# THE EROICA SYMPHONY OF BEETHOVEN.[1]

BY BARON VON DER PFORDTEN.

BEETHOVEN'S Third Symphony in E-Flat, Op. 55, is called the Eroica, the Hero Symphony. The occasion of the origin and the name is exceptionally familiar to us. General Bernadotte was quite intimate with Beethoven during his stay in Vienna as French ambassador, and proposed that the composer "celebrate the greatest hero of the century in a piece of music." Most probably Bernadotte's admiration and enthusiasm for Napoleon was chiefly founded on his military achievements, but Beethoven, as we shall soon see, had a different conception, broader and deeper.

In May, 1804, the symphony was finished and was to be presented in Paris. The arrangement of the title page was especially characteristic, for at the top stood "Napoleon Bonaparte," and lower down, "Luigi van Beethoven." Aside from this there was nothing. No formula of homage nor flattering phrase, not even an ordinary dedication. Only the two great names with full acknowledgment of the equality of the ruler in the realm of sound with the mighty conqueror of men. Then Napoleon performed his *coup d'état* and was proclaimed emperor. This changed the situation.

A trustworthy witness tells us how the news affected Beethoven. He cried out in a passion of anger, "Is he nothing but an ordinary man like all the rest? Now he too will tread all the rights of man underfoot simply to further his own ambition. Now he will set himself above all the rest and be a tyrant!" Perhaps these are not Beethoven's exact words, but the sense at any rate is correctly given. In a rage he tore up the title page, threw it in shreds upon the ground and tramped it underfoot. Thus he castigated his disappointment. Thus he destroyed his own Napoleonic cult.

We may smile at Beethoven's naïveté. It seems almost past belief that Bonaparte could so be misjudged, so idealized. But

[1] Translated from the German by Lydia G. Robinson.

Beethoven was not the only one who permitted himself to be deceived and who revered the clever and ambitious Corsican as the benefactor of mankind. Many idealists thus believed in him and did not recognize the mask until he let it fall. Even in Germany the greatest benefits, liberty and true humanity, were expected from the French Revolution; and Bonaparte, its greatest son, appeared as its realization and perfection, as the prophet of the golden age. Thus he was not to Beethoven the triumphant warrior nor the superior politician but the embodiment of the ideal of noblest humanity, hence the hero of his soul. Therefore upon him he wrote the Eroica, not upon his person but his mission.

Now Beethoven's illusion was gone. Bonaparte and Beethoven no longer had anything in common. The proud, ambitious, self-seeking and violent conqueror is still a hero in history, and will so remain; but Beethoven's hero he could not be. This disillusionment was too complete. We can see perfectly that Beethoven did not understand Napoleon at all. He only thought that he saw in him his own ideal realized. The symphony on Bonaparte would not have shown us Napoleon as he was but as the representative of Beethoven's conception of heroism.

Now we can understand why he stamped upon the title page only and not on the whole work. Napoleon was lost to him; his supposed hero was destroyed but his ideal of heroism had not suffered. It still remained alive in Beethoven's inner consciousness in all its power and beauty, independent of a bodily representative. Therefore where originally "written to Bonaparte" had stood on the score, it was now called *Sinfonia eroica, composta per festiggiare il sovvenire di un grand uomo,* "The Eroica Symphony Composed to Celebrate the Memory of a Great Man" (i. e., a hero). The hero was not named,—name and personality had nothing to do with it.

Beethoven had thought that he might venture to discover his hero in Napoleon. He could not now replace him by another on a day's notice. The hero of his ideal never appeared to him, the Eroica remained without an owner. Hans von Bülow in one of his famous concert-talks after a presentation which was especially inspiring, once called it the "Bismarck" symphony. There is nothing to be said against this; still there is no convincing reason to favor such a proposal. Each of us may dedicate the symphony to the great man whom he considers his hero, his ideal representative of the highest humanity. The symphony has nothing objective in it, nothing defined in so many words; neither the deeds of Napoleon

nor of Bismarck are described in it. It does not relate the story of any particular hero, but it proclaims the conception of a hero. It testifies to a heroism such as Beethoven himself lived and experienced. Whoever can live and feel such a heroism as Beethoven felt it, may lay claim to the symphony and may refer it to his favorite hero. The main question remains whether or not we shall be able to entirely appropriate all that is expressed in the work.

If I should now confess that it is not at all easy for me to rightly comprehend the Eroica, would I be criticized or pitied? Would I have no companions or only very timid ones? Is the character and intention of the work really so clearly obvious? If so, we would hardly expect to find such diverse interpretations as have been attempted. Misled by the title and by our historical information, the attempt has been made to assign to it a program throughout, which, if not Napoleonic, is still definitely objective. This leads to all sorts of difficulties of which I shall call attention to but one.

