

Beethoven's Use of Musical Symbolism in the *Eroica* Symphony

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Part I

From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, a new way of thinking spread like wildfire throughout the many lands of Europe. They called it “The Enlightenment.” People began to question what was right, what was true, and what was “normal.” Great thinkers like Voltaire, Vesalius, and Rousseau arose from the blue with revolutionary new ideas. Society began to change, to critique and improve the world; it morphed into something completely new. Rebellion arose in France, and from that one revolution and the ideas that had inspired it stemmed many others around the world, as well as throughout Europe itself.

Amidst all this chaos, a young man sat at a desk in the small German village of Heiligenstadt in 1802. His name was Ludwig Van Beethoven, by then a very well-known and esteemed composer of classical music. According to historian Romain Rolland, “He is alone with his demons—slighted love, hope, grief, the whole concert of the inner voices...in these sunless days, a death-roar is wrung from Beethoven.”¹ These demons, this hope, this grief, this mournful depression that are eating away at Beethoven have all stemmed from the recent discovery that he is losing his hearing. This is one of the worst misfortunes that could possibly befall a musician, much less a composer possessing the genius of Beethoven. But it also stood for something more. As Alec Harman puts it, “It was a symbol of his separation from the world; his physical deafness complements the spiritual isolation to which he had committed himself, even before his deafness was manifest.”² There, Beethoven, eaten away by loneliness and fear, began to write a document we know to this day as the Heiligenstadt Testament—a sort of

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last will or suicide note. But Beethoven did not kill himself then; he persevered for the sake of his art. He threw everything that he had been taught to the wind and sat down to write true music, revolutionary music, music that flowed straight from the heart of man. He called it *Eroica*.

The structure of the *Eroica* itself was revolutionary; it did not follow the typical style of the Classical Period. As defined by Marion Bauer, the typical sonata form is composed of four movements. The first is divided into three parts—the exposition, where the theme is presented, the development, where the theme is presented in variations, and the recapitulation, where the composer returns to the theme and original key to provide closure. The second movement is typically slow, generally in an A-B-A form, while the third is a minuet or a trio. The final movement is generally a rondo (or Old French *rondeau*), which is typically also in the same form as the first movement.³ Beethoven's *Eroica* was one of the first pieces of that day and age that did not follow the standard sonata form. Instead, Beethoven took that idea and twisted it, warped it, and thus created a new style for music. He changed the keys often, threw out the A-B-A form for his second movement, and even invented a new form of music along the way—the *scherzo*. Instead of writing a minuet or trio, Beethoven wrote a *scherzo*—a word that means “joke” in Italian. True to its name, the new *scherzo* was lively and fun, in a jesting sort of way, with a trio incorporated in the middle. Rolland puts it this way: “He writes *Presto!* ... Overboard with the minuet and its formal graces! The inspired rush of the Scherzo has been found!”⁴ This new form for a symphony represents one of the key ideals of the Enlightenment—taking something old and looking at it with new eyes. As put by Immanuel Kant, the Enlightenment was “man's emergence from his self-imposed inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. ‘Have the courage to use your own understanding’ is therefore the motto of the Enlightenment.”⁵ And Beethoven certainly did this—he did not lay waste to what had come before him, he did not ignore it completely, but instead he looked at it a different way and adjusted it to help convey the message of his music. In doing so he created a whole new type of music.

