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About the Cover

by

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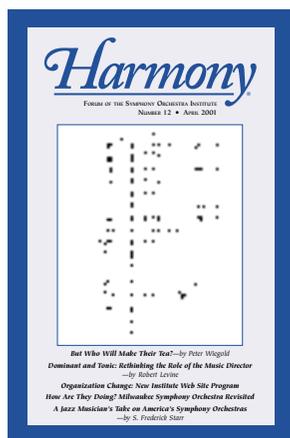
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About the Cover



The music on the cover of this issue, the finale of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, is perhaps the most famous victory music ever written. This sudden blast of C major, marking the first appearance of trombones in a symphony, arrives after an extraordinary transitional passage of suspense and high drama. This was one of Beethoven's greatest masterstrokes, and the path from strife to conquest had never before been so graphically depicted in music.

Theodore Thomas picked Beethoven's Fifth Symphony for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's inaugural concert in 1891. Like the C major triumph of Beethoven's finale, Thomas's success in Chicago

was hard-won. According to an often repeated story, when Thomas was first asked if he could be lured to Chicago to establish a resident symphonic ensemble, the celebrated conductor replied, "I would go to Hell if they gave me a permanent orchestra." By the end of his first season as music director of the new Chicago Symphony Orchestra, he may well have thought he had done just that.

Chicago's cavernous Auditorium Theatre was filled with music lovers on October 17, 1891, eager to listen to the 86 players Thomas had hand-picked to make up his new orchestra. Without any intended irony, Thomas began the inaugural concert with Wagner's rarely performed *Faust* Overture, inspired by the famous tale of a man who bargained with the devil to get what he wanted. Next came Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and then, after intermission, Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto and Dvorák's *Husitská* Overture—the first of many long and challenging concerts Thomas would conduct in Chicago.

The concert was a resounding success and a signal moment in Chicago's burgeoning cultural life, but the rest of the first season was rough going. Chicagoans who knew Thomas from the light summer concerts he had given there with his touring orchestra were not prepared for the serious and demanding programs he now had up his sleeve. (He gave them difficult music right off, programming a new horn concerto by the young Richard Strauss). The public

did not immediately warm to Thomas's dictatorial manner or his Germanic taste in music, and when Brahms's Third Symphony won a spot on the Request program, they accused him of stuffing the ballot box. The press, too, was tough on Thomas, criticizing his conducting as fussy and his interpretations as "conventional and safe." Clearly incensed, Thomas finally issued a statement saying that he no longer read his reviews, "as I find in them nothing that either gives me assistance, knowledge, suggestion or encouragement in my art." Attendance was spotty all season long, reaching a demoralizing low for an all-American program by little-known composers in April. By the season's end, the deficit had reached \$53,000.

But Thomas was a man of ambition, daring, and great vision, and he was persistent. He knew that he had created a brilliant orchestra in Chicago, and he believed that people would eventually see things his way. (When he was told that his audiences didn't like Brahms, he replied, "Then I will conduct him until they do!") Most of all, he knew that once people had tasted great music they would not be able to live without it. The power of music, he said, is immeasurable. "I care not from what station in life come the thousands who sit before me," he later told a reporter. "Beethoven will teach each according to his needs."

Thomas had just 14 seasons with the Chicago Symphony, and several of them were marked more by strife than success, but he gave the city a great orchestra, an invaluable legacy of high standards and inventive programming, and a brand new concert hall, which opened just weeks before his death. What did Thomas conduct on the dedicatory program? Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, the music of victory.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.