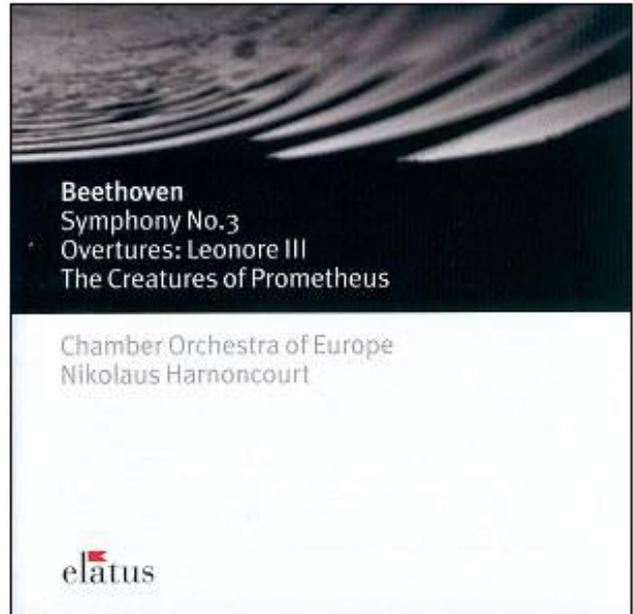


## CD REVIEW 76

### BEETHOVEN

Symphony no 3 in E flat Op. 55 (Eroica);  
Overture: Leonora no 3 Op 72;  
Overture: The Creatures of Prometheus Op 43.  
Chamber Orchestra of Europe, Nicholas  
Harnoncourt  
Elatus 2564 60034-2



I have always had some misgivings about Harnoncourt, but I have to say that this is a fine, logical and faithful account of this magnificent symphony. Is it the first really great symphony?

He has a rich sound. It is full-blooded and yet not excessive. His tempi are so very well judged and all the movements have character. It is well conceived, coherent and beautifully portrayed.

There is lyricism, excitement, drama and a depth of feeling unsurpassed in any other recording I have. The judgement in the funeral march is perfect.

The trouble is that this symphony has had and continues to have so many bad performances and some are on CD. Some performances are atrociously slow and anaemic. The symphony in this performance takes about 46 minutes but than may depend on repeats. I have heard it take 55 to 60 minutes and Klemperer and Rostropovich are the worst offenders.

If you want a full set of these symphonies I suggest David Zinman, a very fine conductor, with the Zurich Tanhalle Orchestra on RCA. On no account invest in the Simon Rattle's performances. They are a great disappointment. The orchestral sound is thin and unpleasant; the balance is often wrong; the performances are nervous; Rattle's tempi are questionable. He cannot even get the opening of Symphony no 5 right. It starts with a quaver rest and the three quavers that follow are not accented. His Pastoral is poor and given a clinical performance... white coats and stethoscopes! The Seventh is utterly unconvincing and he turns this masterpiece into an irritation... an unmovable and painful stone in the shoe. The Eighth is idiosyncratic and the choral finale of Symphony no 9 goes hopelessly wrong. He is short on lyricism and on the richness that Harnoncourt brings to Beethoven. Harnoncourt's Eroica is heroic.

The way Harnoncourt deals with the difficult finale is a revelation. Sets of variations, because of their changeable and episodic nature, are hard to put together and flow. But Harnoncourt succeeds and we are faced with a story, a narrative which hangs together satisfactory in this performance. He always has something in reserve and when he unleashes the power as instructed by Beethoven the shivers travel the spine and the hair stands up. The gentle sections are given with tenderness that is not mawkish and often the sound is very poignant.

The opening movement is well constructed and serves as a curtain raiser. The playing is excellent and the conductor has built a secure and towering edifice.

I have never heard the slow movement played better; there is a profundity here which demands our attention. The scherzo buzzes enthusiastically.

Music must be listened to, not just heard. It must not be demeaned as mere background music which is what Radio 3 say that most of their listeners treat it as!

The third Leonora overture is exquisitely done. And what a gorgeous theme it has, and the orchestral construction is really first class! Admire the contrast of dynamics in the Prometheus overture.

Harnoncourt has really got the understanding of these pieces and, intentionally perhaps, he proves again that Beethoven is the greatest of us all.

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