

## CS Beethoven 250 Symphonies

[00:00:00] On a Sunday afternoon in March of 2020, as German citizens were like so many brethren across the world, isolated at home, a group effort arose for musicians to all at the same time perform one particular piece of music for their neighbors. It probably didn't take long to choose the piece. I'm Colleen Phelps, and this is classically speaking. Of course the end of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was the choice to perform. What other piece of music symbolizes the human collective like that one? But how does a composer get to that point where they can write a piece that's an icon, a monument in this way? Undoubtedly every symphony Beethoven composed led to that piece. Two hundred and fifty years after his birth, these symphonies dominate orchestral programming. So what better way to celebrate the great composers semiquincentennial birthday than a walk through his work? Nashville Symphony conductor Giancarlo Guerrero joined me from his own quarantine: a hotel room in Poland where he'd been scheduled to conduct. Guerrero could probably do an entire episode of discussion for each of these symphonies, but he was also able to boil each of them down all the way to one word, starting with the first.

[00:01:29] One word surprising. It still catches me by surprise. About 90 percent of what you expect in this symphony is all there. The symphony begins with a wrong note. So I promise you, the people that were there when they heard this first call, they I'm sure they thought somebody is playing a wrong note. Well, no. So even though he was kind of trying to follow the rules, this is his first symphony, this is kind of his presentation card, you know, Beethoven was kind of telling us, you know what, guys, you know, you better get used to it because it's going to be a little bumpy. You know, you look at every painting of Beethoven and you always look more often angry. I mean, can you blame me who's going deaf and, you know, frustrated? But that tells you that this man had a wonderful sense of humor.

[00:02:37] We talk a lot about the shadow that Beethoven now casts, but consider this when he wrote the first, he was 29 years old, still fully able to hear composing at the dawn of the 19th century, having studied with Franz Josef Haydn, who's known as the father of the symphony with Mozart only a few years ahead of him in age, but at this point already dead, that's what he had to live up to.

[00:03:09] Eventually, of course, as life, progress and his deafness progressed and many other things went on, he became a darker character. But I think in this first symphony, you've got to wonder what might have happened had he had a normal life and had his hearing for what type of symphony. Let's face it, as time progressed, things became darker. And you can blame him for that. My favorite moment is the opening of the last movement. You have this like big chord and you go, OK, so where is this going? And then you hear the violins kind of it's almost like a joke. Silence, then four notes ba ba, ba ba. Ba ba, ba ba. Five, six, seven, and then papa, papa.

[00:04:09] Symphony number one: surprising. As he approached his second symphony, Beethoven wrote a letter to his friend Franz Wegler. "That jealous demon, my wretched health has put a nasty spoke in my wheel. And it amounts to this: that for the past three years, my hearing has become weaker and weaker."

[00:04:42] Traditional under Beethoven's rules, but, yeah, let's call it the more standard, you know, following the rules. I'm not going to break too many of them.

[00:04:58] The despair Beethoven felt over his hearing loss was written into a famous unsent letter known as the Heiligenstadt Testament, where Beethoven expressed that he

had considered ending his life. But composing was what held him back. Writing, "it seemed to me, impossible to leave the world until I had produced all that I felt was within me." In short, this was a time of intense personal fear and pain. And these happy notes are the smile behind the tears.

[00:05:37] So the second symphony in many ways is almost to respond to the first, you know, it is still magical, it is still a genius of Beethoven, but it doesn't give you as many surprises as you would expect in the first. The second one is more traditional with all the great melody, especially the thing that Beethoven was best at was developing ideas so he would grab this one motif and just develop it in so many ways, upside, downside and harmonically take very interesting places harmonically. These is a very fast, forward thinking symphony. But when you hear it, I mean, there's nothing really shocking about it. I mean, I always, again, think about what the audience might have thought about it when they heard it in the early 19th century. And I think people would have said, you know what, this is what we expect. This is what a symphony in the 19th century, in the early 1800s sound like.

[00:06:47] Symphony number two: traditional. Napoleon himself said that from the sublime to the ridiculous is but a step, a line that Beethoven clearly thought the self-proclaimed emperor had crossed in 1804, leading to a famously rescinded dedication, no longer symphony number three, Bonaparte. It was now known as a Eroica, a heroic piece in memory of a great man.

[00:07:27] The other thing is completely shocked, I think, by this point. Beethoven was already getting highly respected and he wanted to rock the boat. No warning. No, nothing.

[00:07:39] At first, audiences didn't know what to think. Friends of the composer called it a work of genius. The musicians apocryphally enjoyed it so much they gathered for extra rehearsals to play it as well as possible. The general public, though, didn't know what they had just heard. Was that sublime or ridiculous?

