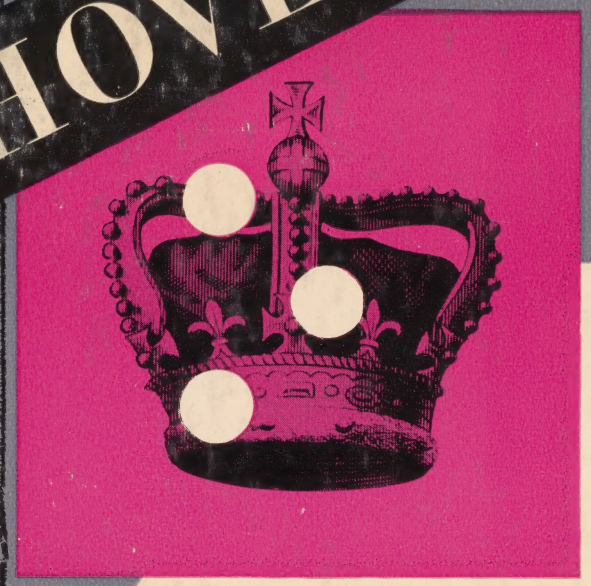
BEETHOVEN

Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major op. 55

"EROICA"



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BEETHOVEN: Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Op. 55 ("Eroica")

BRUNO WALTER conducting the PHILHARMONIC-SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA OF NEW YORK

The months immediately preceding the summer of 1802 were a time of terrible mental conflict for Beethoven. Five short years before he had won fame, fortune and friends. He was a pet of the aristocracy – publishers competed for his manuscripts – he was the favorite piano virtuoso of the day.

Then came the first signs of what was to be the curse of Beethoven's life, his deafness. Yet might not the history of music have taken a radically different turn were it not for this malevolent twist of Fate? Beethoven kept the secret of his growing deafness as long as he could, but finally in desperation he sat down on June 1, 1801, and wrote to his intimate friend, Carl Amenda: "My good Amenda, my loyal friend: How often do I wish you were with me, for your Beethoven lives very unhappily, in constant conflict with nature and his Creator; oftentimes I have cursed the latter for making his creatures the sport of the most terrible chance . . . know then that my noblest faculty, my hearing has sadly deteriorated." So frightfully did the composer brood upon his misfortune that by the Autumn of 1802 he was at his wits end. Finally, he resolved to renounce the world and his fellow men. He gave vent to his overburdened soul in one of the most heartrending human documents, the famous Heiligenstadt Testament: "O you my fellow-men, who take me or denounce me for morose, crabbed, or misanthropical, how you wrong me! You know not the secret cause of what seems thus to you . . ." The remainder of the note is a bitter and suicidal farewell to his brothers and friends.

But, Beethoven did not commit suicide. Somehow the writing down of the Heiligenstadt Testament acted as a sorely needed psychological purgative ("Confession is good for the soul", so the saying goes).

Beethoven's first biographer and old friend, Anton Schindler writes: "First in the fall of 1802 was his (Beethoven's) mental condition so much bettered that he could take hold afresh of his long formulated plan and make some progress: to pay homage with a great instrumental work to the hero of the time, Napoleon . . ." This, Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony, was to be the symbol of the composer's spiritual resurrection.

Much has been written of the relation of the *Eroica* Symphony to the life of Napoleon Bonaparte and to the French Revolution. Beethoven's well-meaning contemporaries embellished the music with elaborate and often fantastic programs. The story of how Beethoven destroyed the dedicatory page to Napoleon when he heard of the latter's acceptance of the imperial sceptre has become a matter of musical history. Crossing out the title page dedication lines to Napoleon, he wrote: "Sinfonia eroica per festeggiare il sovvenire d'un gran uomo' – "Heroic Symphony to Celebrate the Memory of a Great Man." When the composer learned of Napoleon's passing at St. Helena in 1821, he merely remarked curtly: "I composed the music for that sad event some seventeen years ago."

Talk as you may about the underlying program of the *Eroica*, the fact is that the music is so gigantic in its conception as to transcend any mundane matters relating to Napoleon's life, the French Revolution, or even Beethoven's own suffering and deafness. These were no doubt precipitating causes underlying the creation of the Symphony, but to say that the musical content is concerned entirely with any of these things is to belittle both the composer and his art. The hero of Beethoven's Symphony is no mortal being.

The *Eroica* Symphony was unlike any symphony that had been composed before or since. Most striking, aside from the purely dramatic elements of the work, was the stupendous length of the development in the opening *Allegro con brio* and the use of variation form in the finale. The Symphony as a whole was almost twice the length of the average work in the same form by Beethoven's immediate predecessors, Haydn and Mozart, and the scale of orchestral dynamics was correspondingly larger. As a result, Beethoven's contemporaries writhed in protest much as the musical conservatives of our day protest against the work of Stravinsky, Schönberg and Hindemith.

It has often been said that adherence to formal procedure in the arts will tend to obscure the "rhapsodic quality" of the artist's inspiration – whatever that may be. Yet Beethoven in this Symphony seldom attains his most dramatic climaxes by obvious means, but resorts constantly to such "dry" and "formal" contrapuntal devices as canon, fugue and variation. Who will deny that the stupendous fugal passages of the Funeral March are not the most dramatic ever composed. What amazing and delightful things Beethoven does with the simple dance tune that forms the basis for the tremendous variation-finale of this work! Yet one is never conscious of the use of these formalities. If it is possible at all to talk of a perfect union of form and content in the arts, surely this *Eroica* Symphony is one of the supreme examples.

The composer himself has spoken of the place the *Eroica* held in his estimation. In the summer of 1817, prior to the composition of the Ninth Symphony, Beethoven was asked during the course of a dinner which one of his symphonies was his favorite. "Eh! Eh!" said Beethoven. "The *Eroica*." I should have guessed the C minor," said his questioning friend. "No, the *Eroica*." For more than a century public opinion seems to have favored Beethoven's friend in holding the "mighty Fifth" closest to its affections. However, recent years have shown a trend among music lovers toward *Eroica*.

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ML 4228 BEETHOVEN: SYMPHONY NO. 3 IN E-FLAT MAJOR, Op. 55 ("Eroica")

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MASTERWORKS

BEETHOVEN

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Op. 55 ("Eroica")

BRUNO WALTER conducting the
PHILHARMONIC-SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
OF NEW YORK

ML 4228
NONBREAKABLE

SIDE 1
(XLP 1470)

Band No. 1: First Movement: Allegro
con brio

Band No. 2: Second Movement: Marche
funebre (Adagio assai)

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Op. 55 ("Eroica")

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SIDE 2
(XLP 1471)

Band No. 1: Third Movement: Scherzo
(Allegro vivace)

Band No. 2: Fourth Movement: Finale
(Allegro molto)

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