

BEETHOVEN'S 7TH PROGRAM

Darius Milhaud (1892-1974)
The Ox on the Roof: The Nothing Doing Bar, Op. 58 (Le Boeuf sur le Toit)
The Creation of the World, Op. 81a (La Création du Monde)

By the age of seven, young Milhaud showed prodigious talent on the violin, and 10 years later he left his home in southern France to continue studies at the Paris Conservatoire. Immersing himself in the exciting cultural milieu of Paris, Milhaud soon realized that he was more interested in composition than in violin. For several years he served as the secretary of the French ambassador to Brazil, where he heard Latin American music for the first time. Fascinated by these new sounds, Milhaud composed *Le Boeuf sur le Toit*, named after a Brazilian popular song. In the composer's own words: "I assembled a few popular melodies, tangos, maxixes [fast Brazilian tangos in 2/4 time], sambas, even a Portuguese fado, and transcribed them with a rondo-like theme recurring between each two." In addition to South American syncopated dance rhythms, *Le Boeuf sur le Toit* contains diatonic melodies that reflect the composer's fondness for folksongs and popular music. Yet there is also polytonality (melodies presented simultaneously in two different keys), which results in a sound that seems slightly but pleasantly "out of focus." Milhaud used his composition in a ballet with a bizarre storyline that was inappropriate to the South American tunes. However, the ballet captured the spirit of the 1920s and became an instant success, establishing Milhaud as France's infant terrible.

While visiting New York in 1923, Milhaud became intrigued with jazz sounds he heard in Harlem nightclubs. Upon his return to Paris, he wrote *La Création du Monde*, possibly the first major jazz-inspired

piece by a classical composer. (It predates Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* by a few months.) In his autobiography Milhaud writes: "At last I had the opportunity I had been waiting for to use those elements of jazz to which I had devoted so much study. I adopted the same orchestra as used in Harlem, seventeen solo instruments, and I made wholesale use of the jazz style to convey a purely classical feeling."

La Création represents a near-perfect synthesis of syncopated jazz elements with classic Western procedures. The introduction, with constant quarter-note movement in the accompaniment and sustained pedal points in the bass, resembles the opening of Bach's *St. John Passion*. However, with Milhaud, the saxophone plays a sultry melody. There is polytonality, but the principal key, D minor, remains paramount and is enriched, not eclipsed, by the presence of other tonal areas. The first dance is fugal and jazzy, with the subject initially presented in the double bass and then imitated by other instruments. After reaching a loud climax, the movement leads gently into the next dance, which opens softly with steady pulsations (like the introduction) and then presents a melody that bears a startling resemblance to Gershwin. The third dance features a three-note figure against a background of four. As the work nears its conclusion, solo instruments play improvisatory flourishes somewhat akin to Dixieland jazz, recalling themes from earlier sections. The work ends with a quiet coda and a return of the Gershwin-like melody. Milhaud's connection to jazz did not go unnoticed, and he summarizes the reaction of his contemporaries: "The critics decreed that my music was frivolous and more suitable for a restaurant or a dance hall than for the concert hall. Ten years later the self-same critics were discussing the philosophy of jazz and learnedly demonstrating that *La Création* was the best of my works."

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Although Milhaud composed many diverse works, including serious symphonies and operas, *Le Boeuf sur le Toit* and *La Création du Monde* remain his most popular compositions.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Symphony No. 7 in A Major, Op. 92

Beethoven, a German who lived and worked in Vienna long before Milhaud's time, never heard Brazilian music, but his fondness for dance-like compositions is evident in his Seventh Symphony. This work, especially the finale, is filled with rhythmic energy, leading Richard Wagner to describe it as "the apotheosis of the dance."

