

Symphony No. 2 in D minor, Op. 21
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Written: 1802

Movements: 4

Style: Classical

Duration: 32 minutes

Sometimes, knowing the biography of a composer can get in the way of listening to one of his pieces. Everyone acknowledges the greatness of Beethoven, and we are fascinated with how he wrote such amazing music after he went completely deaf. We are sure that we hear his titanic struggles in his music. So, what are we to make of the fact that Beethoven wrote his bright, sunny and optimistic *Symphony No. 2* at exactly the same time that he was going through some of the darkest moments of his life?

By the age of twenty six, Beethoven was already troubled by the incessant ringing in his ears known as tinnitus. Six years later, in 1802, his doctor suggested a rest, away from the din of the city, in the little town known as Heiligenstadt (now a part of Vienna). While there, he penned a letter to his brothers Carl and Johann:

Reflect now that for six years I have been a hopeless case, aggravated by senseless physicians, cheated year after year in the hope of improvement, finally compelled to face the prospect of a lasting malady (whose cure will take years or, perhaps, be impossible)... O how harshly was I repulsed by the doubly sad experience of my bad hearing, and yet it was impossible for me to say to men speak louder, shout, for I am deaf. Ah how could I possibly admit such an infirmity in the one sense which should have been more perfect in me than in others, a sense which I once possessed in highest perfection, a perfection such as few surely in my profession enjoy or have enjoyed.

Such was his despair that he even contemplated suicide. He wrote a short postscript:

Thus do I take my farewell of thee—and indeed sadly—yes that beloved hope—which I

brought with me when I came here to be cured at least in a degree—I must wholly abandon, as the leaves of autumn fall and are withered so.... O Providence—grant me at least but one day of pure joy - it is so long since real joy echoed in my heart...

All of this at the same time that he wrote what the symphony that Hector Berlioz insists is “smiling throughout.” About the only solemn moment in the symphony is the slow introduction that starts the whole thing off. The second movement, one of the longest slow movements of any Beethoven symphony, is noble and pastoral in character, full of song-like themes. The third movement is a *scherzo* (Italian for “joke”) and is Beethoven’s first attempt at converting the stately minuet into something more crackling in tempo and humorous in character. The humor continues in the last the last movement.

Critical reaction to this symphony at its premiere was mixed. (It appeared on a program with his *First Symphony* and the premiers of his *Third Piano Concerto* and the oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives*. The concert went well past midnight). Folks simply thought that it was bizarre and felt that Beethoven was “striving for effect and straining for that which is new and remarkable.” One critic called it “a gross enormity, an immense wounded snake, unwilling to die, but writhing in its last agonies and, though bleeding to death, furiously beats about with its tail in the finale.”

Fortunately, Beethoven never sent the Heiligenstadt Testament to his brothers, and never followed through with his despair. Perhaps more than anything, this symphony is a testament to Beethoven’s ability to transcend his own problems in order to create beauty.

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