

Beethoven's Century

Essays on Composers
and Themes



Hugh Macdonald

Beethoven's Century



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Beethoven's Century

Essays on Composers and Themes

HUGH MACDONALD



UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER PRESS

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
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Preface

The task of sifting through one's earlier writings in order to compile a collection such as the one you have in your hand ought to be a process of self-discovery, revealing a coherent set of attitudes and aims expressed or felt over many years. I confess I can find here little of that sense of direction and purpose that ought to guide a writer's life, and I have little explanation for the miscellaneous nature of the present book's contents. But I make no apology for it, and must leave it to the reader to judge whether the sum is any more than the parts. Beethoven's name invades the title and the first essay, and although the nineteenth century produced a dazzling collection of individualist musicians, his presence and his shadow were undoubtedly felt by almost everyone mentioned in these pages. I have stretched Beethoven's century to begin, as he did, in the eighteenth, and to end approximately a century after his death in the twentieth. The focus on nineteenth-century music and on French music in particular is simply a reflection of my main sphere of activity as a musician and scholar (not necessarily the music I most admire), although I have never wished to be confined to a narrow zone and have ventured at my peril into territory with which many others are far more familiar than I.

These essays were written over a period of thirty years, which alone would account for their diverse styles and approaches. Each one presents a topic that has absorbed me ever since I embarked on it, but I do not claim to have the last word on any subject and acknowledge that in many cases I can offer only a glimpse of something that ought to be put under much closer scrutiny. My aim has always been to shed light on music and the lives of musicians in order to enhance the interest and pleasure music gives us, and often simply to satisfy my own curiosity.


Most of the essays have appeared in print, some in little-known publications and some in French or German, and many of them were read as lectures or conference papers in earlier forms. I have removed all *bêtises* I am aware of, though some will of course remain, and I have not systematically altered observations about contemporary musical practice that may already seem out of date.

Those essays that originated as spoken texts are sparingly footnoted, since footnotes have no place in such a delivery. Those written for *Festschriften* presume that the recipient knows me well enough not to doubt the truthfulness of my words. In any case I have always been the enemy of discursive footnotes and

have never felt the need to account for every statement as if the reader cannot be expected to believe anything unless backed up by solid authority. I must simply assure him or her that I never knowingly invent facts or citations. It is the writer's job to inspire trust in the reader, and I accept that obligation fully.

For the enlightenment of those who are curious about when and how the essays came into being, I will summarise the origins of each; I hope this will explain the different levels of detail or musical intricacy that the reader will encounter.

- 1 'Beethoven's Game of Cat and Mouse' combines part of my study of the *Phantasie*, op. 77, which appeared in *Modern Musicology*, edited by Edward Olleson (London, 1978), with a paper given to the International Conference on Nineteenth-Century Music at Exeter University in 1992.
- 2 'Schubert's Pendulum' combines 'Schubert's Volcanic Temper' from the *Musical Times*, 119 (1978), 949–52, and 'Schubert's Pendulum' in *Schubert durch die Brille*, 21 (June 1998), 143–51.
- 3 'Paganini, Mendelssohn and Turner in Scotland' appeared as 'Paganini in Scotland' in *Nicolò Paganini e suo tempo*, edited by Raffaello Monterosso and published by the Comune di Genova (1988), 201–18.
- 4 'Berlioz and Schumann' was published in German as 'Berlioz und Schumann' in *Schumann Forschungen*, 6 (1997), 107–23.
- 5 'Alkan's Instruments' was published in French as 'La Voix de l'instrument' in *Charles Valentin Alkan*, edited by Brigitte François-Sappey (Paris, 1991), 129–40, ©Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1991.
- 6 'Liszt the Conductor' appeared in the *Journal of the American Liszt Society*, 38 (July–December 1995), 83–98.
- 7 'Wolf's Wagner' was published as 'Wolf's Adulation of Wagner in the Vienna Press' by the Wagner Society in *Wagner*, 7/2 (April 1986), 41–47.
- 8 'Massenet's Craftsmanship' combines 'Massenet's Craftsmanship' in *Musiques – Signes – Images, Liber amicorum François Lesure*, edited by Joël-Marie Fauquet (Geneva, 1988), 183–90, with parts of an article in French, 'Rira bien qui rira le dernier!' published by *Avant-Scène Opéra*, 161 (September–October 1994), 54–61.
- 9 'Skryabin's Conquest of Time' was published in *Alexander Skryabin*, edited by Otto Kolleritsch (Graz, 1980), 58–65, © 1980 by Universal Edition A.G., Wien/UE 26813.

