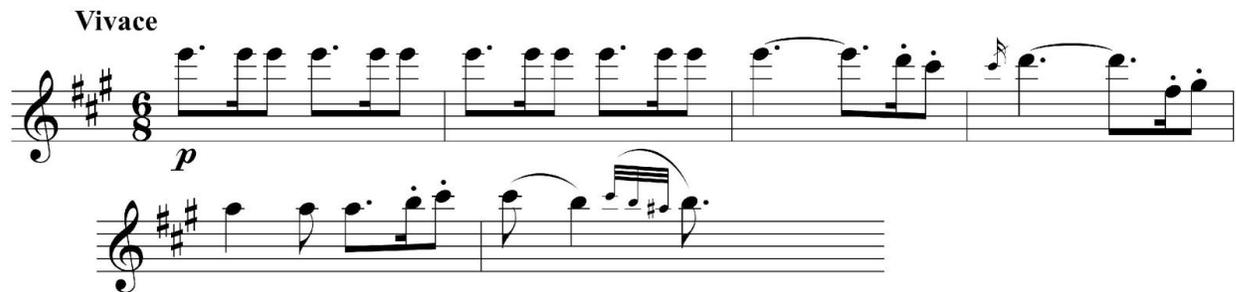


## Notes on Beethoven's Symphony #7 in A Major

In 1811-12, Ludwig van Beethoven's personal life was a mess, as usual. He lived in a squalor few people would tolerate. He was in poor health, hoping for recovery during an extended stay in a Bohemian spa. His hearing was pretty much gone. He was in debt, reduced to taking dubious commissions for some quick cash. But it was during this dispiriting time that Beethoven wrote his seventh Symphony, a composition expressing almost unabated joy. When it was premiered in Vienna in 1813 with Beethoven himself conducting an all-star orchestra, the audience shared that joy, greeting the new piece enthusiastically. It was one of Beethoven's most successful concerts ever.

The seventh symphony begins with an extended slow introduction. If it were stripped of its orchestral color, it could have been one of Beethoven's acclaimed piano improvisations. We can almost hear the master establishing the tonality with a few chords, experimenting with modulations, trying out some melodies, and warming up his fingers with brisk runs.

Finally he gets down to business with an allegro section that starts with a galloping dactylic rhythm played by the flute. That exuberant rhythm dominates the movement as the clockwork of



sonata form whirs along in the background.

### Opening theme of the Symphony

The final movement brings more of the same. The galloping rhythm of the first movement returns, but with its sharp edges rounded off slightly to accommodate the duple time signature. Again rhythm dominates the movement, while the orchestra unfolds the melodies of its sonata form with a barely controlled exuberance.

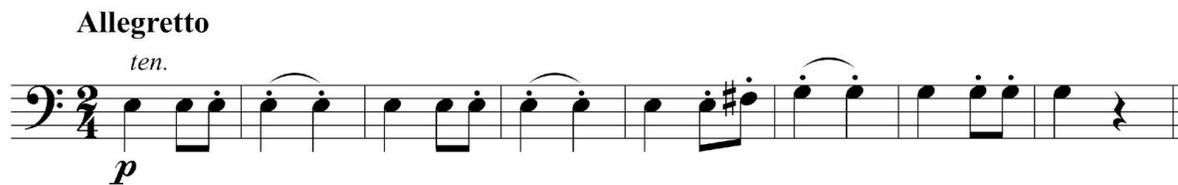
A later composer would have relied on drums and cymbals for rhythmic accents. But the only percussion instruments in Beethoven's orchestra were the timpani, so he used the brass instead. The valveless trumpets and horns of the early 19th century were capable of a raw intensity well suited to a rhythmic function, especially in the high register demanded by the A major tonality of the work. The timbre of these instruments is one of the defining characteristics of the sound of the composition.

The emphasis on rhythm in the two outer movements has led many critics to connect the symphony with the dance. For example, Richard Wagner famously described the piece as "the

apotheosis of the dance,” and the tarantella-like rhythms of the first movement reminded Hector Berlioz of a peasant round dance. Though Beethoven himself rejected such extra-musical associations, the notion that his seventh symphony was his “dance symphony” persists.

Beethoven’s Scherzo, the symphony’s third movement, evolved from an actual dance form, the minuet. Like the minuet the scherzo was in triple time with two contrasting themes, a presto main theme introduced by skittering strings and a serene slower section, the so-called “trio”, ushered in by low winds and horns. But unlike the courtly minuet, this scherzo has a certain recklessness, along with some musicianly humor. It functions as a sort of musical palate cleanser, preparing the way for the audacity of the final movement.

The second movement is an outlier. Its tempo is slower than the others, it is in a minor key, and



its use of rhythms is unremarkable.

#### Theme of the Second Movement.

It is built around an unprepossessing theme consisting mostly of repeated notes. In a few minutes, any Tin Pan Alley or Brill Building hack could come up with a more memorable melody. But the glory of Beethoven’s music doesn’t come from the tunes he wrote, but from what he did with them. The second movement of this second symphony is a set of deft variations on his simple air, skillfully exploiting its harmonic, contrapuntal, and emotional possibilities.

Beethoven’s treatment of his theme in the second movement was so moving that the premiere audience demanded its repetition. It has since developed a life of its own. It has appeared as a stand-alone number in orchestra concerts, taught little fingers to play as an exercise for beginning piano students, and has been background music in television shows and over thirty movies.

It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of Beethoven’s nine symphonies. They remain the symphonic gold standard. Symphony #7 gives us Beethoven at the top of his game. It still delights and puzzles listeners two centuries later.

William F. Long