The second movement is called *Marcia funebre,* "Funeral March." This, it may be assumed, is intended to celebrate the death of the hero. Yes, but if the hero is dead, the affair must be ended. What then can be the meaning of the following movements? The funeral march ought naturally to conclude the symphony and not stand in the middle. Then refuge is taken in an artificial explanation that only one hero is dead and another arises who will carry on his work to its completion. Then, does the symphony have two heroes? Or it is explained that the hero is not dead, but there are heavy sacrifices to lament and these are celebrated here. Thus the funeral march would become a burial scene for the fallen, and the Scherzo following upon it must indicate a return to camp and bivouac. But all this is so far from convincing, is so farced and stilted, that it can not help confusing the inexperienced. The whole thing is the consequence of a fundamental error, made in trying to interpret from the symphony the life of a hero in its external sense. This is the reason why the reader must be warned against most interpretations on the basis of program music.

If any one positively requires guidance and wishes to lean upon a master who has understood Beethoven as few have, let him read Richard Wagner's explanation of the Eroica in the fifth volume of his collected prose and poetical works. There he will find an answer to prejudice and misunderstanding, and Beethoven's idea and conception of heroism set forth briefly and tersely while the emotional content of the individual phrases is indicated both simply and

impressively. There he will find the program of the symphony developed not in an objective sense but only in its spiritual significance. Now we shall proceed to see what we shall find in the symphony.

The first movement begins with a theme which will seem to us the less heroic according as we bring to it a more one-sided conception of heroism. I would not think ill of any one who declared that the first movement of the Symphony in C Minor is much more heroic in the popular sense. The first tones delight us with their freshness, clearness and energy; they breathe a vigorous joy of life and an uninterrupted impulse to action. There is little value in pointing out that Mozart's musical comedy "Bastien and Bastienne" displays the same sequence of tone. The similarity is purely external and therefore musically of no consequence; in that case the theme is pastoral, peacefully contemplative, while in this it contains the deepest spiritual quality.

It is well to observe how the theme changes from E Flat through D down to C Sharp, and in so doing passes from merry action to painful suffering; through the diminished seventh which is held through two measures it goes to the six-four chord of G Minor then back to the tonic. Hence it is from the very beginning a drama of emotion, pleasure and pain in most intimate connection, the whole man, the real Beethoven. Considerable space indeed is given to a lamentation, now elegiac, now pathetic; the second theme in B, in execution the E Minor melody, and the transition group mentioned above and distributed among the wooden wind instruments, contrast sharply with the energy which finally gains the upper hand. It is no doughty hero in coat of mail who pursues his end with inconsiderate selfishness, but an idealist in full power and self-consciousness to whom no human emotion is a stranger, no stirring of the soul unknown; it is the whole man as great in action as in suffering, as fine and noble in deeds as in sorrow—it is Beethoven himself.

Now the purpose of the symphony is clear; Beethoven is celebrating his own hero, he is proclaiming his own ideal of heroism, he is giving us himself. Accordingly its significance does not lie in the fact that it is the first to realize any program, but rather that it reveals freely and openly, outspoken and expressively as never before, the nature of its creator who for the first time speaks forth in it his own peculiar language.

One especially bold feature must not pass unnoticed. This is the famous passage directly before the repetition in the second part

of the movement. The orchestra has sunk to the softest *pianissimo,* finally it no longer breathes the complete dominant seventh, but rather only indicates it in the B and A flat tremolo of the two violins. To these tones which make us shudder there comes gently as from the remote distance, as out of another world, the first theme, E flat, G, E flat, B, sounded mysteriously by the horn. Then the full orchestra takes up for the first time the entire dominant seventh chord, and the transition is complete. Accordingly we have here an anticipation similar to that in the closing phrase of the Fifth Symphony only much more striking and poetical.

For a long time this was considered impossible; even Wagner inclined to the opinion that A flat should be corrected to G. Still this does not improve the passage, but makes it musically even more illogical. It can not be helped. We must accept this dramatic embarrassment as it is, even though it scorns all rules.

The second movement is one of the most affecting ever written. Here too the strings begin the theme which is then repeated by the horns. It is incredible and indescribable to what a degree of tragedy this melody can ascend. Involuntarily it reminds us of the piano Sonata in A Flat, Op. 26, whose second movement is known as *marcia funebre sulla morte d'un eroe* ("Funeral March at the Death of a Hero"), and has become famous. If the gloomy splendor of mourning and the passionate outcry of pain moves us in that case, here we have it to a greater extent. The terrors of eternity overshadow us, pictures of the night arise from the profoundest depths of the tragedy of the soul. It is not only a matter of life and death, but of hope and despair. But Beethoven does not leave us comfortless. In the midst of mourning he admits a gleam of triumph like a message from above, like a word of faith in the ideal which is immortal. Then the march is repeated; the Coda brings a new melody full of unspeakable devotion in a manner so affecting as only Beethoven knew how to sing; and then it is finished. The theme breaks and crumbles away before our eyes and ears and a prolonged hold places its seal upon it.

