

Exuberant creativity

Beethoven's Third Symphony is an example of form adapting itself to content. His Fourth is an example of the opposite: content overflows the form. Beethoven was composing the symphony we know as the Fifth when he received a generous commission for a symphony that had to be ready in less than three months. This commission came from Count Franz von Oppersdorff, a friend of Prince Lichnowsky, one of Beethoven's most important patrons. He had heard the composer's *Second Symphony* and was very impressed. Fortunately, after the struggle of giving birth to the immense "*Eroica*", Beethoven was in a state of creative euphoria. This was a very productive period for him: the *Triple Concerto*, the *Fourth Piano Concerto*, the *Violin Concerto*, the *Rasumovsky Quartets* and many other works. With all this music flowing from within him, he was not going to miss this opportunity to earn a good commission, and he accepted the project to write a symphony in what, for him, was very little time. In fact, he finished it in less than two months.

When one thinks about the process of creating a work of art it is clear that it requires more work to create the form as well as the content. It is much easier to take a pre-established format and fill it with creative ideas. Of course, by this method we would never have had an "*Eroica*" Symphony or a Sistine Ceiling. The result would surely have been attractive, but not the breakthroughs we admire. However, one can imagine how this method helped the output of a genius such as Mozart, who was able to write his last three symphonies in six weeks. But the objective of Beethoven's creativity is action, not merely an emotional and esthetic enjoyment. Beethoven's ideas break with the past in order to look to the future. That is why he had to work so hard in order to develop a form where these ideas can turn towards action.

The Fourth Symphony is a fascinating example of form not adequate to the explosive creative material it contains. The music seems to be in a straightjacket. It wants to spill out but the form will not allow it.

In the first movement, one theme after another is presented, like in the "*Eroica*" but the format is so "correct" that a full development of the rich material cannot take place. In spite of this, Beethoven is able to express the affirmation of his individuality that is always the culmination of his symphonic first movements.

The second movement is developed more fully, with extraordinarily long melodic lines which must share the movement with an obstinate and implacable rhythmic motif. It is said that Beethoven was not essentially a "melodic" composer, but here we have an example of his ability to create inspired melody. If many of his themes are not particularly melodious, it is because he did not want them that way. Contrasting melody with a rhythmic pulse is often found in Beethoven's slow movements. It usually represents, as it does here, the expression of personal emotions and desires that must be harmonized with the internal pulse of one's own destiny. In this movement, as is always the case with Beethoven, the rhythm of destiny will dominate in the end.

The third movement seems to elbow its way forward, pushing right and left as if it feels curiously constrained. It has a marvelous and violent energy. Beethoven dances with his demons in his particular way and one expects this to be a Scherzo. However, curiously this is marked "Menuetto. Allegro vivace" – a contradiction in itself. He is using a traditional mold for devilishly wild music that is not from the classical period. I have never been able to understand this description. The Trio is much more contemplative, with a tempo marking of "Un poco meno Allegro". It reminds one of what the third movement of the Seventh will be like. This analogy may be appropriate for the entire symphony.

The fourth movement is an explosion of kinetic energy. The problem is that it doesn't seem to have any direction. Towards the end, the climax comes almost by surprise, a kind of premature ejaculation that leaves us at the same time exhausted and disconcerted. This requires that the movement end with an addendum, with which the composer is as puzzled as we are.

The Fourth is marvelously spontaneous and uninhibited within that straightjacket. It is like a caged lion, one can admire its beauty, but it is difficult to imagine it running freely in the African plain. The best one can do when interpreting such a work is to try to express as much as possible its raw energy through an aggressive attitude towards the suffocating format: to break down the classic structure and bend the bars of the cage. To see the liberated lion we will have to wait until the Seventh Symphony.