



Eroica

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Ian Hart is Beethoven in a unique drama of the first performance of the *Eroica* Symphony



Ian Hart, most recently seen as Dr Watson in BBC One's *The Hound Of The Baskervilles* and as Professor Quirrell in *Harry Potter And The Philosopher's Stone*, plays Ludwig van Beethoven in a unique film of the great composer's watershed symphony, *Eroica*. Written by Nick Dear, it focuses on the day in June 1804 when Beethoven's Third Symphony was first played through in a private rehearsal at the palace of the composer's patron, Prince Lobkowitz, in Vienna.

Also starring Frank Finlay, Tim Pigott-Smith, Jack Davenport, Claire Skinner and Anton Lesser, and directed by Simon Cellan-Jones (*Our Friends In The North*, *Storm Damage* and the feature film *Some Voices*), *Eroica* is a unique collaboration between the BBC's Classical Music and Drama departments, and has already been screened to acclaim at this year's Edinburgh Film Festival.

Set against the revolutionary climate of the early 1800s, *Eroica* is a real-time performance which

explores the story behind the symphony; the composer's passion for his work; and his unrequited love for an unattainable woman. Beethoven – who is suffering from a gradual loss of hearing – confounds his well-bred audience by producing a score dedicated to Napoleon Bonaparte, a remarkable move bearing in mind that Napoleon was out to destroy the power of the aristocracy. However, on learning that Bonaparte has crowned himself Emperor, Beethoven feels betrayed and famously rips up the dedication page.

Producer Liza Marshall says: "The idea behind the film was to bring a new audience to classical music. We wanted it to have a modern, radical edge – like Beethoven's music did at the time. The audience should feel like they are sitting right at the heart of the orchestra – a total contrast to the traditional style of symphony performance. As Haydn says in the film: 'Beethoven puts himself at the centre of the music. I'm sure that's why it's so noisy.'"

Screenwriter Nick Dear, whose two-part drama, *Byron*, is being shown on BBC Two in September, explains: "In this 'workshop rehearsal' format, the facts of the composer's life are hinted at and only tangentially explored. Most of the human relationships are low-key. The big drama is the music. Here, art takes prominence over life, and the orchestra, en masse, is the principal character of the film."

Executive producer and Head of BBC Classical Music, Peter Maniura, says: "Beethoven's revolutionary Third Symphony, the *Eroica*, burst upon an unsuspecting world in the summer of 1804. BBC Classical Music and BBC Drama have collaborated to recreate that day in a film drama which allows viewers to feel the full force and emotion of a work which changed the course of musical history."

Eroica features L'Orchestre Revolutionaire et Romantique, conducted by Sir John Eliot Gardiner, one of the world's foremost Beethoven experts. The performance is the first in modern times to replicate the exact number of players who performed the original symphony.

Says Jane Root, Controller of BBC Two: "*Eroica* is a unique piece of programming that brings together the skills and talents of two different genres to create an informative and compelling story. It is a new way of working that we are keen to explore on Two and there are already other cross-genre collaborations between the BBC's Factual, Entertainment and Drama genres in the pipeline."

These include *Byron*, Nick Dear's drama starring Jonny Lee Miller in the title role; *D-Day* and *Dunkirk* drama documentaries; and *Samuel Pepys*, a film by Guy Jenkin with Steve Coogan in the title role. *Larkin – Love Again*, a film based on the life of poet Philip Larkin, starring Hugh Bonneville, was shown in July.

Root continues: "With these dramas, *Eroica*, *Larkin – Love Again* or *Byron*, we're trying to get under the skin of the subjects, to capture the audience's imagination by harnessing the experience and expertise of programme-makers across the BBC to bring a new perspective to story-telling."

"Both *Byron* and *Eroica* are about transgression, about pushing the limits, breaking taboos," says Dear. "Both are about men who are outsiders, and whose personal lives cause them immense difficulties. And although both are concerned with the creation of great works of art – *Don Juan* and the *Eroica* Symphony – they are couched within the everyday experience of the artists' lives. Most of what you see is based on documented fact; a little bit is speculation.

"The structure of each film is distinctly different. *Byron* is 13 years of mayhem and debauchery – a picaresque journey through fame, downfall and exile to a muddy oblivion in the swamps of Missolonghi. I wanted the pace to be fast and the world to be peopled by big, rich characters. The themes are Faustian and the art, in this story, secondary to the life, because this man's life is so extraordinary.

"Beethoven's tale takes place over the course of a single day. A genius, like anyone else, gets up and has a wash and goes to work. So that's what he does here – except that his work today is to attend the first play-through of his ground-breaking Third Symphony. At the end of the film, Beethoven goes home and has some fish for dinner. He likes fish."

The producer of *Eroica* is Liza Marshall (*The Sins*, *Fields Of Gold*) and the executive producers are Peter Maniura and Hilary Salmon.