[00:08:01] In the first movement, the wrong entrance, the famous wrong horn entrance. One of Beethoven's students was sitting with him at the dress rehearsal, got up and started screaming, saying, oh, the horn came, went wrong, the whole orchestra playing shows up and you have the horn playing, not even the principal the second half way. And then the orchestra explode and Beethoven's student got up and basically said, you stupid idiot, you came in the wrong spot. And Beethoven said, Calm down, my boy. That's how I want it. Only Beethoven could make it work without us blinking an eye. And then, oh, you like those adagios? I'll give you not only another dijo, I'll give you a funeral adagio. So he's even going to be slower than your normal adagio, again under the genius of Beethoven. Remember, all through this, this hearing is leaning. So remember, he's going into some very dark places. The last movement, a theme and variation, almost seems like you're doing an exercise for a composition class, you know, and the melody is very a very dumb melody. And then, of course, in the hands of Beethoven, just upside down side side with every imaginable chord.

[00:09:30] Symphony number three, shocking. Even some biographies of Beethoven skipped the Fourth Symphony. During Beethoven's lifetime, music journals only mention the fourth to ask why nobody was writing about the fourth. It almost seems settled, possibly even happy. And some have suggested that this cantabile is almost loving. So maybe it's worth noting that this symphony was completed the same year as the first known love letter the composer wrote. "My heart overflows with a longing to tell you so

many things. Oh, there are moments when I find that speech is quite inadequate. Be cheerful and be forever my faithful, my only sweetheart, my all, as I am yours."

[00:10:39] My word for it will be a step back, but not in a negative way, just regroup. Let's go. We're still in the early 19th century. You know, you're already in the twenty third century. Come back. Maybe the structures are kind of the same and he's following the rules, but but there's only so much, you know, creativity within him to make it sound like anybody else. I mean, it still sounds like people. And I think a lot of I like any human being. I mean, he may have gone too far. And you know what? Let's not push the envelope too much.

[00:11:26] Symphony number four, step back. If I had a time machine, I would very selfishly travel to December 22nd, 1808 in Vienna, Austria. Yes, that specific. Find out why after the break. During Advent and Lent in Vienna, people were in town, but theaters and operas were off because of the religious season. So concert halls played host to massive concerts called akademies. They were practically marathons compared to the symphony concerts. We know today the one on December 22nd, 1888, was kind of a disaster. It was crowded. The furnace broke. So it was freezing cold. Soprano had been insulted in rehearsal, so she quit and was hastily replaced. Practice time was woefully inadequate, but it's still a pinpoint in history. Why? Because on this night, Beethoven, in addition to a piano concerto, a choral orchestral work and some arias, premiered both his fifth and sixth symphonies.

[00:14:57] OK, one word for the fifth? Unique. There's nothing like it. There's no other thing that even comes close to I mean, that one is by itself and in the history of music, but I'm including all genres of music. I'm including country and rock and roll and hip hop and jazz. There's nothing like that. Like those 36 minutes, genius. We have no melody in the fifth. What's the melody of bu bu bu bum who goes around singing that motif? And he wanted to show you what he could do with with four notes, build an entire symphony on the idea of four notes because that theme is in every single movement, in every single moment. You don't go more than 30 seconds in the whole symphony without badmouthing. He hates the theme, even though your subconscious is catching it and then you realize it later, after years of conscious, thought it because there's always a three plus one that, um, it's either the same note or an ascending scale. The fact in the first moment that the thing is just like moving like this incredible, you know, runaway train. But he gives you these huge stops, like take a breath, but then once again goes and then right before the end, he gives you this Oboe. And then out of nowhere, you know, it's like, OK, about do something cute here. This is a work for me that you hear it and when I just conducted a couple of weeks ago, I mean, you're literally on the edge of your seat the whole time.

[00:17:11] Where the Third Symphony expanded the genre horizontally, taking up expansive quantities of time, the fifth moved vertically, making what was their larger than life.

[00:17:36] So you kind of talk about five without talking about six, because they were antithesis of each other. They were written at the same time and premiered on the same night. Nature, this one is easy if you've ever been in a park, this symphony will have meaning for you.

[00:18:03] It is so human of him to go from, you know, my life is falling apart, but I'm going to find I'm going to conquer this and I'm going to find the light. And then this is the this is the light.