In addition to the format of the music, Beethoven used musical techniques to convey Revolutionary ideals throughout the four portions, or movements, of the *Eroica*. The first movement, entitled *Allegro Con Brio*, meaning “brisk and lively, with spirit,” is much debated by historians, and could have represented several ideas or themes. The piece starts out with two E flat chords, which seem to scream, “Pay attention!”⁶ The movement then continues on with a bouncing theme, which is then warped into many variations, some happy, some depressing, and some simply dissonant. Alan Woods presents the first interpretation: that the two chords represent an orator demanding attention from an assembly, while the dissonances in the body of the section resemble a “cavalry charge,” a “call to struggle,” and the many obstacles it faces. He writes, “In this movement, we are in the thick of the Revolution itself, with all its ebbs and flows, its victories and defeats, its triumphs and its despairs. It is the French Revolution in music.”⁷ I believe this is a plausible theory; taking it a step further, the different instrumental sections could represent the different social classes and their moments in the Revolution. The times where it seems that two or more of the sections are battling against each other could represent the discord between classes at certain times. There is also the famous instance when Beethoven’s good friend Ferdinand Ries disrupted the first rehearsal of the piece at the point where the horn comes in two bars before the rest of the orchestra. Unaware of Beethoven’s intent here, Ries shouted, “That damned horn player! Can’t he count properly? It sounds infamously wrong!” He later recounted that “I think I nearly had my ears boxed—Beethoven did not forgive me for a long time.”⁸ Aside from illustrating Beethoven’s quick temper and the fact that not everybody appreciated his daring work, this passage could also represent the idea that not all social classes were on the same page. In fact, it could be taken to show that some events during the Revolution were (or at least seemed to be) too rushed and not well enough thought out, but nevertheless worked out in the end. Michael Tilson Thomas, on the other hand, has a different interpretation of the first movement. He states that it’s “about life, youth, hope...and above all, energy.” He writes that the dissonant, seemingly stuck notes could represent how all humans get stuck in life sometimes, how we question things in life, and how we may not necessarily understand why things

happen, while the developmental section represents how everybody has to deal with conflict, anger, and frustration. He argues that this is one of the main revolutionary things about this piece—that Beethoven is the first to touch on the “realm of unconscious exploration.”⁹ I believe that Thomas makes a very good point—that Beethoven conveys new ideas to the public through this piece, new unheard-of chords, dissonances, questions. And these new ideas thoroughly represent Enlightenment thinking—taking something familiar and driving it where it has never been before.

The second movement is perhaps the least debated by musicologists searching for its deeper meaning. It is entitled “Funeral March,” and consists of just that. The march opens with a mournful oboe solo, which is later carried out by other sections before transforming into a less miserable section that brings out a new theme. Beethoven turns that new theme into a gorgeous, lamenting fugue before bringing back the oboe to finish. Thomas explains the common consensus that the piece represents a typically grand Parisian state funeral. But he makes an unusual point in the instrumental arrangement. Instead of having the drumbeats played on actual drums (which were indeed available at the time), Beethoven chose to give the drumbeat figure to the strings, with the dynamic instruction being to play “as if whispering.”¹⁰ This is quite a curious selection. Why would Beethoven have chosen to have one instrument attempt to convey the sound of another? The idea was simply revolutionary. I believe that one reason for this choice could be that the string drumbeats give the piece a whole new level of emotion, of mystery. They make it feel less of a clichéd funeral march, but instead a true picture of grief. I also believe it to be interesting that in every single source that I consulted, it was unanimously agreed that the oboe solo represented a mourner lamenting a loved one’s fate. The piercing sound of the oboe was perfect for this mournful tune—not too sweet, but also not too droll. But then there is the almost waltz-like section inserted right before the fugue. This is where opinions split among historians. Woods believes that this nearly glorious section could be the celebration of a hero; Thomas considers it to be the mourner asking questions, perhaps, “Why is there death? Why must there be suffering in life?”¹¹ Personally, I disagree with all of these claims. To me, this

section sounds almost sarcastically false. The joyful little oboe tune, followed by the grand trumpet fanfare, seems a little out of place in this march. What if this waltz represents Robespierre's promises of good during the Reign of Terror? They certainly must have seemed a little bit hypocritical to the masses after the unjustified execution of thousands. This could account for the fanfares. Maybe this whole march could represent the Reign of Terror itself. But all questions of intent are lost when one begins to listen to the deeply moving fugue. One begins to wonder what must have happened to Beethoven that inspired him to write this heavy, dark piece. Some, like Thomas, believe that the fugue is Beethoven's way of trying to answer his own questions about life through the most rational form of music. Thomas states that it "drains every last bit of strength from us,"¹² and I agree. This fugue is probably one of the purest, most beautiful pieces of music I have ever heard, and I find it hard to analyze its meaning. To me, it simply represents finding true beauty in the darkest of times.

