Milwaukee Symphony

Musical Journeys

WEEKLY STREAMING PROGRAMS

Episode 11 Notes

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Baptized 17 December 1770; Bonn, Germany
Died 26 March 1827; Vienna, Austria

Leonore Overture No. 3

Composed: 1806
First performance: 29 March 1806; Vienna, Austria

The *Leonore* No. 3 was written as the overture for the first revision (1806) of the opera *Fidelio*. The largest and most powerful of the opera's four overtures, it is a microcosm of the opera itself. Donald Tovey, the famous English musicologist, once remarked: "The trouble with *Leonore* No. 3 is that, like all great instrumental music from Haydn onwards, it is about ten times as dramatic as anything that could possibly be put on the stage." Realizing that this mighty overture overshadowed the first scene of his opera, Beethoven replaced it with the more succinct *Fidelio* overture for his final revision of 1814.

The idea of writing an opera was very appealing to Beethoven, although his only completed operatic project, *Fidelio*, cost him years of labor in its creating and revision. "Of all my children, this is the one that cost me the worst birth pangs, the one that brought me to most sorrow; and for that reason, it is the one most dear to me," said the composer to his friend and biographer, Anton Schindler. Beethoven viewed opera as the perfect medium for the expression of his moral and ethical principles. Guided by these principles, Beethoven chose a libretto based upon J.N. Bouilly's *Leonore ou l'Amore conjugal*, an account of Leonore, a faithful wife who attempts to rescue her husband from a despot's prison. Masquerading as a youth named Fidelio, she gains employment at the prison, locates her husband, and is ultimately rescued with him.

Leonore No. 3 begins with the mysterious harmonies of an introductory Adagio. An Allegro section ensues with a rising and falling theme that suggests the heroic endeavors of Leonore. At last, a distant trumpet call is heard, signaling the approach of the rescuers. As the music becomes more hopeful, the trumpet sounds again, and the orchestra moves on to a jubilant conclusion. This overture is frequently reunited with the opera for which it was written, ever since Gustav Maler used it to preface the second act of *Fidelio* in his performances of 1886.

Program notes by Roger Ruggeri.

Grosse Fuge in B-flat major, Opus 133
(Arranged for String Orchestra by Felix Weingartner)

Composed: 1825-26; arranged for string orchestra in 1906
First performance: 21 March 1826; Vienna, Austria (string quartet)

Originally conceived as Beethoven's final movement for his B-flat major String Quartet, Opus 130, the *Grosse Fuge* is one of the colossal musical structures that so often characterized the composer's late-life expression. Completed in 1826, this rather abstract movement soon demonstrated such problems for players and listeners that it was dubbed "The Monster" and was generally deemed to be unplayable.

Aware of these problems, Beethoven's publisher convinced the composer that he should issue the original as a separate work and write a new finale for his thirteenth quartet. In the autumn of 1826, only a few months before his death, Beethoven completed a sunnier movement that served to conclude the quartet less problematically. The *Grosse Fuge* ("Grand Fugue"), which Beethoven subtitled *tantôt libre, tantôt recherchée* ("sometimes free, sometimes scholarly") is often considered to be more accessible when its massive musical materials are performed by a string orchestra. The most widely accepted rescoring for strings is the present one, made in 1906 by the Austrian composer-conductor Felix Weingartner (1863-1942).

This craggy work launches with an *Overtura* in which a central motive is directly presented in forceful octaves. (Beethoven scholar Joseph Kerman once opined that this opening is "not an introduction but a table of contents [that] hurls all the thematic variations at the listener's head like a handful of rocks.") Three brief intimations of the material's development are followed by the first violins' recollection of the theme and a dotted-rhythm launching of the first fugal section. A gentler second fugue ebbs to a whisper before the low strings begin the contrapuntal fragment that works its way up through the ensemble at the beginning of a scherzo-like third fugue. In a fourth section, Beethoven expands and contracts his subject until it subsides in a series of mysterious utterances. Within a quicker (Allegro molto e con brio) fifth part, the contrapuntal motives vie against one another, then, after two microscopic recollections of earlier sections, the work achieves its conclusion in the hard-won key of B-flat major.

Program notes by Roger Ruggeri.

Symphony No. 3 in E-flat major, Opus 55, "Eroica"

Composed: 1804
First performance: 7 April 1805; Vienna, Austria

Beethoven spent the summer of 1802 in the village of Heiligenstadt (now part of larger Vienna). It was a musically prolific time for him, but the 31-year-old master was already aware that his hearing was beginning to deteriorate. In October, as he prepared to return to central Vienna, he carefully wrote a document to his two brothers describing his depression, but declaring he had now rejected the idea of suicide. This "Heiligenstadt Testament" is a heartbreaking testimony to the despair that frequently overtook him during this period in his life.

From that low ebb of despondency, Beethoven effected a speedy recovery through hard work, churning out his oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives* in early 1803. *Fidelio*, his only opera, was written in 1804-05. Between them came the Eroica ("Heroic") Symphony, an opus Beethoven scholar Joseph Kerman has called "a watershed work, one that marks a turning point in the history of modern music." Kerman goes on to explain that Beethoven was concerned not only with the musical and technical aspects of composition, but also with conveying his own spiritual journey and growth process. This "symphonic ideal," states Kerman, "Beethoven perfected at a stroke with his Third Symphony and further celebrated with his Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, and Ninth. The forcefulness, expanded range, and evident radical intent of these works sets them apart from symphonies in the 18th-century tradition."

It is well known that Beethoven took Napoleon as his inspiration for the Symphony No. 3 and later was angered and disillusioned when the revolutionary hero turned despot and had himself crowned emperor. The "Bonaparte" Symphony then became the "Sinfonia Eroica." From our 21st-century vantage point, it is easy to declare Beethoven the true hero here.

The Third Symphony as a whole – and its first two movements in particular – was on a larger scale than any instrumental work the master had yet written; it was many years before he wrote another of such dimensions. Following two strong E-flat major chords, the cellos quietly sing the waltz-like melody that will provide Beethoven with much of the musical material for this movement. Typically, Classical-era symphonies have a central development section shorter than the opening exposition. Beethoven turns this around completely, expanding on his material at great length, taking the listener in unexpected directions. A weighty and protracted funeral march in C minor makes up the second movement. Musicologists have suggested that Beethoven was here influenced by French composers of the revolutionary era, as well as by the operas of Luigi Cherubini (Beethoven's favorite living composer) and Etienne Mehul. All is not gloomy in this movement, however: Listen for a lyrical interlude in C major that soon turns triumphant. And there's even a brief fugal section.

The scherzo's softly scampering staccato strings and jaunty woodwind melodies disperse all funereal thoughts. The bold trio – with fanfares played by three horns – stands in marked contrast. The scurrying then returns, and a short, intriguing coda ends the movement. The ingenious Finale is a set of variation based on a theme Beethoven had used in his ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus* and in the 15 Variations, Opus 35 ("Eroica Variations") for piano. The styles range from solemn to humorous and make use of both the major and minor modes. Listen for everything from imitative counterpoint to a swaying dance, from warlike passages to an ample hymn tune. In the splendid coda, jubilant salvos from the three horns bring this history-changing work to its "heroic" conclusion.

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.