[00:18:28] He's changing the world. I mean, he said it himself, I mean, I'm going to grab fate by the throat. I mean, this is early enough that maybe he thinks that there's there's a there's a hope, but maybe deep inside, he realizes now this is only going to get worse. And of course, with that, his personality, his life becomes worse. When you think of the Sixth Symphony, which was written at the same time, think about this. The first movement, ba ba ba ba ba ba ba ba ba ba. And immediately stopped the symphony. There's a grand pause. You literally hit a wall. You know, the six is the same. Ba ba ba ba ba ba da da da da da. Will you stop. But again, one is ba ba ba bum! And the other one is ya da di da dadida, so they're complete antithesis. From their state of mind, conducting one and then conducting the other, that you really got to be two different people and yet this one man capable was capable to do this. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, you know.

[00:19:46] Symphony number five, unique and shall we say it's fraternal, twin symphony number six, nature. By the time Beethoven reached his Seventh Symphony, his hearing was almost completely gone.

[00:20:04] If the second symphony was denial and the fifth was anger. By the seventh, the composer may have found acceptance.

[00:20:22] The 7th is about dance to me, the Seventh Symphony is just a dance, all of it first movement, the second movement, the third movement, all of it individual, specific, different ways of getting your body and your spirit moving. You know, it's nonstop. That motif in the first I mean, you have the fifth, for example, you know, ba ba ba ba ba ba ba ba ba ba. In the first movement of the 7th. Bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum. Bye bye, guys. Nonstop.

[00:21:15] Not to mention dum, bum, bum, bum, and then repeat ad nauseum, but yet you never get tired of it.

[00:21:31] Now, there's there's something very hypnotic about repetition. The seventh, like, works with anything. The seventh is still going to deliver, you know, it's the timing is 35, 36 minutes long. Again, four movements long except by now. By the way, the only symphony that he expanded was the six foot five movement.

[00:22:09] Like five and six, seven and eight premiered is a set. Apocryphally Beethoven's student Carl Czerny once asked why the seventh was so much more popular than the eighth, and the composer answered, because the eighth is so much better.

[00:22:32] Questionmark, uh, I really don't know what to make of it. He had moved the needle so far, did he feel that maybe he didn't want to lose his or prove that he could still do the simple stuff? I don't know. I mean, I just don't find a reasoning for it. And the fact that because it's kind of funny and lighthearted and short, it's very difficult to program. Of all the symptoms of Beethoven, the eighth, I would say, is by far the most classical of them all. And think about it Beethoven, between seven and nine between those two behemoths, between those two monuments. You have this symphony, which is under 25 under 30 minutes, by the way, with a small orchestra, a small orchestra of Mozart's or Haydn. This one has a lot of the trade, the funny tricks, a lot of the comedy. You know, it's intended to be so lighthearted, it's supposed to put a smile on your face. I'm saying he's going back. But again, it's Beethoven. It's more creative than anybody would have ever done it. But, yes, it is it is a huge step back. And is there any further meaning in this, again, is what's funny, is it supposed to be I mean, I don't know the question mark.

[00:24:39] Symphony number seven, dance and its partner, symphony number eight, question mark. Well, if that's a question, here's the answer.

[00:24:55] It is the Mount Everest to climb from every point of view, it's easier on the audience because it's glorious for those of us performing it than the singers. It's it's it's difficult. I mean, it's a very difficult mountain to climb. Artistically and technically and emotionally, you know, this is kind of like the beginning of what the symphony will become later, exhausting physically and mentally, but yet glorious. I mean, you feel rewarded when you hear those final chords. You always know that the audience are going to go crazy. We enter the first entrance of the of the baritone, it's my spirit going, Oh. Oh, oh. Everybody shut up, you know? Oh, oh, oh. Well, the opening of a lot of moment to me is incredibly magic because Beethoven kind of puts us in a time machine. The opening of the last one, when you have this raucous stormy ba da da dililililaaa, and then you hear this chorale played by the basses and the cellos, incredible chorale, which is part of every audition in every orchestra in the world for cellos and basses

[00:26:53] The ninth. Everest. Maybe best described here in a letter from an audience member to the New York Philharmonic, "when the human voices leaped up thrilling from the surge of harmony, I recognized them instantly as voices more ecstatic, a curving swift and flame like until my heart almost stood still. The women's voices seemed an embodiment of all the angelic voices rushing in a harmonious flood of beautiful and inspiring sound." What's so amazing about that description is that it was made possible through the magic of classical radio. She had heard the broadcast by taking apart the box and putting her hand directly on the diaphragm. She finished the letter with kindest regards and best wishes. I am sincerely yours, Helen Keller. Classically speaking is a production of Nashville Public Radio's Ninety-One Classical. The show is edited by Anita Bugg and engineered by Carl Pedersen. I'm Colleen Phelps and I hope you've been able to enjoy this classical milestone from the safety of home. Tell us how you've celebrated on social media. We're at classically speaking on Instagram and Facebook and speak classical on Twitter. Thanks for enjoying these nine symphonies via your backstage pass to classical music, classically speaking.