

BEDFORD SINFONIA

Saturday 8 May 2027

St Paul's Church, Bedford, 7:30pm

Conductor: Ian Smith

Programme

Coriolan Overture, Op. 62

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)

Having resigned himself to his deafness, Beethoven began, during the years 1806-1808, to compose a prodigious stream of works. These include three string quartets, the *Appassionata Sonata*, the *Fourth Symphony*, the *Violin Concerto* and the *Fourth Piano Concerto*. The symphony and the piano concerto were first performed at a private concert in the home of Prince Joseph Franz von Lobkowitz in March 1807, along with another newly written work, the *Coriolan Overture*.

Often thought to apply to Shakespeare's play 'Coriolanus', the overture in fact reflected the play of the same name by Heinrich von Collin, and it appears that Beethoven was totally unaware of the Shakespeare play. Regardless, Beethoven no doubt identified with Shakespeare's story of a lone man heroically bucking the system, and almost nothing is known of the purpose of the overture other than the composer's deep feeling for Collin's defiant hero as he made no further attempts to extend the music to embrace the entire dramatic work.

The stormy first subject of the overture, in C-minor, shows Coriolanus' rebellious nature, the second subject (a tone higher) is associated with the gentle and humane Volumnia, Coriolanus' mother. Volumnia eventually seems to win her son over, but then the C-minor theme returns, with less conviction, and the music literally falls apart, as does Coriolanus, whose only possible fate in his battle with Rome, is death. In Collin, he falls on his own sword. In Beethoven, he fades away, almost imperceptibly.

Programme notes: Herbert Glass, (Hollywood Bowl) and other sources.

Symphony No. 8 in F Major, Op. 93

Ludwig van Beethoven

I. Allegro vivace

II. Allegretto

III. Tempo di Menuetto & Trio

IV. Allegro vivace

Where the Seventh Symphony is an expansive giant with much in common with the '*Eroica*' *Third Symphony*, the Eighth is a tautly compressed work – almost 'neo-classical' in aspect, if not its subversive attitudes. Beethoven sketched it roughly contemporaneously with the Seventh, which he finished first. The only one of Beethoven's symphonies without a

dedication, it had its premiere in February 1814 at a concert along with the *Seventh Symphony* and *Wellington's Victory*.

The Eighth Symphony's first movement has no slow introduction, no chords or ambiguous harmonies or slow introduction, just a jump into a complete statement of the first theme. This then stumbles, comically, in only the first of many musical jokes, the rude humour of which would have been much more apparent then than it is now. The full orchestra poses a question that yields two responses, led first by the clarinets then returning to the full orchestra. The rest of the exposition maintains the light-hearted perspective through rhythmic, harmonic, and dynamic surprises, and the exposition's grand closing theme features an octave-leap motive that pervades the whole symphony. The movement's development incorporates the octave motive as the glue that binds together similar comical devices, but with greater tension. At the very last moment. Finally, the start of the first theme makes a final appearance, and the movement concludes the same way it began.

Like the Seventh, the Eighth Symphony has no true slow movement. Instead, there is a 'scherzoish' *Allegretto* that ticks along like one of Maelzel's metronomes. It has often been written that this movement – with its tune and ticking – is a parody or arrangement of a canon that Beethoven improvised in honour of Maelzel in 1812. While the winds and horns provide a steady ostinato pulse, contrasting themes appear in the strings: the first delicate and petite, the second slightly longer and more enthusiastic. The two halves of the first theme cleverly sit at different metric placements, a common feature of scherzo movements. This short movement, written in sonatina form consists of an A section, a varied repeat of the A section, and a coda. The final section, despite lasting only seven bars, contains the most theatrical moments of comedy. Sheepish utterances by the strings to quiet insistent questions exasperate the orchestra into sudden outbursts. When met with the same timid replies, the whole orchestra riles up from *pp* to *ff* in a fit of frustration and succinctly ends the conversation with vigorous repeated notes.