- 10 'Janáček's Narratives' appeared as 'Narrative in Janáček's Symphonic Poems' in *Janáček Studies*, edited by Paul Wingfield (Cambridge, 1999), 36–55.
- 11 'Raise Your Glass to French Music!' was written for the San Francisco Symphony's French Music Festival in June and July 1994.
- 12 'Comic Opera' was the keynote address to the Opera section of the conference '100 Years of Music' at the University of Melbourne in June 1995, subsequently published as 'How Comic is Comic Opera?' in *Aflame with Music*, edited by Kerry Murphy and others (Melbourne, 1996), 21–29.
- 13 'Repeats' is a paper read to the Royal Musical Association in 1984 and published as 'To Repeat Or Not To Repeat?' in their *Proceedings*, 111 (1984–85), 121–38.
- 14  appeared in *19th Century Music*, 11/3 (1988–89), 221–37, © 1988 by the Regents of the University of California. Having little taste for rambling colon-ised titles, I liked the symbolic brevity of this title, and was maliciously amused at the thought of bibliographers and others having to contend with it in print. The joke was on me since I am probably the one who has had to refer to it most often, with much frustration. Nevertheless I still like the title since it seems to represent what the article is all about.
- 15 'The Musicians' Arrondissement' is an adaptation of a paper given in French as 'Géographie musicale' at the Université de Poitiers for the conference 'La Maison de l'artiste' in November 2005, and published in *La Maison de l'artiste: construction d'un espace de représentations entre réalité et imaginaire (XVII^e–XX^e siècles)*, edited by Jean Gribenski (Rennes, 2007), 165–69.
- 16 'Les Anglais' was written for *D'un Opéra l'autre: Hommage à Jean Mongrédien*, edited by Jean Gribenski, Marie-Claire Mussat and Herbert Schneider and published by the Presses de l'Université de Paris IV-Sorbonne in 1996, 155–62, under the title 'The *Outre-Manche* in 19th-Century French Opera'.
- 17 'Dr. Mephistopheles' was published in the *Journal of Musicological Research*, 13 (1993), 67–78 (© 1993, reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis Group, LLC) with the subtitle 'Doctors and Devils in the Librettos of Barbier and Carré'.

- 18 'The Prose Libretto' appeared in the second issue of the *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 1/2 (1989), 155–66.
- 19 '*Un pays où tous sont musiciens . . .*' was written for *From Parnassus: Essays in Honor of Jacques Barzun*, edited by Dora B. Weiner and William R. Keylor (New York, 1976), 285–94 (by permission of HarperCollins Publishers).
- 20 'Modernisms that Failed' combines a paper on Machine Music given to the International Musicological Society's conference in London in 1997 with a paper on Modernisms given to the Royal Musical Association's conference at the University of Nottingham in 2006.

* * *

I would like to thank all the publishers of previously published articles for permission to reprint them in this volume. I am also indebted to Stephen Gage for his expertise in producing the maps in chapter 15, and to Michael Beckerman, who had to sight-read the Skryabin article under extraordinary circumstances in Brno in 1977 and who helped me with translations from Czech in the Janáček article. Above all I owe immense gratitude to Ralph Locke, Senior Editor of the series for the University of Rochester Press, for his enthusiasm for this collection and his tireless help in putting it together.

H. M.

St. Louis, 2007

Part I

Composers

Chapter One

Beethoven's Game of Cat and Mouse

Towards the end of his life Beethoven's pupil Carl Czerny recounted a story that appeared in Cocks's *London Musical Miscellany* on 2 August 1852:

His [Beethoven's] improvisation was most brilliant and striking. In whatever company he might chance to be, he knew how to produce such an effect upon every hearer that frequently not an eye remained dry, while many would break out into loud sobs; for there was something wonderful in his expression in addition to the beauty and originality of his ideas and his spirited style of rendering them. After ending an improvisation of this kind he would burst into loud laughter and banter his hearers on the emotion he had caused in them. 'You are fools!' he would say. Sometimes he would feel himself insulted by these indications of sympathy. 'Who can live among such spoiled children?' he would cry.¹

This story is told in connection with the King of Prussia, who had attended such an improvisation and offered Beethoven an invitation there and then. Beethoven refused, he told Czerny, because of this feeling of being insulted by his audience's emotion.