The third movement is curious in itself, because it was the first of its kind ever written—the world's first orchestral *scherzo*. But after the draining funeral march, it is simply the sun that lights up this whole symphony. Robin McKee, the principle flautist in Thomas's San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, states that "the third movement is the best day of your life, where everything is going well, and lining up, and the sun is shining and the flowers are blooming."¹³ Indeed this "little joke" represents the better side of life, hope for the future. And to most, the triumphant horn trio in the middle can only represent one thing—Napoleon. According to Ries, the main reliable source of Beethoven's day, the symphony was originally to be dedicated to Bonaparte, until the fateful day where he had himself crowned emperor of France. Ries recorded Beethoven's words as follows: "So he is no more than a common mortal! Now, he too will tread underfoot all the rights of man, indulge only his ambition, now he will think himself superior to all men, become a tyrant!"¹⁴ Legend has it that Beethoven then erased the dedication from his title page so violently that he ripped a hole in it. This story helps us understand the intent behind the third movement as a celebration of everything Napoleon stood for: the rights of all, freedom, and justice—everything Beethoven admired in him. The

horn trio was to be a representation of this leader arising to bring the people of France to great glory, freedom, and justice.

The fourth movement seems to be out of place. It starts with a little chipper tune that doesn't feel at all like a piece of Beethoven's. But what Beethoven does with it is quite brilliant. Thomas convincingly explains his purpose here: apparently Beethoven had one major competitor during his time in Vienna. His name was Daniel Steibelt. During the time that the two composers were working, most of the court performances were hour-long improvisations that showcased the inner brilliance of the composers' minds. Unfortunately, one day Steibelt had the nerve to improvise on one of Beethoven's themes. Beethoven, being a very quick-tempered man and one who did not easily forgive, is said to have taken the cello part of one of Steibelt's quintets, turned it upside down, and pounded out a few of the notes on the harpsichord over the fading notes at the end of the quintet. He then continued for an hour with a brilliant improvisation based on those few notes. Thomas tells us that if one listens carefully, that little bit of so-called "musical fluff" is actually the last few bars for the cello part of Steibelt's quintet, turned upside down.¹⁵ Aside from being a brilliant story, the fact that Beethoven took something that he believed to be rubbish, put it in his symphony, and ingeniously transformed it in all dimensions shows us again how deeply he was rooted in the Enlightenment ideals of looking at the old through new eyes, being critical of one's surroundings, and urging others to think for themselves.

In a famous cartoon by Charles Schultz, Lucy asks Schroeder, "I'm looking for the answer to life, Schroeder. . . . What do you think is the answer?" To which Schroeder replies vehemently, "BEETHOVEN! Beethoven is IT, clear and simple!! Do you understand?"¹⁶ Indeed Beethoven is "It"—an eternal source of inspiration, a piece of the Revolution, echoing throughout the tunnel of time. The *Eroica* Symphony was one of the most revolutionary musical works of all time. Beethoven changed the way music was thought about, and to this day his music continues to convey the importance of such things as freedom, human rights, using one's mind, looking at old problems through new eyes, and always questioning what one is told. The work itself is

quite complicated, always teeming with mystery and new possibility. As Thomas puts it, “this piece took three years for Beethoven to write, but it’s taken me thirty to get my head around it.”¹⁷ Beethoven certainly was one of the first composers to take his music to such a high level of reality, challenging both himself to be able to use music to convey his outlook, his opinions, and his questions about life, and the listener, to be able to understand and interpret his intentions, which was thoroughly revolutionary at the time.