Cast and crew

Eroica

Main cast

Beethoven Ian Hart
Prince Lobkowitz Jack Davenport
Count Dietrichstein Tim Pigott-Smith
Sukowaty Anton Lesser
Hayden Frank Finlay
Josephine Claire Skinner
Therese Lucy Akhurst
Marie Lobkowitz Fenella Woolgar
Reis Leo Bill
Otto Fisher Trevor Cooper

Production credits

Writer Nick Dear
Producer Liza Marshall
Director Simon Cellan Jones
Director of Photography Barry Ackroyd
Executive Producers Peter Maniura
Hilary Salmon

Ian Hart plays Beethoven



Playing a deaf 19th-century composer could be perceived as an odd choice for a cult, hip actor like Ian Hart, who is usually associated with more modern protagonists. However, having the chance to play Beethoven in *Eroica* was something the Liverpoolian actor saw as a great challenge, especially when it came to the history of the piece.

Beethoven is an iconic figure and his passionate, mesmerising music is still celebrated all over the globe 200 years on. “Beethoven was a brilliant pianist,” explains Hart, who played Professor Quirrell in the first Harry Potter film, *Harry Potter And The Philosopher’s Stone*. “From an early age, he was touted around as the best piano player in town. He knew how good and how clever he was in what he was writing. He knew it was completely different and revolutionary.”

The symphony itself represented a watershed – a complete departure from the traditional, “classical”

style of the period – in that it introduced the “Romantic” movement. Although Hart wasn’t a fan of classical music when he took on the role – he confesses that the film *Amadeus* “was the be all and end all of my knowledge” – he could still appreciate the significance of the score. “*Eroica* was very experimental. It included elements that Beethoven had been working on for over four years and there were sounds mixed together that just seemed wrong to the majority of people at that time.

“For me it’s like *Pet Sounds*, the Beach Boys album, and I felt that Beethoven had a lot in common with Brian Wilson. Wilson became a recluse and stayed in his house for four years after recording that album, because he felt that no one understood what he was trying to do.”

Hart also likens this musical revolution to the discovery of punk rock, Elvis Presley and Eminem in more recent popular music.

“Eminem has taken a music form that wasn’t his own and made it his own and made something new as a result. He’s taken it on to a different level with help from his producer Dr Dre.

“Composers like Mozart and Beethoven were doing variations on a theme – performances of an hour and a half of variations to show how clever they were. They were doing it to show that they could play the same seven-chord progression but in a different way over and over again; alter it, layer it and structure it differently. That’s what Dre is doing, it’s what producers do. They take sounds and melodies and mix it together with a beat. Musically, it’s as great a construct as anything that Mozart or Beethoven would do, I think. I’m sure that many people would disagree but I think there is a lot to be said for what modern producers are doing, it’s not simple.”

Hart has played another great musician, John Lennon, twice for the films *The Hours And Times* and *Backbeat*. However, portraying a legend such as Lennon, or indeed Beethoven, wasn’t as formidable a task for Hart as one might think.

“John Lennon is a symbol for a lot of people but they don’t know who he really was and what he was really like,” explains Hart. “So, for me, there was a lot of freedom in playing a character like that. So long as you do that thing with your eyes and you occasionally make John Lennonesque faces, people are comfortable with it; that does half the job of convincing an audience that everything else you do is consistent with the truth.

“It’s not necessarily easier playing real people but you can get more information about them to make your performance more rounded. You have access to the same material as the writer; you can go to the books the writer went to or you can listen to the same piece of music. With a fictional character, a scriptwriter may have a very clear idea in his head of what the character is like – he may have written it about his mate or his cousin – but that never translates into the script.”

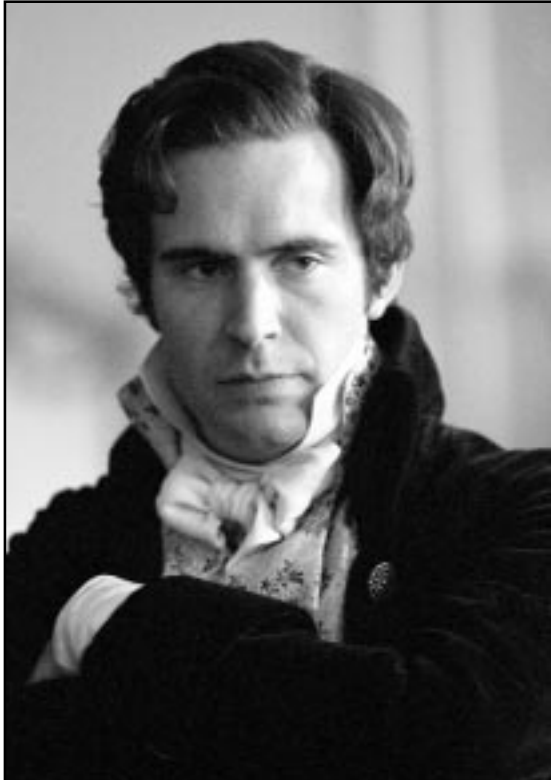
The main challenge for the 39-year-old actor was his preparation for the role, which meant music and conducting lessons, reading up on the composer himself as well as trying to get to grips with the score. “I had to start from scratch,” explains Hart. “I had to make up a new character based on what I knew about him and fill in what the story needed: a certain amount of aggression, a certain amount of anger, a feeling of isolation, of being misunderstood, which was partly borne out of his deafness.