For the third movement, Beethoven reverts to a minuet, a type of movement that his scherzos had made obsolete. The tempo marking notwithstanding, Beethoven humorously deployed a series of striking scherzo-like 'mistakes' in the wind parts such as misplaced entrances that begin right away, and with the trumpet and timpani playing one bar too early and continuing throughout. Most notably, at the end of the minuet the brass, woodwinds, and timpani all disagree on the downbeat. As a homage to earlier symphonies, Beethoven's trio depicts the pastoral with a wind ensemble, but it omits the flutes and oboes. Two horns join with a solo clarinet to play a simple theme over a light bass accompaniment. Although the strings briefly take over and sequence through lush harmonies, they quickly subside, and the foreground returns to its tranquil atmosphere. Ironically, the trio contains some of the most elongated, smooth melodic writing in the entire symphony.

Beethoven resumes his scherzo-like wit in the finale through its laughing melodies, and by continuing to parody conventional structural and harmonic conventions. It is another mad dash, though begun softly, with silent hesitations. Recurring half-step displacements loom over the entire movement like a ghost in the background, and this disturbance is first seen when a syncopated shift from C to C-sharp marked *ff*, shatters the established *pp* at the end of the first theme and breaks into a bombastic transition to the second theme. Beethoven repeatedly plays on expectations by leading the narrative astray at each turn. Following an otherwise conventional development, the octave motive that has played a central role since the first movement leads back to the recapitulation. Highlighting the importance of the octave

motive in the finale movement, Beethoven chose the unusual tuning of Fs an octave apart for the timpani, rather than the expected F (tonic) and C (dominant), and has the timpani play the octave motive at several structural points, including leading to the second part of the coda. A loud, dissonant interruption plays an important role in the huge coda, one of the most over-the-top and outsize codas from the master of the outrageous coda. The reestablishment the proper key is confirmed by a statement of the lyrical second theme. Beethoven has one more jest, with the first theme again peeking out from the crowd, played by bassoons and horns marked piano, gradually fading into distant chordal echoes. A final swell to a grand completion, unmistakably signalled by the octave motive in the timpani and unyielding repeated F major chords by the orchestra finally marks the end of the movement.

When asked by his pupil Carl Czerny why the Eighth was less popular than the Seventh, Beethoven is said to have replied, ‘because the Eighth is so much better’.

Programme notes: Eastman School of Music and LA Philharmonic. Edited: U. Radok

Overture to *Il Matrimonio Segreto*

Domenico Cimarosa
(1749-1801)

Il Matrimonio Segreto (*The secret marriage*) is arguably one of the greatest 18th century opera buffa apart from those by Mozart. Its premiere was the occasion of the longest encore in operatic history. It was first performed on 7 February 1792 at the Imperial Hofburg Theatre in Vienna in the presence of Emperor Leopold II, who was so delighted that he requested that the entire opera be repeated immediately, without the orchestra but with the composer accompanying on the harpsichord.

Il matrimonio segreto was Cimarosa’s 64th or so, opera. Written for Vienna, it was his greatest success, and a hit throughout Europe. It’s an entertaining, human work. The opera takes place in the Bologna household of the merchant Geronimo, elderly, deaf, grumpy, but generally benevolent. His younger daughter Carolina has secretly married his secretary Paolino. Geronimo’s elder daughter – the shrill and vain Elisetta – is contracted to marry Count Robinson, but he takes one look at her and falls in love with Carolina instead. The married couple think of turning to Geronimo’s sister Fidalma for help ... but she wants Paolino for herself. Matters come to a head when sister and aunt persuade Geronimo to lock Carolina in a convent, and the couple are discovered stealing out of the house to elope.

Born in Aversa near Naples in 1749, Cimarosa was able to take advantage of the excellent musical education afforded him by the Naples Conservatory system. He went on to write operas, or *commedie in musica* (comedies in music) for all the major Italian theatres in Naples, Rome, Venice, and Milan. All told, he wrote nearly one hundred operas (and possibly more), the overwhelming majority of which were comic. After an unsuccessful stint in St Petersburg, Russia, he arrived in Vienna where his great masterpiece *Il Matrimonio Segreto*.

