

## Ludwig van Beethoven (1770- 1827)

On occasion one comes across monumental figures in the realm of cultural achievement. They are monumental because they represent great pivotal moments, that help us understand and chart the very course of history. These giants are persons whose artistic contribution is seen in the context of what comes before them, and what comes after. In each case, they are the irreplaceable conduit between the 'before and after', that ensures that human achievement can leap forward at a remarkable pace.

Johann Sebastian Bach is one such figure. He performed and composed in the 'Baroque' era between 1650 -1750 a period known for its florid and complex contrapuntal writing. Historians contend that the Baroque era ends in 1750 because Bach died in 1750. Such was his total mastery of the style that his successors had to invent a new style altogether, just to remain in business. All musicians from then until the present day, if writing or performing fugal counterpoint get measured against Bach and always by their own admission, fall short. Pablo Picasso is another such figure. His contribution to art is marked by the demonstration of such extraordinary talent. We look at where we stand now, and cannot understand the present context without Cubism, Collage, Constructed Sculpture, Surrealism and an innate sense that artists could express by impression. Therefore we could not have come to this point without Picasso.

Beethoven is also such a figure, and when listening to his music, it seems that one can hear history unfold. The medium of his great talent, initially at least, was the piano. It is in the piano sonatas that we first glimpse the scope of his work. The structure is more daring, the harmony is more revolutionary, and the technique is dazzling. By the time he grows in experience, as a musician, as a man, as a composer- the struggles of his life seem to appear in his music making. *There is nothing accidental or vague about the way Beethoven lived his life.* He was forced by circumstance to comply with severe conditions and constrictions which as painful and resented as they were, not only bled into the music he wrote, but informed its character and its depth. We imagine the idealist, championing the brotherhood of mankind, and having his hopes dashed with Bonaparte's coronation. We know of his loathing of aristocracy, and yet his need to beg for patronage, at every turn. Begging for patronage was almost always by way of presentation at some high borne dinner party or event, at which Beethoven's ill-mannered, loutish, unkempt presence became the butt of cruel of jokes and jibes. His features were not attractive, but it didn't prevent him from courting women unsuccessfully -with a sort of violence, which left him unsatisfied physically and mentally. Let us add to these insults the greatest injury of all. He would not be able to rely on his hearing, the one constant in any musician's life. *Therefore, there is nothing accidental or vague about the compelling force of his music.*

The **Overture to Coriolan**, Opus 62 is a piece written, not after the Shakespeare but after a play by Heinrich Joseph von Collins, from 1804. It is quite like Beethoven to champion a contemporary work, and though the idea that the stark opening of the piece and the contrasting lilt of the ensuing melody are somehow connected to the story line is not likely, the drama of the music is undeniable. Much like the opening of the Fifth – also in the key of C minor- the sheer force of will, so prevalent in Beethoven's language, knocks the listener to the floor.

The **Symphony No. 4 in B Flat Major**, premiered at the same concert – at the home of Prince Lobkowitz in 1807, along with the *Coriolan* overture, represents a kinder, gentler Beethoven. The symphony, dedicated to Franz von Oppersdorf, was commissioned after Oppersdorf heard Beethoven's second symphony at the home of Prince Lichnowsky. The second and the fourth symphonies are not dissimilar – providing whimsical, beautiful melodies in a light unrestrained way. Underlying the lightness and whimsicality in the Fourth Symphony is a profound sense of poetry and architectural strength - so evident in another work from the same 1807 concert, the Fourth Piano Concerto. In all these pieces there is also a rampant jocular humour, which spills over reminding us not to take things too seriously. What a concert that must have been!

**Beethoven's Seventh Symphony** expresses entirely different sentiments, premiered in Vienna on 8<sup>th</sup> December, 1813 at a benefit concert for wounded soldiers from the Battle of Hanau. Along with it, the piece *Wellington's Victory* expressed the sentiment of so many of the audience. Vienna had been torn apart, French soldiers were everywhere, and the era of the great Saxon Electors was in its twilight. All the while, maintaining the brimming dance, constantly on the move, luxurious in melody, insistent in rhythm and exuberance, there is also an emotional depth that is never far from the surface. The famous allegretto second movement was repeated immediately and has cast its spell on countless audiences. One can only imagine what that concert was like. Imagine the recovery from the ravages of war- the ushering out of the Napoleonic age – and the star list of players that participated. Schuppanzigh was there leading the orchestra. Spohr, Hummel, Meyerbeer, Salieri, and other greats of the day were sitting in the orchestra, from whom we get our first hand accounts of Beethoven's podium manner – and how the audience was beguiled and enthralled.