

Melbourne Symphony Orchestra

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Deconstructing the Classics

BEETHOVEN SYMPHONY NO.7

SECONDARY LEARNING RESOURCE

Script: Nicholas Bochner

INTRODUCTION

Beethoven is probably the most recognisable figure in classical music. His name, his frowning face and the opening of his 5th symphony are all emblematic of serious music, high art and deep philosophical thought. For all that familiarity Beethoven remains in so many ways an enigmatic figure. The performance we're looking at is the MSO conducted by Principal Conductor in Residence Benjamin Northey performing Beethoven's 7th Symphony, in the Iwaki Auditorium in March 2020.

There are many facts that we know about Beethoven: his deafness, his confidence from an early age in his gifts, and his relationship to god, deeply spiritual but a firm believer in the agency of humans. We know of his anguish at the condition of his hearing from the oft-quoted Heiligenstadt Testament and we know of his many failed love affairs, the most tortuous of which ended dramatically with the famous letter to the mysterious Immortal Beloved, whose identity remains unknown to this day. All these things give us a picture of the person he was and yet contradictions persist. As early as the age of 31 he despaired of ever experiencing joy again, yet much of his music is full of unbounded joy; in dealing with people he frequently seemed to find his fellow human tiresome and difficult yet an unshakeable faith in the greatness of the human spirit underpins much of his work; he was assured in his belief in his great musical gifts and destiny and yet he still craved the admiration and applause of the world.

We have the documents I've mentioned as well as letters, his conversation books and his diary but it is perhaps obvious in the end that the most substantial guide to Beethoven is his music. Of course the music of any composer will tell us a great deal about them. But with **Beethoven, more than any other composer before him, strove to create music that was the embodiment of a moral vision, a depiction of the state of humankind and a guide to the spiritual aspirations available to us.** [Refer to Discussion Point 1.](#)

But exactly how does he embody complex spiritual and philosophical concepts into a string of sounds? Beethoven's early musical training put him in direct contact with Bach, Mozart and Haydn. Bach via his first important teacher Christian Gottlieb Neefe who hailed from Leipzig and was steeped in that city's two greatest composers, Johann Sebastian and Carl Phillip Emmanuel Bach; Mozart through living in Vienna; and Haydn who he met and studied with in person. From these three he inherited the already highly developed contrapuntal and classical styles that are governed by their own very clear logic. Beethoven's genius lay in his ability to take this logic and carry it to the point where each work that he created sets up a musical premise, which sets in train a series of logical results so compelling that the listener feels as though they are inhabiting a reality in which sounds are facts and the combination, contrasting, resolution and culmination of these sounds are events. The resulting music has the character more of a discovery of natural phenomena than that of a human creation. By definition this musical logic cannot be described in words, but we can take a closer look at the music to try and grasp what is going on.

The first step in creating the world in sound is to set out the parameters of that world, and Beethoven does this clearly in every symphony. Sometimes, as in the 5th symphony, he sets this up immediately within the first four bars of the piece. In contrast, the 7th symphony has the longest introduction of all, allowing Beethoven to set up a framework of musical parameters that will govern the entire work.

DISCUSSION POINT 1

Beethoven the Humanist. Listen to the finale to Beethoven's 9th Symphony in the Beethoven playlist. This is one of the most famous melodies ever written. It has been adopted as an expression of humanity at the fall of the Berlin Wall, as an anthem to togetherness for the European Union and a soundtrack for inhumane hyper-violence in Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. What compositional techniques did Beethoven use to take us on the immensely emotion journey.

The first thing that happens is the full orchestra chord that establishes the key: A major. Left standing after this full sound is the solitary oboe presenting this phrase of perfect symmetry: a falling fourth and a rising fourth with four equal rhythmic values. The next chord strike leaves us again with a single note, but it quickly splits into 2 lines; the next chord leaves us with 3, and the next 4. This is one level of this phrase. At the same time as this accumulation of instruments we have an accretion of rhythmic values: the first two bars are 4 equal note values, the next two split the second bar into some faster notes, the following two split the second bar still further. There are two more processes at work here that we don't necessarily notice consciously as our ear is naturally drawn by the beautiful wind lines, but they are things that enter our subconscious and shape our understanding and expectations of the rest of the work. The first is the bass line under the full orchestra chords: this line is descending by half steps or a chromatic scale. This is something which will be structurally important later. The second is that through this phrase as wind instruments build up there is a note held through each harmony. This focus on a single static note is something that returns in every movement of the piece.

