

The Symphony of Fire

Beethoven's Second Symphony is a very important work in the development of the composer, something rarely acknowledged. It represents the end of his first period and a step towards the "*Eroica*" Symphony, a work that marks the beginning of his great heroic period. The Second is contemporary with Beethoven's "*Heiligenstadt Testament*", where he contemplates the possibility of suicide because of his growing deafness, although he rejects it. However, the symphony is not at all tragic in nature, and is characterized by good humor. What the Symphony and the Testament do have in common is that, in both cases, Beethoven looks confidently forward, sure of his destiny.

From the time Beethoven composed the incidental music to the stage work "*The Creatures of Prometheus*" in 1801, he became obsessed with the character of Prometheus. The ballet music from this work is the basis of the "*Eroica*" Variations and the last movement of the "*Eroica*" Symphony, as well as the germ idea for the whole symphony, perhaps his greatest. One can also argue that Prometheus is a central idea of the *Second Symphony*. In Greek mythology there are two versions of the Prometheus story. In one version he is the creator of humanity. This is the story that appears in the stage work for which Beethoven wrote the incidental music. In the other, perhaps better known version, Prometheus steals fire from the gods and gives it to mankind. This gives men the capacity and freedom to develop. We should also remember that, in many mythologies, the god of fire is also a "trickster" god, who teaches men important ideas with the use of humor. These ideas include being able to discern what is or is not important, so that he can better decide where to concentrate his efforts.

While it is Prometheus as creator that appears in the "*Eroica*", it is the version as god of fire that we meet in the *Second Symphony*. This symphony is full of flashes of fire, especially in the first movement, where the Allegro con brio begins with the following figure in the first violins:



These flashes of fire are complemented with a defiant and even arrogant attitude that describe very effectively the god of fire. This also brings to mind Loki, or Loge, the Nordic fire god that we know from Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*.

Throughout the four movements, with flashes of fire and good humor, we see how the classical symphony is transformed into a Beethoven symphony. I don't want to imply the Beethoven's First Symphony is not Beethovenian, since it contains most of the elements that will characterize his symphonies. Beethoven is Beethoven since Opus 1, but it was necessary to formalize the transition that will explode in the first chords of the "*Eroica*".

The first of these characteristics that I want to highlight is the overwhelming driving force in Beethoven's music. In the *Second Symphony*, this is clearly evident in the first movement, which is virile, aggressive, strong, defiant and arrogant. In the Coda of this movement, he not only affirms his individuality, something he had already done in the *First Symphony*, but also reaches a glorious climax with a very heroic trumpet fanfare. This same drive and strength is felt in the last movement.

In the second movement, in typical "trickster" fashion, the music will sometimes push us forward and sometimes will stop us and sometimes will do both at the same times. We cannot be sure which way he wants us to go: forward or backward. At the end of the movement, in a wonderfully ambiguous passage, he clears our doubts and the decision is to go ahead. That is what we have to do, and that forward gaze will become one of Beethoven's most consistent characteristics. His second movements will usually emphasize horizontal flow, in contrast with the usual vertical affirmation of the first movements.

Another characteristic that illustrates the strength of the composer is his willingness to face his inner demons without fear. He danced with them and incorporated them into his creative process. In this symphony these demons will have the incandescence of fire in the Scherzo as well as in the Trio and will thus prepare the way to reach a state of ecstasy at the end of the work.

And ecstasy is what we get with unleashed madness in the last movement. It is a pity that few conductors seem to be interested in expressing this quintessentially Beethovenian climax, perhaps they are determined to think that Beethoven's first two symphonies are "classical" and "Haydnesque". We must emphasize that no classical period Coda had these dimensions. As a percentage of the last movement, this Coda is similar to the ones in the Fifth and Sixth symphonies. In terms of madness, this one is close to the end of the Seventh, although the later symphony is, of course, much better constructed and channeled towards the climax. In any case, in the Second we already have all the important elements that we recognize in the great Beethoven symphonies.

Perhaps Beethoven had to work through this "Symphony of Fire" before composing the "*Eroica*". The First had been too innocent. He had to destroy the classical symphony in order to forge a transition with the destructive and creative power of fire.