort of dramatic background to the Eighth faded into insignificance next to the emphasis on anecdotes according to which Beethoven in the Allegretto was said to have characterised the metronome and therewith the passage of time. Research has meanwhile revealed the 'Mälzel canon' to be a forgery by the Beethoven biographer Anton Schindler, suffering, as Klaus Döge put it, from a "pathological obsession with authority". Thus the Eighth assumes a similar 'outsider' role to that of the Fourth: both can be regarded as more moderate, backwards-looking, 'classicist' works without great profundity, standing in the shadow of their great predecessors, the *Eroica* and the Seventh. The Seventh itself – like the *Eroica*, Fifth and Ninth – has had to endure a multitude of various interpretative attempts, the best known of which is Richard Wagner's 'Apotheosis of the Dance'. There are indications, however, that all three works are permeated by the common set of references to a characteristic dramaturgy, one which still awaits its full decipherment through research.

Martin Geck maintained, very much to the point: "What drama, novel or poem … succeeds so suggestively in turning darkness into light, battle into victory, in so overwhelmingly transforming the experience of suffering and doubt into feelings of pure joy, as does Beethoven in the final movements of his Fifth and Seventh! Not least of all it was this aspect, and remains so to this day, that gave musical art its advantage in offering its public welcome identification: at the end, speeches and arguments cease; there is only celebration!" The Seventh would have been the endpoint of this optimistic development, written at the end of the Napoleonic era. In 1991 Berndt W. Wessling gave conclusive formulation to such ideas, adding his support to the theory of Harry Goldschmidt, who regarded the Seventh as a 'Symphony against Napoleon' – "the accompanying music to the life of the great Corsican, whose downfall sparked the 'people's battle' near Leipzig, bringing about a historic turning point six weeks before the premiere of the Seventh." Whoever knows how disappointed Beethoven was with Napoleon –

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with whom he long identified as his *alter ego* before turning his back on him and his politics in rescinding the dedication of the *Eroica* – will readily accept Goldschmidt's and Wessling's thesis.

The Seventh is, just like the more trivial *Wellington* symphony, a victory celebration, now on a symphonic plane. Bound with this is the remembrance of the fallen (the proceeds of Beethoven's academy were to benefit the invalids of the Napoleonic wars). The introduction to the first movement begins with an old symbol of mourning in the bass, a chromatic descent through the interval of a fourth, a special form of the *passus duriusculus* which, according to Hartmut Krones, "was seen in Baroque times as the highest of all symbols of pain." The famous funeral march links expressly with this fourth: The pregnant six-four chord of the winds at the beginning and close of the movement not only functions like a parenthesis; it was unheard of at the time to begin a movement in this fashion (the six-four chord was up till then a passing chord and at most the point of departure for a soloist's cadenza). The funeral march refers back to the dramatic funeral scene of the *Eroica* and can readily be interpreted as a funeral ceremony; the researcher Wolfgang Osthoff established various constituent elements (litany, liturgical chant, *cantus firmus* techniques). Last but not least, the movement is in A minor, which according to the old key characteristics is an expression of penitence and lament. At the concert the movement found such favour – typical Viennese morbidity! – that it had to be repeated. Since then it has been regarded as a key work of Beethoven's, taken up by many later composers – for instance by Schubert in his *Death and the Maiden*; Bruckner, too, recalled it in the Andante of his *Romantic*. The funeral march stands in the starkest contrast with the principal movement, pulsing with life, dominated by the famous dotted 'Klemperer' motive, but also with the ensuing almost contrary, awkward Scherzo. Its Trio, however, recalls the ideas of the funeral march: according to Abbé Stadler, a Lower-Austrian pilgrim's song was pressed into service here.

The Finale, ultimately, quotes the revolutionary march *Le Triomphe de la République* by Gossec and thus completes the circle, returning to the theme of the French Revolution. According Martin Geck it demands "more a letting go than a collecting of oneself", an unfettered celebration which in an eerie manner anticipates the excesses of the Vienna Congress (1814/15). "From the First to the Seventh he continually attempts to find new, 'symphonic' solutions to the representation of fighting, struggling, reflecting, of courage, joy, sorrow, but also – as in the *Eroica* and *Pastorale* – far more detailed programmatic representations. And he is constantly concerned in the Finale movements with finding a 'solution' to the ideas developed in the preceding movements," claims Martin Geck. "With the Seventh, written in the immediate climate of political upsurge just prior to the beginning of the wars of liberation, Beethoven made a final attempt on this path – and suffered the failure of his aesthetic credo. One has to accept this in any case if one examines his attitude following the Seventh: Firstly comes the Eighth, written straight away, remarkably rapidly, almost tossed off, which gives expression to the pessimistic idea that all enthusiasm has no point, since the message cannot be formulated with sufficient clarity in the

medium of absolute music and cannot be semantically transmitted to the listener. The Eighth is thus the sad proof – still valid to this day – that a symphony, even in the concert hall, is only accepted as 'symphony' when one distortedly demonstrates its bare mechanics." Perhaps the acerbic, introverted humour of the Eighth can be even better interpreted in the face of the eternal circle of war and death and victory and celebration which becomes apparent in listening to *Wellington's Victory* and the Seventh. At the end of it all stands only Beethoven's bitter conclusion, finding its apex in the Ninth, that his music was probably capable of achieving just about nothing. The escape to the sung words of Schiller in the Finale is also the confession of a composer's failure.

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