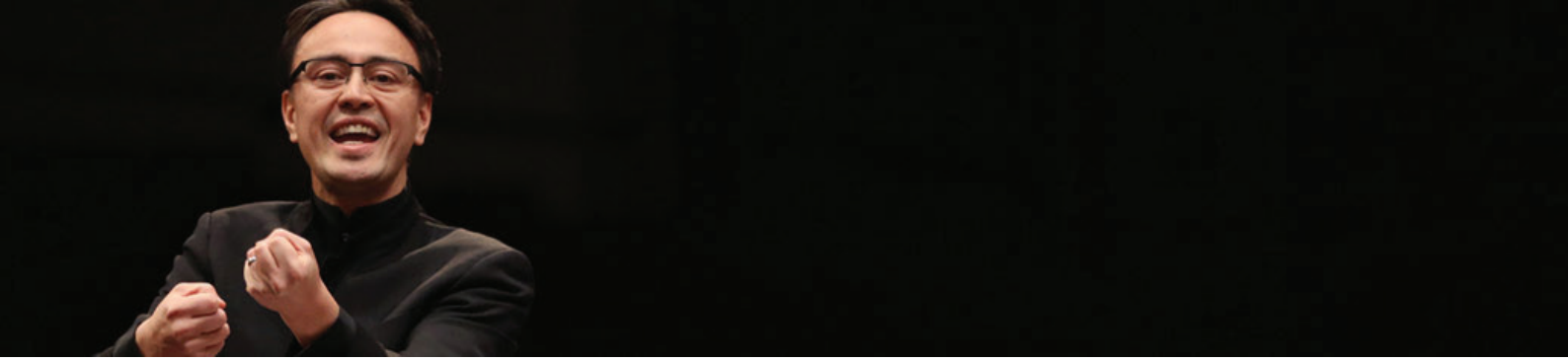

Masur Conducts Beethoven

This season, we're fortunate to hear six of Beethoven's symphonies. Tonight, we begin that journey with his first two excursions in the genre; they serve as both an homage and a tschüß to the 18th century. In between, the MSO's horn section moves to the front of the orchestra for Robert Schumann's delightful *Conzertstück*.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

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

Symphony No. 1 in C major, Opus 21

Composed: 1799-1800
First performance: 2 April 1880; Vienna, Austria
Last MSO performance: September 2011; Edo de Waart, conductor
Instrumentation: 2 flutes; 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 2 horns; 2 trumpets; timpani; strings
Approximate duration: 26 minutes

At age 21, Beethoven left his native city of Bonn – never once to return – to study in Vienna. There he worked with the immortal Franz Joseph Haydn, the renowned Antonio Salieri, the veteran theatre

composer Johann Schenk, and the preeminent pedagogue J.G. Altbrechtsberger. By the time he set pen to paper to begin his Symphony No. 1, he was 28 years old and had accumulated an impressive catalogue that included a dozen piano sonatas, two cello sonatas, three violin sonatas, three piano trios, and a set of six string quartets.

It is interesting to note that Beethoven's first full-blown essay in the symphonic form came just half-a-decade after Haydn's Symphony No. 104 (his last) and a dozen years after Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony. It serves in many ways as a summing up of the Classical style they so peerlessly exemplified; the young Rhinelander's First Symphony is, stated Donald Francis Tovey, "a farewell to the eighteenth century." In his later symphonies, we meet a distinctively different composer.

Beethoven himself led the premiere, on a monster concert that included his divertimento-like *Septet*, Op. 20, masterful improvisations at the piano, and one of his piano concertos, probably No. 1. As if that weren't enough, a Mozart symphony and an aria and duet from Haydn's *The Creation* were also on the program.

The symphony opens rather quizzically. For a work in C major, it would be reasonable to expect a C major chord, but instead we hear the dominant-seventh of F major (V7/F). By the fourth measure, we reach G major, the dominant of the home key (V/C), but it isn't until the slow introduction gives way to the Allegro con brio that we are unequivocally in C major. Strings introduce the jaunty main theme, solo winds intone the second theme. The entire movement is electric with unalloyed vitality, and the winds call to mind the outdoor *Harmoniemusik* of Beethoven's predecessors. The songful second movement is set in F major in a lilting 3/4 time. A brief section in C minor and a more pronounced one in D-flat minor, *fortissimo*, provide contrast before the opening theme returns, with *staccato* 16th-notes lending lighthearted new counterpoint.

Beethoven called the third movement a minuet, but in truth it is a scherzo, nothing at all like the old courtly dance. The rhythmic feel is one beat per bar, not three, with chords in the winds and scales in the strings providing a brief but attractive trio. The composer again toys with us in his slow introduction to the final Allegro molto e vivace, employing a set of rising violin scales. It's a motivic device he makes good use of throughout the movement, "an essay in undiluted comedy" (Richard Osborne).

