

Heroic Harmonies

February 7, 2009

Just before the media uproar of the last two weeks a dear friend asked me to write about any piece of music that I especially liked. It would have to be a piece by Beethoven (1770 – 1827). Then I might single out the first movement of his Third Symphony, known as the “Eroica,” or Heroic Symphony.

Really the whole symphony is heroic. It is the musical portrait of a hero, originally Napoleon, until Beethoven learned that from First Consul of the French Republic he had made himself into an old-style Emperor of the French Empire, whereupon Beethoven ripped out the dedication page to Napoleon and dedicated the symphony instead to a hero. But the music remained unchanged: the revolutionary expression of Beethoven’s ardent hopes for a heroic new age of mankind to emerge from a tired old order of kings and cardinals.

It was however that old order, as expressed by Haydn (1732 – 1809) and Mozart (1756 – 1791) in particular, that gave to Beethoven the musical structures within which to shape and contain his dramatic new emotions. The first movement of the “Eroica” was unprecedentedly long in Beethoven’s own day – over 600 bars, lasting in performance anywhere around a quarter of an hour. Yet from first bar to last, the varied wealth and dynamic force of the musical ideas owe their tight unity and overarching control to the classical sonata form which Beethoven had inherited from the 18th century: Exposition, Development and Recapitulation (ABA), with a Coda mighty enough (innovation of Beethoven) to balance the Development (ABAC).

Leaping into action with two E flat major chords, the hero strides forth with his main theme, the first subject, built solidly out of that chord. The theme goes to war. A valiant re-statement precedes several new ideas of varying rhythms,

keys and moods until moments of calm come with the classically more quiet second subject. But war soon returns, with off-beat rhythms and violent struggle, culminating in six hammering chords in two-time cutting right across the movement's three-time. A few vigorous bars close the Exposition.

Upheavals and calm alternate for the rest of the movement. Notable in the Development is the most tremendous upheaval of all, culminating in a threefold shattering discord of F major with E natural in the brass, out of which mouth of the lion comes the honey of a brand-new lyrical melody, but still striding! Notable in the Coda is the fourfold repetition of the hero's triumphant main theme, climaxing with inexorable logic in a blaze of glory. Lord, grant us heroes of the Faith, heroes both tender and valiant, heroes of the Church!

Kyrie eleison.