Part II

Today, the French Revolution is still very much alive. The once new ideas of human rights, fighting for freedom, and the sovereignty of the people are now central aspects of our culture. Beethoven’s *Eroica* took these themes and set them to music using a revolutionary new style that even changed the way people thought about the fundamentals of music. In the present day classical music is not considered our chief form of art. By now most people express these revolutionary ideals in other ways. However, classical music is still alive, and still very much affected by Beethoven’s revolutionary style. But how does one find Beethoven today, amidst the scarcely admired contemporary composers? Is his inspiration alive? The answer is that Beethoven is still very much alive, in the form of Dmitri Shostakovich, a Soviet-era Russian composer.

As in the time of the French Revolution, so too did Russian Communist leaders seek to use music to convey things like Soviet ideals and nationalism. Anybody who did not conform to these standards was in danger. As Michael Tilson Thomas puts it, “Official government decrees defined truth and beauty. Traditional composers were declared decadent and their music forbidden. Only Beethoven survived the ban.”¹⁸ The music in Shostakovich’s era was continuously regulated by the government, so, as in the era before Beethoven, composers generally wrote with the goal of official approval in mind. Shostakovich, however, did not.

His style was instead quite similar to Beethoven's. As Elliot Schwartz and Barney Childs have written, he was fond of dissonant, striking, and witty music. They also mention that "[his] rhythms are angular and often syncopated, he rarely strays from a strong sense of regular pulse."¹⁹ The two composers were similar in both background and musical technique. It makes one wonder whether Shostakovich might have been in large part inspired by Beethoven, perhaps even the *Eroica* in particular, as there are substantial moments in Shostakovich's works that sound almost like Beethoven reincarnated into different themes. Two of the most prominent examples of this are in Shostakovich's Symphony no. 5 and Symphony no. 12.²⁰ Thomas observes that "Shostakovich wrote his Fifth Symphony on the model pioneered by Beethoven."²¹ The third movement in particular bears much resemblance to the Funeral March of Beethoven's *Eroica*. It has the same exhausted, depressing feeling and begins similarly with a lonely oboe solo. Indeed, the two composers drew on similar circumstances to write these marches: Beethoven upon the massive state funerals of France during the Reign of Terror, and Shostakovich upon the brutal methods of Stalin's regime. Additionally, the second movement of Shostakovich's 12th is similar in its feel.²² But the major difference is that while Beethoven uses the strings to represent drummers in the opening, Shostakovich's cellos give a dark, doom-like impression, as if someone were watching over you, about to take you away at any moment. Additionally, while he opens the second movement of his Fifth Symphony like Beethoven, with a soulful oboe, Shostakovich decides to open with a French horn instead—an announcement of the whole Russian people's agony as opposed to one person lamenting.

Aside from the lonely, exhausted funeral marches, both composers make use of an intriguing technique in the final movements of their symphonies. In the *Eroica* and in Shostakovich's Fifth and 12th, the last movements are free from all the doom and mournful hopelessness, which makes them sound oddly out of place. In each case the final movement is full of joy and hope and pride, brassy fanfares, "musical fluff" as Thomas puts it.²³ I have offered possible explanations for this in Beethoven's work above, but why would Shostakovich do it? He himself states that "to strike out for the new is the sacred duty of all

artists.”²⁴ This points to one way of construing these joyous but incongruous outbursts. If Shostakovich were to write a symphony like his 12th, with all his dissonance, depressing chords, and doom-like cellos, his music would be censored, and he would probably be killed for writing “un-nationalist” music. Hence he needed to give the government a little of what it wanted—joyous fanfares, marches, chipper little tunes. Yet at the same time, the last movement of his 12th is very similar to the end of Beethoven’s *Eroica* in the sense that it is not just “fluff,” but something more. Beethoven develops the fluff into powerful themes, and Shostakovich tweaks the fluff to serve his own purposes. He inserts little recapitulations in minor keys, uses a few dissonant chords, and even over-develops his fanfares, making them a little *too* gaudy. Like Beethoven joking at Steibelt’s expense, he pokes a little fun at “approved” musical tastes.

