

Symphony No. 3 in E-flat major, Op. 55, *Sinfonia eroica*

Ludwig van Beethoven

Ludwig van Beethoven was a partisan of noble humanitarian principles, joining those who saw the democratic ideals of ancient Greece reflected in the aspirations of the Jacobins of post-Revolutionary France. At the head of the Jacobins was Napoleon Bonaparte, and Beethoven was among the political idealists who viewed Napoleon as a repository of hope for the social enlightenment of humankind.

At the urging of the future King of Sweden, Beethoven began contemplating a musical celebration of Napoleon as early as 1797. As his early sketches coalesced into a symphony, Beethoven resolved not to simply dedicate his composition to Napoleon, but to actually name it after him. In the spring of 1804, just as Beethoven completed his symphonic tribute, news arrived that Napoleon had crowned himself Emperor, that the standardbearer of republicanism had seized power as an absolutist dictator. It fell to Beethoven's pupil Ferdinand Ries to inform the temperamental composer, and to relate the scene (which must have occurred in May 1804) in a later biography:

Beethoven held [Napoleon] in extremely high esteem at that time and compared him to the greatest Roman consul. Both I and several of his closer friends saw this symphony lying on his table, already copied out in score; at the very top of the title-page was the word “Buonaparte” and at the very bottom “Luigi van Beethoven” — and that was all. Whether he intended to fill in the middle, and with what, I do not know. I was the first one to bring him the news that Buonaparte had declared himself emperor — whereupon he flew into a rage, shouting: “Is even he nothing but an ordinary man! Now he will also

trample upon human rights and become a slave to his own ambition; now he will set himself above all other men and become a tyrant.” Beethoven went to the table, grabbed the top of the title-page, tore it in two, and threw it to the floor. The first page was re-written and the symphony was then for the first time given the title of *Sinfonia eroica*.

The autograph score thus mutilated has disappeared, but the library of Vienna's Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde owns a copyist's manuscript that Beethoven marked and used for conducting — and it tells a similar tale. Its title page originally read (in Italian) “Sinfonia grande intitolata Bonaparte del

In Short

Born: December 15, 1770 (probably, since he was baptized on the 17th), in Bonn, then an independent electorate of Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Work composed: summer or fall of 1802 to the spring of 1804; a prominent theme in the finale dates from 1801; dedicated to the music-loving nobleman Prince Franz Joseph von Lobkowitz

World premiere: in private performances at Prince Lobkowitz's palace in Vienna during the second half of 1804; first public performance, April 7, 1805, at Vienna's Theater an der Wien, with the composer conducting

New York Philharmonic premiere: February 18, 1843, Ureli Corelli Hill, conductor, which marked the US Premiere

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: April 7, 2018, Esa-Pekka Salonen, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 47 minutes

Sigr Louis van Beethoven” (“Grand Symphony titled Bonaparte by Mr. Ludwig van Beethoven”). But the words “titled Bonaparte” were erased with such vehemence that a gash stands largely in their place. When the piece was published, it was presented as *Sinfonia Eroica ... per festeggiare il sovvenire di un grand Uomo* (*Heroic Symphony ... to Celebrate the Memory of a Great Man*); and the work’s dedication, originally intended for Napoleon, was given over instead to Beethoven’s patron Prince Lobkowitz. It became a leitmotif in Beethoven’s life that individuals would fail to live up to his idealizations, and

that the composer would prefer Mankind in the abstract to Man in the flesh.

At first, critical response was guarded. On February 13, 1805, readers of Leipzig’s *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* ingested this report:

The reviewer belongs to Herr van Beethoven’s sincerest admirers, but in this composition he must confess that he finds too much that is glaring and bizarre, which hinders greatly one’s grasp of the whole, and a sense of unity is almost completely lost.

Sources and Inspirations

Beethoven had intended to name his Third Symphony for Napoleon Bonaparte, but changed his mind in a fit of rage at the news that the French ruler, who had seemed to uphold democratic ideals, had declared himself Emperor. Napoleon was confirmed as Emperor by the French Senate in May 1804, and the move was subsequently approved by the public in a constitutional referendum, although 52 percent of voters abstained.

Napoleon’s coronation at the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, on December 2, 1804, carried all the trappings of royal succession that the French Revolution had overthrown. He was draped in an 80-pound red velvet, ermine-lined mantle, carried a scepter and sword, and wore a gold laurel wreath prior to taking the Crown of Charlemagne. The crown had been newly created, as the traditional royal jewels had been destroyed in the Revolution. Napoleon was anointed by Pope Pius VII, but then crowned himself, signifying that this imperial reign came from his own merits and the will of the people, and not through religious consecration.

Madame de Rémusat, a woman of letters who served Napoleon’s wife, the Empress Josephine, observed that “men worn out by the turmoil of the Revolution ... looked for the domination of an able ruler” and that “people believed quite sincerely that Bonaparte, whether as consul or emperor, would exert his authority and save [them] from the perils of anarchy.”



The Coronation of Napoleon,
by Jacques-Louis David

The same critic maintained that the piece “lasted *an entire hour*.” That was an exaggeration, but the *Eroica* was nonetheless the longest symphony ever written when it was unveiled, and listeners and critics commented widely on that fact. “If I write a symphony an hour long,” Beethoven is said to have countered, “it will be found short enough,” and he was proved right in the long run. Opinion about the Third Sym-

phony shifted rapidly. By 1807 nearly all reactions to the piece were favorable, or at least respectful, and critics were starting to make sense of its more radical elements and accept it as one of the summit achievements in all of music.

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, three horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.

Listen for . . . a “False Entrance”



Beethoven in an 1803 painting by Christian Horneman

The course of the first movement of the *Eroica* Symphony is quite unpredictable, and one of its quirks led to an incident that must have been fearsome at the time. Just before the recapitulation, Beethoven writes what sounds like a false entrance for the horn, prefiguring immediately upcoming material but sounding dissonant against a chord being played just then by the violins.

An account by the composer’s pupil Ferdinand Ries states:

The first rehearsal of the symphony was terrible, but the hornist did in fact come in on cue. I was standing next to Beethoven and, believing that he had made a wrong entrance, I said, “That damned hornist! Can’t he count? It sounds frightfully wrong.” I believe I was in danger of getting my ears boxed. Beethoven did not forgive me for a long time.