Describing the compositional process as being governed by a musical logic might suggest somehow that the unfolding of the music could be in some way predictable or obvious. But on the contrary, it is the musical logic that allows something surprising and breathtaking that no one else would have thought of to make complete sense once we hear it. Following this opening phrase, the musical logic demands that something very different happen. After an unbroken line of 9 bars built from sustained notes moving over intervals of a fourth and fifth, we get a single bar of fast notes, rising by step against a static note in the bass. This is answered by a single bar that is a version of the first bar and we sense that these two apparently disjointed ideas are somehow connected.

The rhythmic values of this rising scale are the next step in the rhythmic process that took place in the opening phrase while the static note in the bass line relates to the held notes we heard in the upper winds in that phrase. When Beethoven combines the repeat of the opening phrase with the rising scale the effect is like a revelation of truth, and we are only in the 15th bar of the whole work.

This web of compelling logic operates at every level of a work of true genius, spanning across phrases, sections and movements, bringing the whole work together. It is what creates the sense of an organic unity because it works exactly like DNA in a natural system: every note and phrase contain the genesis of the rest of the piece.

While the introduction's compelling logic sets the whole work up for us, it does so while concealing a very big surprise. It is hard now to imagine never having heard the piece, but if you hadn't, the sweep, majesty and nobility of the introduction would not prepare you for the substance of the main movement. At the end of the introduction, having introduced a wealth of material, Beethoven narrows his focus to two things: the single repeating note and the process of rhythmic development.

And now we find out what the 7th symphony is really about – a celebration of rhythm and dance. Beethoven is a composer who, more than any before him, has themes recognisable by their rhythm alone, and this symphony

takes that to a whole new level. Each movement has a distinct rhythmic character that becomes a relentless driving force. The character of the rhythm and theme of this movement has an element of rustic folk. The way this follows the majesty of the introduction could suggest that after the 6th symphony, which celebrated the land and its people, Beethoven is going further here to claim nobility for the common person, foreshadowing the central message of the great 9th symphony.

The symphony was a huge success at its premiere. Given the quality and accessibility of the music, and the star status of Beethoven at the time, this is no surprise. Unusually for Beethoven though, there was also a certain amount of luck that heightened the success. It was premiered at a benefit concert for wounded soldiers in the immediate aftermath of Wellington's victory over Napoleon. This meant that not only was the joyous celebratory mood of the piece was heightened by the atmosphere, but also that there was the opportunity for a companion piece on the program. He had been approached by Johann Maelzel, inventor of the metronome, to collaborate on a work for his automated panharmonicon and together they produced the battle symphony *Wellington's Victory*. The piece has been described, justifiably, as opportunistic, gimmicky, fortissimo hokum and the Viennese loved it. This pairing of the sublime with the ridiculous amplified the success of the 7th symphony, allowing it to raise a good deal of money for veterans and later for Beethoven himself.

This military atmosphere also heightened the success of the second movement of the symphony, a movement already destined to be the most appealing and popular in an already appealing and popular symphony. The enormous appeal of this movement is hard to explain. It starts, like the main part of the first movement, with a compelling rhythm, one recognisable as a pavane or slow march. The first half phrase of the movement holds us with the single note melody, which harks back to the held notes in the introduction of the first movement. The second half phrase recalls the descending chromatic line of the introduction, leading to the heartbreaking major/minor resolution of that phrase.

Now begins a series of masterful variations of this compelling theme. Firstly, Beethoven picks out the middle line of the harmony, and uses it to create a sinuous melody in the violas and cellos that emphasises the descending chromatic line. Refer to Discussion Point 2.