Recommended recording: Sir John Eliot Gardiner, Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique (Archiv)

ROBERT SCHUMANN

Born 8 June 1810; Zwickau, Germany
Died 29 July 1856; Endenich (near Bonn), Germany

Conzertstück in F for Four Horns, Opus 86

Composed: 1849
First performance: 25 February 1850; Leipzig, Germany
Last MSO performance: MSO premiere
Instrumentation: 2 flutes; piccolo; 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 2 horns; 2 trumpets; 3 trombones; timpani; strings
Approximate duration: 19 minutes

Of the composers of the Romantic era, Robert Schumann is quite likely the most romantic. His music emphasized self-expression, is inherently lyrical, and often displays literary, extra-musical connections. Schumann was a prolific composer, father (eight children), and writer (co-founder of the periodical *Neue Zeitung für Musik* ("New Journal for Music"). In the latter role, he helped further the career of the young Johannes Brahms.

His *Conzertstück* for four horns dates from 1849, a fecund period in Schumann's composing life. He himself referred to it as "my most fruitful year," a time when he was writing songs and choral music, piano music, instrumental works, incidental music to Lord Byron's Manfred, and putting the final touches on his opera *Genoveva*. The term *Conzertstück* ("concert piece") usually implies a single-movement work. Schumann's, though, is set in the three movements – fast-slow-fast – typical of a concerto. The composer may have preferred this term because the movements are relatively short.

Two orchestral chords set the opening sonata-form Lebhaft ("lively") into motion as the soloists burst in with a spirited fanfare. In composing his Op. 86, Schumann took advantage of the new valve horn's technical abilities. Here, he tosses around chromatic passages that would have been well-nigh impossible on the natural horn. (He had recently exploited the new instrument's capabilities in the *Adagio and Allegro*, Op. 70 for horn and piano.) The D minor Romanze that follows is in a more somber, with a lyrical chorale-like middle section. The main theme's return is cut short by a trumpet call and a robust answer from the strings, creating an *attacca* transition to the final Sehr lebhaft ("very lively"). Scales, arpeggios, and virtuosic fioritura again showcase the valve horn's versatility as the soloists both dialogue with one another and join together for thrilling passages of chordal harmony. In the middle, there's a backward glance to the gentler chorale of the Romanze; at work's end, soloists and orchestra combine to make a rollickingly joyful noise.

Recommended recording: Nigel Black, Laurence Davies, Laurence Rogers, Peter Blake; Christian Thielemann, Philharmonia Orchestra (Deutsche Grammophon)

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Opus 36

Composed: 1801-02
First performance: 5 April 1803; Vienna, Austria
Last MSO performance: February 2018; Stefan Asbury, conductor
Instrumentation: 2 flutes; 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 2 horns; 2 trumpets; timpani; strings
Approximate duration: 32 minutes

Beethoven spent the summer of 1802 in the village of Heiligenstadt (now part of larger Vienna). It was a musically prolific time for him, and there he put the final touches on his Symphony No. 2. 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.

It is an affirmation of Beethoven's genius – as though one were needed – to realize that the Heiligenstadt Testament and the "richly textured, emotionally vital" (P.G. Downs) Symphony No. 2 co-inhabited the brain of their creator: the self-confidence evident in the latter is worlds away from the despairing mood of the former. (Sidebar: In his book *Diagnosing Genius: The Life and Death of Beethoven* (2007), F.M. Mai states the composer had bi-polar disorder.)

In his Second Symphony, Beethoven employs the instrumental forces and the layout of Haydn's last 12 symphonies – with a slow introduction and rondo finale. "Although Haydn could never have written this work," states Beethoven scholar Joseph Kerman, "it stands as a final ideal realization of the concept of a large piece which he had developed."

The 33-measure introduction is slow and dramatic, abundant in the sort of powerful music the master would continue to exploit throughout his life. The Allegro con brio's main theme is presented in the lower strings; clarinets, bassoons, and horns intone its martial-like second theme. Employing just those two principal subjects – and that energetic little 16th-note turn – Beethoven constructs a movement that is by turns both graceful and full-bodied. In the coda, listen for an amazing passage in which the cellos and double basses, across nine bars, traverse an octave, moving upward in half-steps as the harmonies shift above. It's all *fortissimo* and leads to the exultant ending.

The second movement is a large-scale sonata form, "one of the most sensuous of all Beethoven's Larghettos" (Lewis Lockwood). Its lyricism prompted Donald Francis Tovey to call it the touchstone of what is beautiful and childlike in music. In his Symphony No. 1, echoing Haydn's terminology, Beethoven called his one-in-a-bar third movement a minuet-and-trio. Here, he admitted that it is scherzo; in so doing, he forever changed the labeling of the standard symphonic layout.

The fiery rondo-finale is, to our ears, unadulterated Beethoven. To his 1803 audience, though, it must have been shocking – bizarre, even – what with its relentless energy that suddenly stops, its breaks in texture and continuity, its in-your-face sense of humor. Beethoven led the first performance of his Op. 36, on a Viennese concert that included the premieres of his Piano Concerto No. 3 and the oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives*. The concert received mixed reviews, but reportedly was a box-office success, a combination not unheard-of even today.

Recommended recording: George Szell, Cleveland Orchestra (Sony)

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.