“The more deaf Beethoven became, the less he was able to communicate with people, so he became frustrated and angry. I guess he was starting to feel paranoid as well. You would feel paranoid if you can’t hear what people are saying about you.

“I also had conducting lessons from a conductor from the Royal College of Music, but I still found it difficult. The musicians in the performance could have reacted really badly; an actor coming in with a funny wig on and he starts waving his hands around – they could have gone against me, but a lot of it is getting people on your side in that situation. I was lucky. They were lovely people and I got on well with them. My one consolation was that people would say, ‘Well Beethoven wasn’t a very good conductor!’”

After filming *Eroica*, Hart had only a short break before starting work on his new project, *White On White*, with Alan Cumming and Willem Dafoe. But he finds the insecurity of wondering where the next job is coming from hard to cope with now that he has a family. “Having a family and acting for a living aren’t always compatible, but it is the only thing I can do.”

Jack Davenport plays Prince Lobkowitz



Jack Davenport seems to have cornered the market in playing upper-crust English gents like Norrington in the recent box-office hit, *Pirates Of The Caribbean*, and saucy, ex-public schoolboy types like Miles in *This Life* or, more recently, Steve in *Coupling*. This time, however, the 30-year-old actor plays a 19th-century Viennese aristocrat with a limp: Prince Lobkowitz, the generous patron to Beethoven, for whom the rehearsal of the Third Symphony is performed.

“I rather liked Lobkowitz, in as much as I think, historically, a lot of those symphonies wouldn’t exist without him. He may not have had the talent but he did have the cash, and he chose to spend it on patronising the arts rather than just building another palace or some celebration of him and his family. I think he ended up bankrupting himself but if you are going to be profligate with inherited money, then that’s quite a good way to go!”

Davenport, an ex-Cheltonian and the son of Maria Aitken and Nigel Davenport, has established himself as one of the new Brit Pack who are conquering Hollywood. Having played significant roles in recent hits such as *The Talented Mr Ripley* and Gore Verbinski’s *Pirates Of The Caribbean* with Johnny Depp, he spends a lot of time in America but still finds the “superficial” life of LA a turn-off.

“On one level, being in Hollywood is no different to being an actor here, insomuch as all you’re really doing is going out trying to find work and nail that work down. However, it is very much a one-industry town, so people think, talk, breathe, sleep and even defecate little else. It’s all about movies which can be a bit wearing because you can end up thinking, ‘Come on guys, there are other things in life!’ But, on the other hand, it’s an exciting place to be if you’re working.

“I don’t think I’ll be moving out there just yet though. There are stories I’d like to be part of that are very much to do with being British. Something like *Eroica*, for example, would not get made over in Hollywood because, as a proposal, it would seem nigh on ludicrous and quite risky, but it is exactly the sort of thing that would get done over here, especially by the BBC. Those pieces of work can often be the more interesting ones. Yes it’s lovely to be in big, glamorous, gazillion-dollar-grossing films, but it’s not the be all and end all.

“I didn’t do a huge amount of research – a bit of reading and getting my limp right! I was playing someone who was living in the 19th century and there was the odd portrait, but he is not well known. I think it’s more difficult to play historical figures if there is any film record of them. I was once asked to play Anthony Eden, but one of the reasons I baulked at the idea was the fact that everyone knows who he is and what he looked like, and that made me quite nervous. Ian’s [Hart] absolutely stuffed in that respect because he’s playing one of the greatest composers of all time!

“Beethoven aside, the film is less about the people and more about the music. The construction of the

piece is not about giving some detailed historical re-enactment of these characters but the amazing cultural event that the first performance of this symphony entailed. Our job as actors was to respond to the music, and it seemed more important to me to keep one's responses as fresh as possible."

Davenport developed an appreciation of classical music mainly because his parents played it all the time. As well as this, the uniqueness of the piece drew him to it. "It was such an odd proposal for a film in terms of its structure – the emphasis is very much on what you're hearing rather than what you're seeing.

"I have a much fuller understanding now of how epoch-making the symphony was. The musicians told me that the symphony is the equivalent of punk rock, inasmuch as it breaks every single rule. I can now fully appreciate how nuts it is!"

Davenport has just finished a film with Deborah Messing (of *Will And Grace* fame) but is philosophical about living up to the reputation of his parents. "I will always ask what they think because my father's been a professional actor for over 50 years. Why wouldn't you ask someone with that much experience what they think?"

However, even with his Hollywood career on the ascendant, Davenport is as keen as ever to film the new series of hit sitcom *Coupling* later this year. "We know each other so well and know exactly what we are meant to be doing. And it's fun, of course. It's half an hour of penis jokes per week, and what person doesn't like a good penis joke?"