DISCUSSION POINT 2

Theme and variation. Listen to the works by Charles Ives and Mozart in the Beethoven playlist. Can you identify the variant element in each variation? Is it harmonic, melodic or rhythmic?

Having started this theme with just low strings, Beethoven now adds instruments at each variation to create a very long crescendo. After a full orchestral statement of the theme spells out its full power, the mood changes. The winds bring in a melody that contrasts in every way: a major key with a steady stream of notes that flow easily through a full 16 bars. The insistent rhythm of the slow march persists though, now relegated to the edge of perception as an accompaniment figure in the basses and cellos.

Maintaining this audible connection with the opening darker section, means that this section of light is cast as reminiscence or dream of happiness rather than a real transition to that state, and sure enough the opening returns for further variation. This form of double variations, with two contrasting themes being developed alternately was a favourite of Beethoven's. In it we perhaps find the closest thing to an expression of his state of mind. Despite the turmoil he was suffering during the composition of this symphony – the end of his relationship with the immortal beloved, conflict with his brother and loss of income due to various misfortunes befalling his patrons – the majority of the symphony bursts with life and joy. It is only in this movement that we can imagine him holding himself against cruel circumstance while remembering and longing for happiness.

In a symphony dedicated to the spirit of dance, the scherzo, the movement that always evokes dance, is going to be quite something. Expanding the scope and expressive potential of what had been in the classical symphony the minuet and trio was a process Beethoven had been undertaking since his very first symphony. The scherzo of number 7 is his largest to date and is only eclipsed by the scherzo of the ninth. It starts explosively in the key of F major, a surprisingly distant key, but by the end of the first short section it has already modulated back to the home key of the symphony, A major. F major is the key of the 6th symphony and the use of that key for this movement is another strong suggestion of a link between the two pieces.

The trio section that appears twice in this movement is a noble serenade which recalls two of the elements of the introduction: the long notes held through harmony and the chromatic movement which together form the basis of this section.

In early sketches for this symphony Beethoven had contemplated this theme for the finale. There is no doubt that in the hands of Beethoven this theme would have provided a satisfactory summing up and rounding out of the preceding movements but he soon discarded it in favour of a rather more unorthodox idea that allowed him to drive the energy of the symphony to an ecstatic level. The source of this melody is rather surprising: in terms of minutes of music composed, one of the largest single genres of music by Beethoven was arrangements and settings of Irish and Scottish songs that he undertook primarily as a source of income. He nevertheless took the work very seriously and there is a large amount of correspondence in which the

publisher of the works in Edinburgh frequently praises his work whilst always asking for greater simplicity. In the minicoda of a song called "Save me from the grave and wise" which is based on a traditional Irish tune we find this. What works as a sort of lilting motion in the folk song setting is transformed into a relentlessly driving motive threatens to never stop.

The feature that creates much of this forward motion is the relentless repetition of a single note on the second beat of the bar; yet another appearance of the held note we heard in the introduction. For the *coda* of this movement the chromatic motion that was introduced in the introduction makes one last very important appearance. After passing theme through the instruments of the orchestra, the cellos and basses descend to the lowest part of their register and start to grind away at the notes on either side of E. This is now a combination of the chromatic idea and the held note idea. This causes a long build up that results in Beethoven having to use a dynamic marking he had never used in a symphony before: *fortississimo*, an indication that this moment is not a peak just in this work but in fact in the whole arc of the symphonies so far.

In his darkest hours Beethoven had contemplated taking his own life but was held back by the knowledge he had great art to produce, and that it was destined to be a gift for humankind. In most people this would be hubris, but as we listen to a work like his joyous Symphony No.7, we can easily understand how Beethoven attained his status as the most beloved and influential of composers and can only be grateful that Beethoven understood the enormous value of the gift he would leave us.

PLAYLIST LINK: [Spotify](#)

CREATIVE COMPOSITION ACTIVITY:

Create your own theme and then enjoy creating a set of variations by inverting, mixing rhythm and changing the harmony – perhaps move it from major to minor or try a related (dominant) key.

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