

On Beethoven

Der Freymüthige [a German literary journal, The Free Courageous Ones] (7 April 1805)

Some, Beethoven's particular friends, assert that it is just this symphony [No. 3, "Eroica"] which is his masterpiece that this is the true style for high-class music, and that if it does not please now, it is because the public is not cultured enough, artistically, to grasp all these lofty beauties; after a few thousand years have passed it will not fail of its effect. Another faction denies that the work has any artistic value and professes to see in it an untamed striving for singularity which has failed, however, to achieve in any of its parts beauty or true sublimity and power. By means of strange modulations and violent transitions, by combining the most heterogeneous elements, as for instance when a pastoral in the largest style is ripped up by the basses, by three horns, etc., a certain undesirable originality may be achieved without much trouble; but genius proclaims itself not in the unusual and the fantastic, but in the beautiful and the sublime. Beethoven himself proved the correctness of this axiom in his earlier works. The third party, a very small one, stands midway between the others—it admits that the symphony contains many beauties, but concedes that the connection is often disrupted entirely, and that the inordinate length of this longest, and perhaps most difficult of all symphonies wearies even the cognoscenti, and is unendurable to the mere music lover; it wishes that Herr v. B. would employ his acknowledgedly great talents in giving us works like... his early compositions that have placed B. forever in the ranks of the foremost instrumental composers. It fears, however, that if Beethoven continues on his present path both he and the public will be the sufferers. His music could soon reach the point where one would derive no pleasure from it, unless well trained in the rules and difficulties of the art, but rather would leave the concert hall with an unpleasant feeling of fatigue from having been crushed by a mass of unconnected and overloaded ideas and a continuing tumult by all the instruments. The public and Herr van Beethoven, who conducted, were not satisfied with each other on this evening; the public thought the symphony too heavy, too long, and himself too discourteous, because he did not nod his head in recognition of the applause which came from a portion of the audience. On the contrary, Beethoven found the applause was not strong enough.

E.T.A. Hoffman, "Beethoven's Instrumental Music" (1813)

Mozart and Haydn, the creators of our present instrumental music, were the first to show us the art in its full glory; the man who then looked on it with all his love and penetrated its innermost being is—Beethoven! The instrumental music of these three masters breathe a similar romantic spirit—this is due to their similar intimate understanding of the specific nature of the art; in the character of their compositions there is none the less a marked difference.

In Haydn's writing there prevails the expression of a serene and childlike personality. His symphonies lead us into vast green woodlands, into a merry, gaily colored throng of happy mortals...

Mozart leads us into the heart of the spirit realm. Fear takes us in its grasp, but without torturing us, so that it is more an intimation of the infinite...

Thus Beethoven's instrumental music opens up to us also the realm of the monstrous and the immeasurable. Burning flashes of light shoot through the deep night of this realm and we become aware of giant shadows that surge back and forth, driving us into narrower and narrower confines until they destroy *us*—but not the pain of that endless longing in which each joy that

has climbed aloft in jubilant song sinks back and is swallowed up, and it is only in this pain, which consumes love, hope, and happiness but does not destroy them, which seeks to burst our breasts with a many-voices consonance of all the passions, that we live on, enchanted beholders of the supernatural!...

Haydn grasps romantically what is human in human life; he is more commensurable, more comprehensible for the majority.

Mozart calls rather for the superhuman, the wondrous element that abides in inner being.

Beethoven's music sets in motion the lever of fear, of awe, of horror, of suffering, and wakens just that infinite longing which is the essence of romanticism...

Can there be any work of Beethoven's that confirms all this to a higher degree than his indescribably profound, magnificent symphony in C minor [No. 5]? How this wonderful composition, in a climax that climbs on and on, leads the listener imperiously forward into the spirit world of the infinite!... No doubt the whole rushes like an ingenious rhapsody past many a man, but the soul of each thoughtful listener is assuredly stirred, deeply and intimately, by a feeling that is none other than that unutterable portentous longing, and until the final chord—indeed, even in the moments that follow it—he will be powerless to step out of that wondrous spirit realm where grief and joy embrace him in the form of sound. The internal structure of the movements, their execution, their instrumentation, the way in which they follow one another—everything contributes to a single end...