Although Cimarosa’s fame today predominantly rests on *Il Matrimonio Segreto*, it is hard to overestimate the influence he held over Italian music in the years before Rossini’s ascendancy. After being fêted in the major international capitals of Russia and Austria, Cimarosa returned to his roots in Naples, ending his career by revising some earlier works and composing new ones. He died in Venice in 1801.

Edmond Clément called it the masterpiece of masterpieces in the buffo genre, while François-Joseph Fétis hailed Cimarosa as one of the greatest musicians Italy ever produced, and praised the comic verve and piquant wit of this fertile genius. Berlioz, though, found the opera interminable: 'nearly as tiresome as the Marriage of Figaro without being anything like so musical'.

Symphony No. 7 in A major Op. 92

Ludwig van Beethoven

Poco sostenuto; Vivace

Allegretto

Presto; Assai meno presto

Allegro con brio

The first performance of Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony* was completely overshadowed by the inclusion of his *Wellington's Victory* in the same programme. This was an occasional piece written to celebrate the defeat of Napoleon at the battle of Vittoria, on 21 June 1813, and described by the composer as 'a folly'. The piece was included because this was a charity concert, given on 8 December 1813, in the Great Hall of the University of Vienna, to raise funds for wounded Austrian and Bavarian soldiers. Such great musical personalities as Spohr, Schuppanzigh, Dragonetti, Romberg, Meyerbeer and Salieri played in the orchestra, giving their services for free. Beethoven conducted.

Despite the ephemeral success of what has become known as the 'Battle Symphony', it was the vigorously exultant *Seventh Symphony* which soon gained the ascendancy in the following years. It had been largely written in the winter months of 1811 on Beethoven's return from Teplitz, a Bohemian spa renowned for its cures and its neutrality during the Napoleonic upheavals. He had gone there on doctor's orders for a change and a rest. The symphony was finished early in 1812, four years after the *Pastoral* appeared, and was dedicated to Count Moritz von Fries, an Austrian banker, art collector, and patron.

The *Poco sostenuto* acts as the prologue to the symphony and is an elaborate movement in its own right. There are two majestic themes in slow motion, both heard on the oboe. A third important figure is a fast-moving semiquaver passage heard as scales and repeated notes which anticipates the coming *Vivace*. The link with the *Vivace* is achieved by the fast repeated notes becoming slow ones which in turn change to a quiet rhythmic figure resembling the galloping motion of a distant horse. This becomes the main theme of the *Vivace*, first presented by the flute and soon moving to the foreground as the whole orchestra joyously joins in. Other themes are cunningly derived from the same source. A short pause prepares us for the development which starts quietly but becomes a frenetic romp acting as a launching pad for the considerably worked recapitulation.

The *Allegretto* is a sublime elegy and maintains the symphony's sense of motion. A sombre theme is introduced by the lower strings followed by a glorious counter-melody (the first variation) played by violas and 'cellos. This section is in A minor, but the central section is in A major and features a warm melody from the clarinets which relates to the opening theme of the *Poco sostenuto*. The sombre theme returns and the glories that follow include a short fugue passage, a variation derived from the fast semiquaver figure in the *Poco sostenuto*, a repeat of the clarinet melody, and the quiet coda with its impressive use of *pizzicato* and glowing sunset chords from the winds.

The main characteristics of the *Presto* are a fast figure in triple time in the *Scherzo* section contrasted with a laid-back, dreamy *Trio*. The *Trio* is heard twice in full, and then Beethoven leads us to believe it is to be heard yet again, but, in a moment of humour, he brusquely dismisses it with five loud chords that act as a link to the *Allegro*.

Sustained power once more marks the finale, the music moving from one climax to the next with a number of harmonic twists. The brusque binary theme has a pattern of semiquaver motifs in the strings, with cross accents in the wind. The triumphant development leads to the coda, bringing yet more energy and exploring new ideas before alighting on a dominant pedal note, accompanied by first and second violins vying with each other over the first subject figures, and finally coming to a tremendous conclusion.

Programme notes: Ben Brickman, John Dalton

Several of these notes were supplied through the Programme Note Bank of Making Music, the National Federation of Music Societies, and from other sources.