Ludwig van Beethoven, Symphony No. 7 in A major, Op. 92

Beethoven is probably the most beloved composer of all time. His innovative composition style inspired a new Romantic movement in classical music. Having mastered the classical style of Mozart and his teacher Joseph Haydn, Beethoven charted a new path, expanding sonic and formal boundaries and creating a new style of music that was uniquely his own.

Beethoven was born in December 1770, in Bonn, Germany. His grandfather served as *Kapellmeister* in the Archbishop's court. His father was a tenor singer and an alcoholic, and his mother died when he was 17 years old. Beethoven had six siblings, but only two of them, his brothers Carl and Johann, survived childhood. By the time Beethoven was 28, he was battling chronic health maladies, including debilitating digestive problems, tinnitus (persistent ringing in the ears), and progressive hearing loss. For a while, Beethoven became reclusive and hid his hearing loss even from close family and friends. Eventually he became more social, communicating with friends via written "conversation books" that he carried everywhere.

Beethoven worked on his Seventh symphony from 1811 to 1812, while on a visit to the spa town of Teplitz (Teplice in the Czech Republic today). He had been seriously ill, complaining of headaches and high fever. His hearing was getting worse; these would be the last years he could hear speech and music. He was also in some financial difficulty, having recently lost two major patrons, and he found out that his brother was "shacking up" with someone unsuitable. His own romantic love life had fallen into disarray as he pursued emotional affairs with married women and made proposals to uninterested young ladies. Months after completing this piece, he wrote the anguished, passionate letter addressed – but never sent – to his "Immortal Beloved," a lost love whose identity remains unconfirmed to this day.

With all that was troubling him during this period of his life, it is a wonder that this symphony contains some of his most unabashedly boisterous music. Luckily for Beethoven, its celebratory air happened to coincide with the prevailing national mood. In late 1812, the emperor Napoleon was dealt a crippling loss in Russia, and Beethoven's adopted hometown of Vienna, which had suffered greatly under the French leader's dominance, was ready to celebrate.

Beethoven debuted the symphony on December 8, 1813, at a charity concert for soldiers wounded in the Battle of Hanau, in which Austro-Bavarian troops attempted to prevent Napoleon's retreat to France after his defeat in Leipzig. Also on the bill were two marches written (by other composers) for a new musical contraption called a panharmonicon, and *Wellington's Victory*, Op. 91, commemorating the Marquess (later Duke) of Wellington's victory over Napoleon's brother Joseph, the King of Spain, at the Battle of Vitoria. The composer himself was on the podium, and the orchestra included Louis Spohr, a German composer and violinist who invented the chinrest and the system of rehearsal letters and numbers still used today, and opera composers Giacomo Meyerbeer and Antonio Salieri.

The concert was a critical and financial success for Beethoven, who put on the same program several more times. While Beethoven's Seventh may not be held in quite the same lofty regard today as his Third, Fifth, or Ninth symphonies, it was immediately embraced by Viennese audiences. This was almost certainly due to the "rustic simplicity" of its melodies, which bear the stamp of Beethoven's familiarity with Scottish, Irish, and Welsh folk songs (he arranged almost 180 of them between the years of 1809 and 1818). Each movement has a strong dance-like character that is shaped by specific recurring rhythmic patterns. As Richard Wagner would later praise the work, in his characteristically

grandiose way: "The Symphony is the Apotheosis of the Dance itself: it is Dance in its highest aspect, the loftiest deed of bodily motion, incorporated into an ideal mold of tone."

The first movement opens with a languid, pastoral setting that is at first delicately, then increasingly, energized by a series of staccato rising scales in the strings. The energy gradually dissipates, ending on a series of hesitant call-and-responses between the flute and oboe and the strings. But the entire introduction has been a decoy – the winds suddenly change the character of the piece from a square 4/4 meter to a lilting 6/8 melody. The transition introduces the prevailing rhythmic pattern of the movement, a dotted rhythm that is easily identified using founding music director Maestro David Katz's mnemonic: "Amsterdam." Beethoven uses the propulsive "Amsterdam" motif to give the music a sprightly, country dance feel. He then uses components of this tune to build the complex development section. The coda is well-known for the droning bass line that starts quietly in the background, but, like a hurdy-gurdy or a bagpipe, gets louder and louder, even to the point where the line is dissonant to the main melody. Beethoven ratchets up the tension as far as he possibly can before reaching the jubilant climax, horns blaring.

The second movement was an instant hit from the moment of its premiere; audiences would demand that it be immediately played again. (Conductors sometimes even substituted it for the second movements of Beethoven's Second and Eighth symphonies to make those performances more appealing.) The meditative elegy introduced by the violas, cellos, and basses features a clear rhythmic motif: long, short-short, long, long. The movement takes on the form of a canon as the second violins pick up the melancholy tune and the lower strings move on to a plaintive countermelody. What started as a simple, stately pavane develops additional layers and grows in intensity as successive sections of the orchestra join in.

Brief interludes in A major bring moments of solace, but the opening theme keeps returning, still driven by that inexorable rhythmic motif. In the end, Beethoven presents an unanswered musical question, as the motif reverberates through the strings one final time – but stops one note short. Instead, the movement resolves on the same wind chord on which it began.

The third movement is an archetypal Beethoven scherzo: a blazingly fast tempo, irregular phrase lengths, and unexpected accents. The rollicking *Presto* alternates with a stately Trio in which the winds play a bucolic chorale (possibly from an Austrian folk song) over a persistent pedal tone in the violins. Rather than constructing a resolution between these two sections, the composer ends the movement with a musical joke, a series of five explosive chords.

Beethoven introduces the last movement with two short fanfares – and then it's off to the races. This melody is a full-on, stomping, drinking song. The first violins play a wild, whirling tune reminiscent of a Scottish reel, punctuated by propulsive offbeats. The second theme, marked by nearly non-stop dotted rhythms, quietens things for a bit, but it's not long before Beethoven brings the triumphant energy back again.

— Program note by Emily A. Chen and Patricia Bronte