

**Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 36**  
**Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**

Adagio molto – Allegro con brio

Larghetto

Scherzo Allegro

Allegro molto

Very often we are misguided by what composers write, and say, about their own music. Hindsight then provides us with a reality, still struggling to free itself of earlier judgements. This has been particularly true of Beethoven in regard to his first two symphonies. He told us he intended to “embark upon a new road” referring to his third symphony, and like dutiful acolytes we took him at his word. It is true that the ‘Eroica’ is different in many ways to any symphonic work that went prior. It is larger, grander, more involved, more intricate, more rugged and perhaps even more passionate, but not, as is widely believed, without precedence. Partly because of Beethoven’s pronouncement his first and second symphonies have always been lumped with ‘the earlier music’ – ‘the stuff that sounds like advanced Mozart’. On closer evaluation of the vast number of pieces, especially those piano sonatas, written before and up to 1804, it is clear that these two symphonies are a gradual progression in the musical language from which the ‘Eroica’ bursts forth.

Dr. Tovey succinctly describes the second symphony of Beethoven as a “work which immediately impressed contemporaries as making a startling advance in art without a disconcerting change in its language”. Though it would have been familiar and comfortable for the listeners of Mozart’s last three symphonies, it was larger and the breadth of design and unique dramatic vigor of his style made it irresistibly new in 1801. It is worth bearing in mind a few more pointers when reviewing the place of this symphony in the artistic firmament. Beethoven’s raw, “shock value” music making is particularly apparent in these first two symphonies. Perhaps sentiments of his childhood in abject poverty, his alcoholic parents and his ‘breadwinner’ status at age 19 gave him his rough edges. He is, at this stage, 32 years old, his progressive deafness of two years not quite as ugly as it would be later. There is his ever-present underlying sense of struggle

in composition, unlike his onetime teacher Mozart who, incidentally, wrote those aforementioned last three symphonies in six weeks between the end of June and 10<sup>th</sup> of August, 1788. Then, there is his early genius that was recognized in his piano playing and composition, enough for him to have that lesson with Mozart, and another few sessions later on with Haydn, and get him appointed assistant court organist in Hanover, aged 14. Perhaps most importantly, the “scherzo” appears in the 2<sup>nd</sup> symphony for the first time in the history of symphonic composition.

This form has remained Beethoven’s in the true sense, as scherzos from other composers have tried to change the parameters. Dr. Rosen sums up aptly. “Their splendor breaks through his influence, but never starts from it. All that is most interesting in the next generation is a reaction against Beethoven, or an attempt to ignore him,...all that is weakest submits to his power and pays him the emptiest and most sincere of homages”.