

CONCERT 14 Sep 2020

Dear WHO and friends,

I am going back to the great Beethoven this week, discussing the work that changed the nature of symphonic writing and freed him from the massive legacy of Mozart. This of course was his Symphony No. 3 in E flat major (the Eroica) Op. 55. I also want to muse about a very special orchestra whose performance I would encourage you to listen to and watch. Most of you I'm sure have heard this symphony before, maybe many times, but like all great works of art each experience is different and transcending in its beauty and understanding. The orchestra is the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra. Set up by Daniel Barenboim and academic Edward Said in 1999, it was named after an anthology of poems by Goethe.

In Barenboim's words, "the Divan was conceived as a project *against* the fact that it is essential for people to understand what the others think and feel. I'm not trying to convert the Arab members of the Divan to the Israeli point of view or Visa Versa. But I want to create a platform where the two sides can disagree and not resort to knives".

In the words of one of the orchestra's musicians, "this orchestra is a human laboratory that can express to the whole world how to cope with the other".

The orchestra is based in the town of Seville in Spain and consists of musicians from the countries in the Middle East, of Egyptian, Iranian, Israeli, Jordanian, Lebanese, Palestinian, Syrian and Spanish background. They have performed in many countries around the world. In 2016 the "Bar-Said Akademic" was established in Berlin, offering Bachelor of Music degrees and Artist Diplomas based on the aims of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra.

Beethoven composed the Eroica when he was 32, beginning work on it less than a year after penning the fraught and poignant Heiligenstadt Testament. Many historians feel he may have been trying to exorcise his anger and despondency over his increasing deafness by throwing himself into this work, the longest and most complex symphony any composer had written to date. Many did not know what to make of it at its first public performance at the Theatre an der Wein, Vienna, on 7 April, 1805. The concert was organised by Franz Clement the violin virtuoso who, the following year, introduced Beethoven's Violin Concerto to the adoring Viennese public. The story of the symphony's original dedication to Bonaparte is well known, as is his change of title to "Heroic Symphony", composed to celebrate the memory of a great man when, to Beethoven's disgust, Napoleon declared himself Emperor. As no program notes were left, speculation over "the hero" has been widespread. Hector Berlioz averred that "the scherzo" and "finale", picture funeral games given in honour of the dead hero, such as Homer describes in his Iliad. Wagner thought the "funeral march" depicted the 'deeply stoutly suffering man', the "scherzo" the 'gladly blithely doing man' and the "finale", 'man entire, harmoniously at one with self, in those emotions where the memory of sorrow becomes itself the shaping force of noble deeds'. Czerny suggested that the first "allegro" represented a sea fight and the "funeral march" as a memorial to Nelson. Perhaps Beethoven was purposely leaving it open to individual interpretation.

Certainly the symphony was confronting at the time and many of the public and the critics did not know what to make of it. The critic of the highly respected "Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung" in the edition of 13 February 1805 wrote: "This long composition is ... a daring and wild fantasia ... but often loses itself in lawlessness. Too much glaring and bizarre ... a sense of unity is completely lost. If Beethoven continues on his present path both he and his public will be the sufferers'. Strong sentiment indeed!

Beethoven of course knew and understood the extraordinary magnitude of this work ushering in his Heroic period and producing the great Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Symphonies, the "Emperor Piano Concerto" and "Fidelio", some of his most loved works. He agreed with friends who were quoted in a review stating 'If this masterpiece does not please now, it is because the public is not cultured enough to grasp all the effects... it will be seen for the masterpiece it is'.

Late in life, he was asked by his friend Christian Kuffner, the poet, which of his symphonies was his favourite. "The Eroica" he replied. 'I should have guessed the C minor'. 'No' insisted Beethoven, "the Eroica".

The recording I encourage you to listen to is by Barenboim and the East-Western orchestra from a memorable Prom Concert performance. Orchestra and conductor obviously have a wonderful connection, Barenboim often using minimalist gestures to encourage and shape an ensemble at the top of their game.

I won't go into a detailed analysis of each movement at this juncture but would like to encourage you to listen out for some high points.

First Movement: Allegro con brio

After two chords with full orchestra, a real statement of intent and suggestion to the audience to shut up and listen, the chief theme is interpreted by the cellos. Curiously enough, it is the same as the opening of the overture to Mozart's *Bastien and Bastienne* which Beethoven must have heard in Bonn years earlier and I referred to in the letter about Mackerras and his early composing. The second subject proper is heard after a descending passage, its first phrase being allotted to woodwinds and continued by strings. A most elaborate development ensues. Listen out for a violent outburst with full orchestra followed by calm, featuring the oboe in an important roll. The development ends with the horn playing out the first four notes of the first theme. It comes in alone and at the first rehearsal Ferdinand Ries, Beethoven's student standing alongside him, cursed, stating that the man was a fool to enter in the wrong place calling out "Too soon. Too soon! The horn is wrong. He reported that Beethoven scowled, saying the horn player had done exactly what was written and he didn't forgive him for some time. Listen out for these famous four notes, just one of many radical departures in the symphonies' structure and, understandably at the time, could have been seen as a wrong entry. The recapitulation follows with the first subject again on the cellos. Second subject is then followed by a long and complicated coda.

Second Movement: Marcia funebre: Adagio assai

The first subject is played by the strings and then oboe before the second theme is heard in the strings. These themes are developed until what could be considered the trio, which is heralded by a section in the major mode. There is a return to the minor mode, fugal in character. An outburst of trumpets and horns is followed by the first theme on oboe and clarinet before returning to the second theme on strings. Just before the end, a peaceful melody is sung gently by the violins before a hint of the first subject, elongated in time, closes the movement. A slow movement of this length was unprecedented, but the exquisite compositional structure never loses the audience's attention. When Napoleon died many years later Beethoven was asked if he would write a funeral march to commemorate his death. "I already have" he replied.

Third Movement: Scherzo Allegro vivace.

The first theme is given to the oboe and first violins and is preceded by a short descending introduction. Almost all the material of the scherzo is founded on it. The trio section features three horns, the first time this had ever been done in the symphonic tradition. The players of the day would have been challenged by this writing. Horns at that time had no valves; the players had to make the notes by changing lip pressure and combining that with the right fist changing its position in the bell. There is a return to the scherzo in an abbreviated form.

Fourth Movement: Finale Allegro molto.

This movement consists of a theme and 10 wonderful variations. Beethoven had a particular affection for this theme, using it in the finale of variations for piano in E flat, his *Prometheus* ballet and a *contretanz*. Seconds, you have your moment to shine in the first variation, much to the annoyance of the firsts who have it in the second. The variations continue through different instrumentations, followed by a wonderful fugue on the first part. Then comes an incredible change of tempo to *Poco Andante* where the woodwinds introduce a further variation, which is continued by the strings. A sublime passage for first violins and oboe is juxtaposed with the second part of the theme thundered out by the basses, trumpets and woodwind. A rousing coda brings this amazing symphony to a close, bringing audiences to their feet for over two hundred years. Just wait to see and hear the reception after the Divan Orchestra performance to gauge the enduring love of this mighty work. There is an advertisement inserted into the first movement at the most inappropriate moment by some

commercial Luddite, get out of it quickly. The performance is excellent, vibrant and committed, with lovely interviews and a rousing reception at the end.