
Ludwig van Beethoven, *Symphony No. 2 in D, Op. 36*



Symphony No. 2 in D major was premiered on April 5, 1803 in Vienna. It is scored for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani and strings and is approximately 36 minutes long.

1. *Adagio molto. Allegro con brio*
2. *Larghetto*
3. *Scherzo: Allegro*
4. *Allegro molto*

Measured against the hot-wired First Symphony, the heroic Third, and the heaven-storming Fifth—all of them written between 1799 and 1808—Beethoven's Second is a relaxed work in greater part, akin to the Fourth and Sixth symphonies. This has prompted music listeners ever since to wonder how he could have created a work as buoyant as No. 2 at a time when his worsening deafness had been diagnosed as incurable and irreversible.

The composition came to term in 1802 from sketches organized the previous year. Likelier than not, it reflects several happy months in the rural retreat of Heiligenstadt, on the recommendation of an otologist. From one window in his isolated cottage he could see eastward to the Danube, and beyond. Outside, he roamed the fields and surrounding woods freely, yet his mood was "morose" according to Ferdinand Ries, the devoted pupil who visited him there.

In the third movement of No. 2, the word scherzo appeared symphonically for the first time, although it retained a song and trio form, and was built on the sudden juxtapositions of loud and soft, with changes in their patterns just when he'd seemed to settle on one. One Viennese critic, after a repeat performance in 1804, called Symphony No. 2 "a crass monster, a hideously writhing, wounded dragon that refuses to die and, though bleeding in the finale, furiously thrashes about with its stiffened tail." One should always keep posterity in mind whenever a spiky new piece tempts us to dismiss it without a trial (whereas easy-listening pieces tend to spoil as quickly as unrefrigerated seafood, and most should).