Ferdinand Adolf Gelbcke, "Classical and Romantic: A Contribution to the Historical Writings on the Music of our Time," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (11 and 14 June 1841)

Now – who creates the spirit of an age? Surely, the man of unquestioned genius who exerts an overpowering influence on his contemporaries. Yet in the first place he is inescapably a child of his time. He can never wholly isolate himself from his surroundings, nor ought he to do so; and he must always work with the materials that he finds around him. The great artist, then is a product of three separate factors that must happily and successfully be combined with each other: genius, historical context, and the resources that are currently available. Upon these will depend the manner in which genius manifests itself. A brief glance backwards at the history of music in earlier times will provide ample illustration of this point. When the Catholic church stood out against the tide of Reformation under the inspired leadership of a succession of Popes, Palestrina, working within the spirit of his time and his religion, assumed the role of the Reformer of Catholic church music. The artistic medium that had then been most effectively explored was that of vocal music. Thus Palestrina concentrated his attention wholly on that field. When later on an *inspired* form of Protestantism was consolidated in Germany under the protection of the Prussian royal household, which was itself in the ascendant, the contrapuntal style came to full maturity, as did the *Protestant* organ under the imposing leadership of old Sebastian Bach. And later, when the Austrian Empire enjoyed a golden era of security, power, prosperity and peace under the reign of Emperor Joseph II, was this not the age of Haydn and Mozart?... They were, moreover, able to exploit a far wider range of artistic techniques than their predecessors had done, owing to the fact that extensive developments had been and were being made in the construction of musical instruments...

Beethoven extended musical form and expression far beyond the point that the composers of Mozart's generation had reached, the spirit of his music being altogether different and less balanced. The stormy age of revolution stirred the oceanic depths of Beethoven's imagination, whipping up the most magnificent and restlessly surging breakers. The ceaseless ebb and flow,

the constant reshaping of things has since been a characteristic of music; and it is paralleled by the struggle for new political structures, a struggle that is the principal concern of the present age.

Richard Wagner, *The Art of Tone* (1849)

What inimitable art did Beethoven employ in his “C-minor Symphony,” [No. 5], in order to steer his ship from the ocean of infinite yearning to the haven of fulfillment! He was able to raise the utterance of his music *almost* to a moral resolve, but not speak aloud that final world; and after every onset of the will, without a moral handhold, we feel tormented by the equal possibility of falling back again to suffering, as of being led to lasting victory. Nay, this falling-back must almost seem to us more “necessary” than the morally ungrounded triumph, which therefore—not being a necessary consummation, but a mere arbitrary gift of grace—has not the power to lift us up and yield to us that “ethical” satisfaction which we demand as outcome of the yearning of the heart...

Hector Berlioz, *À travers Chants* (1862)

Music is both sentiment and a science; it requires of its practitioner, whether he be a performer or composer, natural inspiration and skills that can only be acquired through prolonged studies and profound thought. The union of knowledge and inspiration constitutes art...

Berlioz, *Beethoven* (pub. 1941)

One evening I hear Beethoven’s C-minor trio resounding... I fling open my door... Come in, come, and welcome, proud melody!... God! How noble and beautiful!... Where, then, did Beethoven discover these countless phrases, each more poetically characterized than the other, all of them different, all of them original, not even sharing that family air one recognizes in the works of great masters renowned for the fecundity? And what ingenious developments! What unforeseen motions!... How he soars, this indefatigable eagle! How he glides, poised in his harmonious heaven!... Now he plunges down, loses himself in it, rises, descends again, disappears... then he returns to his starting point, his eye glinting brighter, his wing beating more vigorously, disdainingly, quivering, inebriated with infinity...