Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Symphony No. 7 in A Major, Opus 92 (1812) 38 minutes

I. Poco sostenuto; Vivace

II. Allegretto

III. Presto; Assai meno presto

IV. Allegro con brio
Notes on the Program by Ken Meltzer

Symphony No. 7 in A Major, Opus 92 (1812)

Ludwig van Beethoven was baptized in Bonn, Germany, on December 17, 1770, and died in Vienna, Austria, on March 26, 1827. The first performance of the Seventh Symphony took place in the Hall of the University of Vienna on December 8, 1813, with the composer conducting. The Symphony No. 7 is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.

Ludwig van Beethoven completed his Seventh Symphony in 1812. The work received its premiere on December 8, 1813, at the grand Hall of the University of Vienna, as part of a concert for the benefit of wounded Austrian and Bavarian soldiers. Beethoven served as conductor.

Because of Beethoven’s participation in the concert and its philanthropic mission, several of Vienna’s most eminent musicians agreed to play in the orchestra. The concert proved to be one of the great public triumphs of the composer’s career. The audience insisted upon an encore of the Seventh Symphony’s Allegretto. By popular demand, the entire concert was repeated four days later, raising another 4,000 florins for the wounded soldiers.

Still, Beethoven’s reliance in the Seventh upon the briefest of rhythmic motifs—often presented with relentless, and even frightening energy—inspired some negative reactions. Musician Friederich Wieck, father of Clara Wieck Schumann, attended the first rehearsal of the Beethoven Seventh. Wieck recalled that the general consensus among musicians and laymen alike was that Beethoven must have composed the Symphony, particularly its outer movements, in a drunken state (“trukenen Zustande”). Carl Maria von Weber, after hearing the Symphony for the first time, was reported to have exclaimed that Beethoven was now “quite ripe for the madhouse.”

On the other hand, Richard Wagner, in one of the most famous appreciations of a Beethoven Symphony, celebrated the finale as the “apotheosis of the dance.” More than two centuries after the premiere, Beethoven’s Seventh continues to amaze audiences with its dramatic fire. It remains one of the most powerful of all symphonic creations.

The Beethoven Seventh is in four movements. The first begins with the most ambitious slow introduction (Poco sostenuto) of any Beethoven Symphony. The flute offers premonitions of what develops into the central theme of the ensuing Vivace, a sprightly dance in 6/8 time. The theme’s dotted eighth/sixteenth/eighth-note nucleus provides the foundation for virtually all that ensues in this remarkable movement. The slow second movement (Allegretto), in the character of a somber march, opens and closes with a foreboding chord. By contrast, the vibrant third-movement scherzo (Presto) exhibits both extraordinary energy and power. The finale (Allegro con brio) is a miraculous combination of academic structure (sonata form) and Dionysian abandon. It is not until the terse final measures that the whirlwind of activity comes to a stunning halt.