

Beethoven's 'Eroica' Symphony

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Rossini: Overture to *Guillaume Tell*

Cue *The Lone Ranger* music! Actually, Rossini's *William Tell* Overture consists of four independent sections, including a sextet of celli, a bucolic English horn solo and one of classical music's most exciting thunderstorms. Best known is the galloping finale, guaranteed to raise your heart rate while putting a smile on your face.

Rouse: Bassoon Concerto (East-Coast Premiere and NJSO Co-Commission)

Christopher Rouse, who passed away at 70 in September, was one of the deans of American composition. His Bassoon Concerto, an NJSO co-commission, completed his cycle of concertos for every major woodwind instrument. Principal bassoon Robert Wagner describes it as "jaunty, with a lightness about it that is not so earthbound." The concerto's three movements are played without pause.

Beethoven: Symphony No. 3, "Eroica"

Concise motives are building blocks for the heroic first movement. The funeral march is a somber affair, with the oboe as soloist. Beethoven limits himself to one theme in the scherzo, but puts it through its paces. Horns have a section solo in the "hunting call" trio. The famous finale theme served Beethoven for two other sets of variations.

Rossini: Overture to *Guillaume Tell*

GIOACCHINO ROSSINI

Born: February 29, 1792, in Pesaro, Italy

Died: November 13, 1868, in Passy, near Paris

Composed: 1829

World Premiere: August 3, 1829, at the Paris Opera.

NJSO Premiere: 1963–64 season; Kenneth Schermerhorn conducted.

Duration: 12 minutes

Rossini's overture to *William Tell* might well be the most popular classical work in the entire literature. Thanks to the old radio and television show "The Lone Ranger," whose theme music adapted the overture's final segment, American children have for generations identified Rossini's music with the excitement of Wild West heroism. The *William Tell* Overture actually has a fascinating history that considerably predates both radio and television.

The opera for which it was written is based on a drama by the German playwright Friedrich Schiller. The main themes of Schiller's play are the inherent balance and grandeur of nature, and man's intrusion upon that natural order via his political and economic concerns. Rossini's *William Tell* made superb use of both ideas. The opera is unique for a number of reasons. He was an Italian composer, and established his reputation in Italian opera houses. In 1823 he moved to Paris, eventually settling there permanently. *Tell* was his fourth production for the prestigious Paris Opéra, but it is the only work Rossini composed that fully embraces the French nineteenth-century convention of a five act grand opera, complete with ballet. Most important, it proved to be his swan song. After *Tell*'s successful 1829 premiere, Rossini retired from the operatic stage, enjoying the fruits of his considerable reputation for another 39 years.

William Tell is Rossini's finest opera overture—which is saying a lot. Unlike his sprightly and familiar Italian overtures, the one for *Tell* does not adhere to modified sonata form, nor does it derive its momentum from a signature "Rossini crescendo." This one is divided into four segments, each with its own character. The cellos open quietly, evoking the lovely Swiss countryside, and painting an aural picture of calm before storm. That awe-inspiring thunderstorm ensues, a masterly musical canvas of nature's dramatic summertime wrath. Next is a pastoral, featuring one of the most coveted English horn solos in the orchestral literature. Finally, the overture concludes with the martial and patriotic galloping section so well-known from the television show. Curiously enough, Rossini's signature music, this irresistible finale, began as a quick-step he composed in July 1822 for a Viennese military band! One wonders what Rossini would have thought of his music's extraordinary extended life.

Instrumentation: two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, triangle, bass drum, cymbals,

five solo cellos and a full complement of strings.

ROUSE: Bassoon Concerto (2017)

CHRISTOPHER ROUSE

Born: February 15, 1949, in Baltimore, Maryland

Died: September 21, 2019, in Baltimore, Maryland

Composed: 2017

World Premiere: November 16, 2018, at St. Louis' Powell Hall. Andrew Cuneo was the soloist; Cristian Măcelaru conducted the St. Louis Symphony.

NJSO Premiere: These are the East-Coast and NJSO premiere performances.

Duration: 20 minutes

Christopher Rouse, who passed away at 70 in September, was already one of America's most frequently performed composers when he won the Pulitzer Prize in music for his Trombone Concerto in 1993. One of the deans of American composition, *Musical America* named him Composer of the Year in 2009, and he counted many significant younger composers among his former pupils. His own undergraduate education took place at Oberlin. He then studied privately with George Crumb for two years, before matriculating at Cornell for his doctorate in composition, working with Karel Husa and Robert Palmer. Rouse taught for many years at the Eastman School of Music and had been full-time faculty at the Juilliard School.

In earlier works, Rouse favored atavistic motor rhythms and grinding dissonance, qualities that are evident in *The Infernal Machine*, *Bump* and *Phaethon*. In the early 1990s, he moved away from sustained allegro movements toward the soulful and metaphysical—and often very dark, as in his first two symphonies. He then began a series of more optimistic and positive works, but his style remained elusive, not fitting consistently into any one category. One aspect was consistent: his determination to compose a concerto for every major instrument in the orchestra. With the 2017 Bassoon Concerto, jointly commissioned by the NJSO, St. Louis Symphony, Sydney Symphony and Lausanne Chamber Orchestra, Rouse completed that cycle in the woodwind section, as his composer's note (reprinted here with permission) explains:

With my Bassoon Concerto I was able to complete my cycle of concerti for each of the principal four woodwinds. While my Flute and Oboe concerti are of a more serious nature, those for clarinet and

bassoon are lighter in mood. As the bassoon's voice is a comparatively modest one, I pared down the orchestra to a group of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons (in order to provide the occasional potential for building a sort of "mega-bassoon"), two horns, harp, timpani, percussion (one player) and strings.