Beethoven wrote Symphony No. 7 in 1811-1812, and it was premiered the following year with the composer as conductor. Billed as a charity concert for wounded Austrian and Bavarian soldiers, the program included another piece by Beethoven, *Wellington's Victory at the Battle of Vittoria*. The concert hall in the Old University of Vienna was filled with 5,000 listeners, all keenly aware of Napoleon's recent military defeats and grateful for an artistic celebration of these events. By today's standards, *Wellington's Victory* is not ranked highly. (One contemporary even refers to it as "essentially a brainless concerto for percussion!") However, the audience found the music stirring and emotional, and in the heat of the moment, interrupted the performance several times with outbursts of jubilation. In fact, the presence of *Wellington's Victory* ensured the initial acceptance of Symphony No. 7, increased Viennese admiration for Beethoven as a composer, and netted considerable financial funds, both for the charity organization and for the composer. The concert was so successful that it was repeated on demand four days later.

Despite Beethoven's achievements during 1811-1813, these years were not without pain. Beethoven was deeply infatuated with a young woman, known today only as his "Immortal Beloved." During 1812 the composer realized their relationship was coming to an end, and he was bitterly disappointed. Another setback even more devastating was Beethoven's impending deafness. His hearing had been deteriorating for years, and by 1813 he was almost profoundly deaf.

But Beethoven's emotional and physical difficulties are not evident in Symphony No. 7. Unlike the Third, Fifth, and Sixth Symphonies, the Seventh has no allusions to nature and no programmatic associations at all. Instead, the composer aims for new horizons to create an original work in a different manner—one that focuses on joyful, rhythmic energy and expansion

The opening movement begins with an unusually long introduction. It consists of several explosive, attention-getting chords interspersed with soft passages by the woodwinds, scale runs, and a lyrical, Mozartean theme. As the introduction draws to an end, the tempo slows down, providing anticipation for the exposition of the movement. The first theme is dance-like, suggesting a folk origin, the second is bouncy and joyful, while the third resembles the sound of hunting horns. Underlying all three themes is a dominating three-note rhythmic figure (long-short-long), which provides a light-hearted lilt that unifies the entire movement.

The second movement is in the key of A minor and consists of two ideas. The well-known first theme is not a genuine melody but a simple harmonic progression built on a rhythmic motive (long-short-short-long-long). Beethoven cleverly alters the progression by adding different instruments for each variation—a hauntingly beautiful countermelody in the low strings, then a faster-moving

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countermelody in the second violins, and finally, accompanying triplets in the low strings. A new lyrical theme in the key of A major appears briefly; however, the rhythmic motive never vanishes completely. After a brief transition the variations are resumed, with developments and imitations interspersed, and Theme B returns. The movement ends as it began, with the harmonic progression and rhythmic motive in A minor, played softly by woodwinds. Although resembling the slow second movement of Symphony No. 3, Beethoven's tempo designation, *Allegretto*, indicates that Symphony No. 7's second movement is not a funeral procession. When the work was first performed, the audience demanded an immediate encore of this movement, and even today the *Allegretto* continues to be a favorite movement from Beethoven's nine symphonies.

According to Anthony Hopkins, the third movement "sets a new standard for vitality and humor exceeding all its predecessors for rhythmic rigor." It is certainly brilliant and energetic, especially since it follows the slow second movement. In the Scherzo (A) there are chordal outlines, scale passages, and trills, while the trio (B) contains a half-step motive that descends and then returns to its original position.

Beethoven uses both the A and B sections again, resulting in an expanded structure from the usual Scherzo form (ABA) into a double Scherzo (ABABA).

The fourth movement is filled with rhythmic energy, bold syncopations, and boisterous sounds that are interspersed with fanfares, all of which makes Donald Tovey's assessment, "a triumph of Bacchic fury," particularly appropriate. The musical climax occurs in the coda, which is lengthy and harmonically complex, thus serving as an appropriate balance to the long introduction of movement one. For the first time in a symphony, Beethoven employs the dynamic level *fff* (very, very loud). As the volume increases, so does the intensity, propelled through driving rhythms and sustained vigor, and the symphony concludes triumphantly.

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