It will never be possible to comprehend the emotional character of this movement in words, but fancy is free. In fancy we may see tears fall, we may dig the grave, or hear the shovelfuls of earth roll upon it; but it is also possible for thoughts to keep far away from the grave and turn to other mental wounds and losses.

Our experience with the third movement, the Scherzo, is similar. Its cheerfulness is moderated; it flashes forth from an almost spectral energy, to which a definite significance can hardly be as-

signed. The Trio sets a particularly difficult task for the horns; it sounds like a flourish of trumpets, like a summons to ceaseless battle. The *alla breve* measures thrown into the repetition of the *Scherzo* again show Beethoven's extraordinary energetic power of composition.

The Finale starts off with a stormy *allegro molto* which arouses our expectation to the highest pitch. But then we stand surprised, if not astonished. Beethoven makes use of a theme which has already served him in the variations of Op. 35. It is not really a melody, it is only the harmonic undertones of a melody. What they have to do in this Hero Symphony we cannot see at first, but Beethoven makes it clear. The simple theme E flat, B, B, E flat, varied by a counter movement and continued in the reverse direction, prepares the ground for what is to follow. For now a melody is to be built upon it which not only contains the meaning of a second theme, but is devoted to unsuspected uses. First we have a *fugato* on the first theme; it runs on into a G Minor melody which breathes forth great rhythmical energy. Variations are also made on this theme. Fnally the second theme becomes dominant; in the *poco andante* development it attains indescribable force of expression. The passage from the seventeenth measure of this broader tempo is splendid and reminds us at once of the "Fidelio." We experience a spiritual exaltation with which music had heretofore never been endowed: a *presto* of a wonderfully alluring swing completes the work. Hence the Finale building up quite from the beginning has in a measure reached the highest point. It leaves us in an exalted mood.

That is the Eroica. Who now thinks of Napoleon? Who asks for a program? I believe that we are entirely cured of every misconception. We no longer care to fathom what it all means. We are happy and thankful to be able to feel what we hear.

From this we may draw a lesson. We do not assign any special place to the Eroica because it bears a particular name and because we chance to know the motive of its external origin. The internal history of its origin and its value and significance do not differ from Beethoven's other works. For instance we could with equal right expect a special name for the Symphony in C Minor and might lay it to the account of chance that it never had one. It is related that Beethoven said with reference to the first theme, "Thus Fate knocks at the door." Why did he not call it the "Fate Symphony"? Because no external occasion suggested it and because intrinsically it was not necessary. If we do not feel what it says to us it is not

because there is no title or program to instruct us as to what we ought to feel.

On the other hand, the appreciation of the Third Symphony is made more difficult rather than assisted by the fact that it was called the Eroica and was originally written to Napoleon. If we bring definite ideas of heroism to it, it is a thousand to one that they will not correspond to what we are to hear. It is only when we give ourselves up to the work without preconceptions and without thinking of its name or history that we can possibly grasp its import, and especially must we be prepared to be in sympathy with it.

It is always the same. As long as we require an explanation and interpretation in words we are still far from understanding Beethoven's music. For this it is not at all important in what direction our power of imagination is directed or how far it is carried. Pictures and scenes may arise before our inner vision. This may occur while hearing the symphony or even in memory. It is possible also for this accompanying vision to be entirely lacking without detracting from the complete artistic performance. In this respect every person is differently constituted. Even the same person is not always disposed the same at different times.

Only we should always be honest, and it ought to be possible to establish proofs. Suppose one were to play the Eroica without giving its name to the audience and then ask all around, what would be gained by it? How many would be likely to say, "It is a Hero Symphony"? And is it likely that any one would declare that it must originally have been written to Napoleon? Certainly all would admit that it is a magnificently conceived work, whose immeasurable, spiriual content we would be able to assimilate only after repeated performances. That would be right. That would be the correct foundation upon which we could proceed to build farther. If a community of connoisseurs were to exchange opinions the result would not be essentially different. Perhaps a number of them would have visions to relate which they had experienced during a performance of the Eroica; perhaps the eyes of many would be shut from pure delight in hearing. But all would loudly testify that a great man and artist had spoken to them, and had exalted them to his own dramatic world of thought and emotion.

This is what the Eroica says to us, and it is equally true for all of Beethoven's works.