

Beethoven Symphonies

May 15, 2021

For readers who know the varied symphonies, here may be a little joy of recognition. For those who do not know them, may there be here a little encouragement to get to know them.

1. By 1800 Beethoven has already written much music, but here is his first Symphony. One would say, he is young, but the apprentice of Haydn and Mozart is already a master. Melody, harmony, rhythm, drive and humour, he has it all !

**A joyful spirit comes to the battlefield.
With promise of weapons musical rare to wield.**

2. Two years later, the young composer (32) is stricken with the onset of deafness. Yet this Symphony shows no trace of his despair. Rather, it shows how the musician will mint his suffering in joy and triumph for his future listeners.

**The master is spreading his wings at greater length,
Drawing from deafness' grief yet greater strength.**

3. The Symphony #3 fully lives up to its nickname, the "Eroica". Inspired by Napoleon, it presents the life and death of a great hero. Musically its wealth and power of emotion open up a new language, a new age of music, where man is henceforth at the centre.

**Ready for battle, forward the hero strides.
To death, but up on high his spirit rides.**

4. The "Eroica" of 1803 unleashed from the now fully mature Beethoven a series of popular masterpieces. The fourth symphony of 1806 is one of these : rich, varied, profound, full of thought and beauty, life and joy, yet tightly organised to deliver its punch.

**To reign now over opening realms unknown.
With passion, variety, order all his own.**

5. "Beethoven's Fifth" is the best-known of all nine Symphonies because it most dramatically presents the deep struggle in his soul to accept his fate. Here is modern man, 1807, striving to bend fate to his own will, in a blaze of revolutionary triumph.

**But storms do shake the universe's frame.
And man must fight, the victory to claim.**

6. Beethoven loved the countryside where he drank in the beauty and grandeur of God. It inspired all five movements of the lovely "Pastoral" Symphony, of 1808, the Sixth. Its calm is in remarkable contrast to the tension of the Fifth Symphony, just before it.

**A walk in the countryside, beside a stream.
Then peasants dance, a storm, a pastoral dream.**

7. The Seventh, of 1812, is another popular favourite. Four movements of an Olympic grandeur, but never remotely cold or inhuman. The wild last movement reminds us of Beethoven's inner struggles, but it is still perfectly designed and controlled.

**A majestic discourse, threnody of the soul.
Noble in every part, and in the whole.**

8. The Eighth, also of 1812, also relieves tension by harking back to the pre-heroic symphonies and humour of a Haydn, but Beethoven cannot forsake the richness and organisation of his mature style. The second movement is pure comic opera.

**Down from the heights, the hero comes to earth.
Remembering earlier times, with rhythmic mirth.**

9. The famous Ninth Symphony, is named the

“Choral” because of the choir which Beethoven introduced to set to music a beloved Hymn to Joy. Three monumental movements set the scene, but, for Beethoven, it is joy that must have the last word.

**Doom, fate and crashing heavens open wide.
Still rhythm, beauty, men’s joy will abide.**

Kyrie eleison