While Beethoven and Napoleon may be dead, their legacies live on today. You can hear them if you listen hard enough, because the ideas they stood for are not dead. Freedom, hope for a better life, and people’s rights are still highly advocated in our world today. Occasionally, a person may even come along who seems to be the modern incarnation of Napoleon, or Beethoven, like Shostakovich. The echoes of the French Revolution still ring throughout our world—you just have to close your eyes and enjoy a little piece of music. ●

Notes

1. Romain Rolland, *Beethoven, The Creator*, trans. Ernest Newman (Garden City: Garden City Publishing Company, 1937), 63-4.
2. Alec Harman and Wilfrid Mellers, *Man and his Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 638.
3. Marion Bauer and Ethel R. Peyser, *Music Throughout the Ages*, ed. Elizabeth E. Rogers (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1967), 344-5.
4. Rolland, 93.
5. Robert W. Strayer, *Ways of the World: A Brief Global History (Volume II - Since 1500)*, (New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2009), 482.

6. Ludwig Van Beethoven, *Symphony no. 3 (Eroica) in E flat, Op. 55*, with the Dresden Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Herbert Kegel, recorded 1995, Capriccio Digital, compact disc. NOTE – When making references to musical techniques implemented in *Eroica*, they are based on this recording unless stated otherwise.
7. Alan Woods, “Beethoven: man, composer, and revolutionary,” May 19 2006, International Marxist Tendency, <http://www.marxist.com/beethoven-man-composer-revolutionary190506.htm> (accessed November 17, 2010).
8. W. A. DeWitt, “Beethoven’s Eroica,” 2004, <http://www.beethovenseroica.com/eroica2.html> (accessed November 19, 2010).
9. Michael T. Thomas (with the San Francisco Symphony), *Beethoven’s Eroica*, online video, (2009), Keeping Score, <http://video.pbs.org/video/1295282213/> (accessed November 17, 2010).
10. Michael T. Thomas (with the San Francisco Symphony), *Beethoven’s Eroica*.
11. Thomas (with the San Francisco Symphony), *Beethoven’s Eroica*.
12. Thomas (with the San Francisco Symphony), *Beethoven’s Eroica*.
13. Thomas (with the San Francisco Symphony), *Beethoven’s Eroica*.
14. DeWitt, “Beethoven’s Eroica”
15. Thomas (with the San Francisco Symphony), *Beethoven’s Eroica*.
16. Charles Schultz, “The Answer to Life,” The Charles M. Schultz Museum and Research Center, <http://www.schulzmuseum.org/pressreleases/20091204.html> (accessed November 21, 2010).
17. Thomas (with the San Francisco Symphony), *Beethoven’s Eroica*.
18. Michael T. Thomas, “Shostakovich’s *Symphony No. 5*,” 2009, PBS Keeping Score (with the San Francisco Symphony), <http://www.pbs.org/keepingscore/shostakovich-symphony-5.html>

(accessed November 19, 2010). It is interesting that the only survivor of the classical censorship was Beethoven, since he himself wrote very avant-garde revolutionary music.

19. Dmitri Shostakovich, "Music and the Times," *Music Journal*, January 1965, in *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music*, ed. Elliot Schwartz and Barney Childs (New York: Holt, Rineheart, and Winston, 1967), 106.

20. Dmitri Shostakovich, *Symphony no. 12 in D minor, Op. 112*, with the Cologne Gurzenich Orchestra, conducted by Dmitri Kitaenko, recorded 2005, Capriccio Digital, compact disc.

21. Thomas, "Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5"

22. Shostakovich, *Symphony no. 12 in D minor, Op. 112*.

23. Michael T. Thomas, "Beethoven's *Eroica*," 2009, San Francisco Symphony, <http://www.pbs.org/keepingscore/beethoven-eroica.html> (accessed November 17, 2010).

24. Shostakovich, "Music and the Times," 109.

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