

In 1802, upon the completion of his Symphony #2, there were few signs that Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) was destined to become the romantic revolutionary we now consider him to be. He was, like Haydn and Mozart a product of the Enlightenment and a follower of the ideals of Free Masonry, and since his relocation to Vienna ten years earlier, his career decisions were remarkably practical.

One of the first musicians he sought out after his arrival in the great city of music was none other than Mozart himself. The Great Master was brusquely dismissive of the gifted youth until he heard him improvise. Later Mozart remarked, "Keep your eyes on him...someday he'll give the world something to talk about!" Soon after that, Beethoven met Joseph Haydn who immediately became his most important teacher.

Ever confrontational, Beethoven considered both Mozart and Haydn to be his adversaries. His ultimate goal was clear, to prevail not only as their eventual successor but as Vienna's greatest composer. The way in which he would achieve this was to first learn everything he could from each of them and emulate their styles. He studied not only every Mozart and Haydn work he could lay his hands on but also the works of JS Bach and his sons. In addition to his studies with Haydn, (which would continue until he was nearly in his thirties), he even became a student of the infamous and influential Antonio Salieri. Beethoven's commitment to perfecting his technique and following in the footsteps of establishment figures would assure his success in Vienna. But his ambitions would not end there. He would soon become the first composer to believe that his music would not only make his name immortal, it would possess the power to transform the world!

Known for his frequent audacious and sometimes outrageous behavior, the young Beethoven was surprisingly risk-averse when it came to his career. For example, he wrote some of his most original music in the Piano Sonatas which were played almost exclusively in private homes and rarely reviewed in the press. When he finally decided to present his first major concert (more than SEVEN YEARS after his arrival in Vienna!), he chose the works he was most certain would succeed both with the general public and with the critics. That concert included his first piano concerto, the septet (which would be his biggest public

success), and the premiere of his Symphony #1, an ingenious, vivacious work written almost entirely in the style of Haydn.

“Papa” Haydn had just returned from London where his final Six Symphonies were premiered. Beethoven would ensure that the premiere of his “First” would follow almost immediately on the heels of Haydn’s “Last”. Just as Brahms openly envisioned his first symphony to be “Beethoven’s 10th”, I suspect Beethoven privately imagined his first Symphony to be “Haydn’s 105th.”

The exact composition dates of the lovely Two Romances for Violin and Orchestra are not known but they were probably written contemporaneously with the first Symphony (although they were not published until much later). The inspired, and brilliant Second Symphony, like the first, is still relatively conservative. However, we can hear Beethoven carefully adding more and more of his own fiery, visceral and athletic voice to the traditional symphonic recipe.

The Symphony #2 is a product of an incredibly fruitful period of six-months when, upon the advice of his doctor, Beethoven lived in Heiligenstadt, a quiet village in the Vienna Woods. With Mozart long dead and Haydn senile and retired from composing, it was in Heiligenstadt that Beethoven had come to accept that although he had vanquished his two great adversaries, there was now a much more powerful one to contend with. An adversary almost unimaginably formidable and menacing. His ever worsening deafness and the suffering it inflicted upon him would be his indomitable opponent for the rest of his life. It would cause him nearly unbearable psychological misery but it would also inspire a radical idea within him. He envisioned a revolutionary new role for the Artist which would directly result in some of his greatest works and would fire the imagination of generations of great composers to come: The Artist as the Romantic Hero!

-Joseph Swensen (March 2019)