The concerto is cast in the traditional three movement (fast-slow-fast) form and is meant in large part simply to provide pleasure. I realize that such an intent is now looked upon with suspicion in some quarters, but I have never felt that every work of art is required to plumb the depths and secrets of human existence. Sometimes 20 minutes spent in the company of, I hope, a genial companion can be the most meaningful way of passing time. I did, however, try to resist making too much of the bassoon's oft-heralded role as the "clown" of the orchestra. While there are occasional forays into the more "comical" lower range of the instrument, more time is spent in the middle and upper tessitura of the bassoon, and melodic lines often tend toward the lyrical. Overall there is a collegial relationship between soloist and orchestra, unlike the common "soloist against the orchestra" paradigm of many romantic era concerti.

Soloist Robert Wagner observes that the concerto's biggest challenge is playing nearly constantly. "He certainly doesn't give the soloist much time off!" Rouse's spare instrumentation gives Wagner the opportunity to explore the bassoon's softer, more intimate side. "While he places considerable technical demands on the soloist, he's also written wonderful quiet lyric moments."

Instrumentation: woodwinds and horns in pairs, timpani, percussion, harp, strings and solo bassoon.

BEETHOVEN: Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Op. 55 ("Eroica")

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born: December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: Summer 1802 to early 1804

World Premiere: Probably privately in 1804, in Prince Lobkowitz's palace. Beethoven conducted the first public performance on April 7, 1805, in the Theater an der Wien.

NJSO Premiere: 1928–29 season; Philip James conducted.

Duration: 47 minutes

During the 18th and 19th centuries, certain keys were associated with specific ideas. Nobility of spirit—specifically the nobility of heroism—was a quality linked with the key of E flat. When Beethoven began his Third Symphony, Napoleon Bonaparte was First Consul of France and embarking upon the political expansion that was to place his name among the greatest military leaders in history. Beethoven idealized Napoleon, perceiving him as the hero of revolutionary France, and planned to dedicate the symphony to the French leader. The work’s original subtitle was “Bonaparte.”

When Napoleon declared himself Emperor in May 1804, Beethoven exploded in protest. According to his biographer Ferdinand Ries, he cried out: “Is he then, too, nothing more than an ordinary human being? Now he, too, will trample on all the rights of man and indulge only his ambition. He will exalt himself above all others, become a tyrant.”

He then tore the title page of his new symphony in pieces. When he recopied it, he wrote “Sinfonia eroica.” Vienna’s Bureau des Arts et d’Industrie published it in 1806 with a dedication to Prince Lobkowitz and the subtitle “To celebrate the memory of a great man.”

“Eroica” means “heroic” in Italian, and the symphony is monumental in every sense. When Beethoven completed it in summer 1803, it was the longest symphony ever written. The “Eroica” was pivotal in Beethoven’s development not only as a symphonist but also as a composer. With this one work, he divested many 18th-century conventions and vaulted forward into uncharted territory.

About the music

Two *fortissimo* chords announce immediately that we are to sit up and take notice—this is *not* background music. More than two centuries later, their effect is still electrifying, setting the tone for the entire work. Several features distinguish the sonata-form first movement from its predecessors. The development section is exceedingly long—Beethoven’s longest, in fact—and, directly after its climax, introduces an entirely new theme for flute and oboe, in the remote key of E minor. (Beethoven recalls that theme in the recapitulation, where it becomes the subject of a coda so extensive that it nearly matches the development in length.)

Just prior to the recapitulation, when we expect the restatement of the main theme, *pianissimo* violin tremolos making the very air pregnant with anticipation. Perhaps the most famous “wrong note” in all Beethoven then occurs: French horn states the opening triadic figure. Beethoven, however, has fooled us: the horn entrance is intentionally premature. Full orchestra drives home his cadence with two measures of decisive, fortissimo dominant seventh chords before resolving to the home tonality of E flat. The horns’ false entrance, a sort of acoustic pre-echo, is clearly marked in Beethoven’s hand in the autograph. Yet many listeners assumed that it was an error. The more we hear this symphony, however, the more certain we are that Beethoven knew precisely what he was doing. Every note of this symphony is calculated for maximum effect.

The English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge referred to the famous slow movement march as “a funeral procession in deep purple.” It salutes the unnamed deceased hero of the title, and contains one of the great oboe solos in the orchestral repertoire. Beethoven also provided rich material for bassoon and flute. In the quasi-military section in major mode, we can hear intimations of the Fifth Symphony, which would follow the “Eroica” by four years. Timpani is a powerful presence in this slow movement, functioning both as bass and even occasionally as a melodic instrument, rather than mere punctuation.

After a whirlwind scherzo that reduces three beats to one per measure (and features the entire horn section in its Trio), Beethoven ices his cake with variations. The theme, actually a double theme consisting of bass line and melody, was familiar to Viennese audiences from Beethoven’s ballet score, *The Creatures of Prometheus* (1800). Nobility of spirit, capricious humor, funeral march, fugue, poignant tenderness: all these and more find their way into Beethoven’s cosmic finale, his ultimate tribute to the unnamed hero.

Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs, three horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings.