

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

(1770-1827)

Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, opus 55 "Eroica"

Born in the small German city of Bonn on or around December 16, 1770, **Ludwig van Beethoven** received his early training from his father and other local musicians. As a teenager, he was granted half of his father's salary as court musician from the Electorate of Cologne in order to care for his two younger brothers after his father gave in to alcoholism. Beethoven played viola in various orchestras, becoming friends with other players such as Anton Reicha, Nikolaus Simrock, and Franz Ries, and began taking on composition commissions. As a member of the court chapel orchestra, he was able to travel some and meet members of the nobility, one of whom, Count Ferdinand Waldstein, would become a great friend and patron. Beethoven moved to Vienna in 1792 to study with Franz Josef Haydn and, despite the prickliness of their relationship, Haydn's concise humor helped form Beethoven's style. His subsequent teachers in composition were Johann Georg Albrechtsberger and Antonio Salieri. In 1794, he began his career as a pianist and composer, taking advantage whenever he could of the patronage of others. Around 1800, Beethoven began to notice his gradually encroaching deafness. His growing despondency only intensified his antisocial tendencies. However, the Symphony No. 3 "*Eroica*" of 1803 began a sustained period of groundbreaking creative triumph. In later years, Beethoven was plagued by personal difficulties, including a series of failed romances and a nasty custody battle over his nephew, Karl. Beethoven died in Vienna on March 26, 1827.

In 1801 Beethoven first began to divulge to close friends the deterioration in his hearing. The next summer, at the suggestion of his doctor, he moved to the suburb of Heiligenstadt to escape the heat, noise, and hassles of Vienna. It was there, in early fall 1802, that he penned the remarkable "*Heiligenstadt Testament*," addressed to his brothers, in which he poured out his heart:

"O you men who think or say that I am hostile, peevish, or misanthropic, how greatly you wrong me. You do not know the secret cause that makes me seem so to you. From childhood on, my heart and soul were full of tender feelings of goodwill, and I was always inclined to accomplish great deeds. But just think, for six years now I have had an incurable condition, made worse by incompetent doctors, from year to year deceived with hopes of getting better, finally forced to face the prospect of a lasting infirmity (whose cure will perhaps take years or even be impossible)."

Beethoven could not bear the indignity of asking people to "*speak louder, shout, for I am deaf*," and felt he must retreat from society. He even contemplated suicide: "*A little more and I would have ended my life. Only my art held me back. It seemed to me impossible to leave the world until I had produced all that I felt was within me.*"

He began sketching the "*Eroica*" at the time of the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, and did his most concentrated work beginning in May 1803. It was the first of his symphonies for which he gave public indications of an extra-musical program, although what he wanted to divulge shifted over time. Originally he planned to dedicate it to Napoleon, whom he had long admired. But Beethoven became disillusioned when Napoleon crowned himself Emperor in 1804. In the end, the work was published in 1806 with the title "*Sinfonia Eroica ... composed to celebrate the memory of a great man.*" Beethoven completed the work in 1804 and it was premiered, privately, in Vienna, at the palace of Prince Lobkowitz, to whom it was ultimately dedicated. Beethoven also conducted the public premiere on April 7, 1805, in the Theater an der Wien.

Listeners and critics, those writing during the initial ten years or so of the work's existence, viewed the "*Eroica*" as a bizarre but original composition, more sublime than beautiful. Its unprecedented length, technical challenges, and uncompromising aesthetic stance seemed to aim beyond entertainment, forcing Beethoven's contemporaries to rethink what constituted a symphony.

OF NOTE: It often takes some time before musicians feel comfortable with the demands of difficult new music. Ultimately, it is probably much more instrumentalists and conductors, not listeners, critics, and managers who determine what pieces enter the repertoire. In the case of the "*Eroica*," the musicians seem to have gone out of their way to embrace "this most difficult of all symphonies." It is recounted that at a Leipzig performance in 1807, "The orchestra had voluntarily gathered for extra rehearsals without recompense, except for the honor and special enjoyment of the work itself."