

Discover Beethoven's Eroica

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Ludwig van Beethoven: Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Op. 55 (“Eroica”)

A hallmark of great music is its ability to say something powerful to us no matter how many times we have heard it. For a few listeners, this will be a first acquaintance with Beethoven’s magnificent “Eroica” Symphony, which is certain to make a powerful impression. For most of us, a performance of this masterwork is a visit with an old and dear friend. Now more than two centuries old, the “Eroica” sounds fresh and immediate throughout its forty-seven minute duration. Concise motives are building blocks for the heroic first movement. Principal oboe is the soloist in the somber *Marcia funebre*. Beethoven limits himself to one theme in the scherzo, but puts it through its paces. Listen for the horns’ section solo in the “hunting call” trio. Beethoven used the famous finale theme for two other variations sets. Heroism, surprise, drama, solemnity, humor: the “Eroica” has them all.

In this performance, host Diego García will walk the audience through each movement, giving clues and tips for what to listen for in this path-breaking symphony. Whether this is your first or fiftieth time hearing Beethoven’s “Eroica,” we hope you’ll discover something new in this performance!

Ludwig van Beethoven: Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Op. 55 (“Eroica”)

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born: December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: 1803–1804

World Premiere: Private performances in 1804 for Prince Lobkowitz. Beethoven conducted the first public performance in Vienna on 7 April 1805 at the Theater an der Wien

Duration: 47 minutes

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

When Beethoven began his Third Symphony, Napoleon Bonaparte was First Consul of France. Beethoven idealized Napoleon, perceiving him as the hero of revolutionary France, and planned to dedicate the symphony to the French leader. The work's original subtitle was "Bonaparte." That changed when Napoleon declared himself Emperor in May 1804. Beethoven exploded in protest. According to his amanuensis Ferdinand Ries, he cried out:

"Is he then, too, nothing more than an ordinary human being? Now he, too, will trample on all the rights of man and indulge only his ambition. He will exalt himself above all others, become a tyrant."

He then tore the title page of his new symphony in pieces. When he recopied it, he wrote "Sinfonia eroica." It was published 1806 with the subtitle "To celebrate the memory of a great man."

"Eroica" means "heroic" in Italian, and the symphony is monumental in every sense. When Beethoven completed it in summer 1803, it was the longest symphony ever written. The "Eroica" was pivotal in Beethoven's development not only as a symphonist but also as a composer. With this one work, he divested many 18th-century conventions and vaulted forward into uncharted territory.

Two *fortissimo* chords announce immediately that we are to sit up and take notice; this is not background music. More than two centuries later, their effect is still electrifying, setting the tone for the entire work. The development section is exceedingly long —the longest in Beethoven, in fact —and, directly after its climax, introduces an entirely new theme for flute and oboe, in the remote key of E-minor. Beethoven recalls that theme in the recapitulation, where it becomes the subject of a coda so extensive that it nearly matches the development in length.

The English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge referred to the famous slow movement march as "a funeral procession in deep purple." It features one of the great oboe solos in the orchestral repertoire. Beethoven also provided rich material for bassoon and flute. In the quasi-military section in major mode, we can hear intimations of the Fifth Symphony, which would follow the "Eroica" by four years. Timpani is a powerful presence in this slow movement, functioning both as bass and even occasionally as a melodic instrument, rather than mere punctuation.

After a whirlwind scherzo that reduces three beats to one per measure (and features the entire horn section in its Trio), Beethoven ices his cake with variations. The theme was familiar to Viennese audiences from Beethoven's ballet score, *The Creatures of Prometheus* (1800). Nobility of spirit, capricious humor, funeral march, fugue, poignant tenderness: all these and more find their way into Beethoven's cosmic finale, his ultimate tribute to the unnamed hero.

This information is provided solely as a service to and for the benefit of New Jersey Symphony subscribers and patrons. Any other use without express written permission is strictly forbidden.