The picture is vivid and disturbing since we would normally suppose that to hear Beethoven improvising would indeed be a moving experience. If Liszt could reduce his audience to tears playing the 'Moonlight' Sonata in a darkened room, how much more affecting would be the presence of Beethoven himself hunched over the lower end of the keyboard, laying out solemn chords perhaps like the slow movement of the 'Appassionata', throwing in surprise sforzandos and abrupt changes of key and keeping the emotional tension high. For their vulnerability his audience is then shouted at. 'You fools!' he cries, perhaps slamming down the lid.

This is no doubt an illustration of Beethoven's well-known lack of social graces; only the desire to be drawn again into the mystical world that his music magically suggested would induce members of Viennese or Prussian society to

invite him back and run the risk of being insulted again. But it should not be ascribed simply to bad manners: it is also an illustration of Beethoven's regard for his audiences not only when he was improvising but in his finished compositions too. Mozart used to complain, with good reason, if his audiences were boorish or noisy while he was playing. Beethoven's complaint was the opposite: he scorned his listeners for being so attentive and so moved. What sense are we to make of that?

It may be assumed that composers normally aspire to please, gratify, move or lead their listeners. Some like to baffle, some like to offend. Beethoven can be excused of wishing to offend his audience, but the other aspirations can be ascribed to him easily enough. In addition he had the rarer desire, not widely acknowledged, to tease and deceive us, an impulse that betrays a seriously disturbing attitude that will make many of his admirers uncomfortable.

Much scholarship has been devoted to the problem of understanding Beethoven's mind, often with the assumption that an assiduous reading of the notes will reveal the processes that led to the finished masterpieces. By good fortune we have an enormous body of sketches that should, on the face of it, afford a glimpse of the master at his desk, crafting polished wood from the rough timber of his first ideas. Beethoven himself clearly valued the sketchbooks since he carted them from one apartment to another even when they related to works that had long been performed and published. But although sketches tell us what earlier forms the music took, they never reveal the reason why one version was replaced by another. Beethoven was not obliging enough to scribble 'too short', 'too complicated' or 'too dull' in the margin, and some of his early ideas might strike the innocent reader as equally good as their replacements, if not better.

Analysis, similarly, can ultimately only tell us what's there, in the music, not why it's there, a fact that is now more widely acknowledged in the face of determined but vain attempts to show that everything in Beethoven is connected in some profoundly organic way. At one point the composer's integrity had to be shown to reside in the wholeness and rationality of the music, without untidy disclosures that interfered with the picture of interpretative certainty. Whereas early reactions to the late quartets had been a splutter of incomprehension (Tchaikovsky described them as chaos²), the twentieth century has produced a stream of guides, analyses and interpretations claiming that these works, though difficult, are not meaningless or unfathomable. No critic or scholar would admit to not comprehending them, and they are played everywhere. Psychoanalysis and the full apparatus of modern scholarship, we are told, have laid bare the essence of such problematic music, and perhaps it is true that for many people the experience of listening to late Beethoven is indeed an experience of imagined comprehension. Patient work by performers and scholars has revealed a great deal, but we can no longer claim, with Alfred Einstein, that 'there is not—even in the last works of Beethoven—a single movement, a single measure, that

does not rest on the strictest, immanent musical logic, and that even in the most minute detail would call for extra-musical justification'.³

Such arrogance used to be more common than it is now, happily, and we should acknowledge that Einstein was here trying to deflect the notion that there might be dramatic or narrative impulses at work in Beethoven's music. Even so, he clearly believed that there is such a thing as musical logic, and that one set of notes implies, or even necessitates, another set of notes. Calling it 'immanent' logic is merely a defence against the charge that the logic cannot always be demonstrated.

Now it is of course true that much of Beethoven's music is easily explained in terms of customary procedures. Recapitulations often happen according to expectation; most instrumental pieces modulate within a page or two to the dominant; most pieces end in the key they start in. Symphonies usually have four movements, concertos have cadenzas, and so on. We know from our familiarity with classical style when not to be surprised by regular events in Beethoven's music. But if it were all truly logical it would instantly lose its interest, since we could predict everything before it happened and by applying the rules compose another dozen Beethoven symphonies, sonatas and quartets of our own.

Despite the widespread belief, still held in many quarters, that the classical virtues of order, logic, unity and organic growth are the mainsprings of Beethoven's genius, there seems to me to be an equal place in his work allotted to precisely the opposite, to elements that are disorderly, illogical, disunified, inorganic, anticlassical, disruptive, and so on. Beethoven's range is much wider than many have realised. And he can switch instantly from one extreme to the other. He can mix the good, the bad and the ugly within a single bar. Reason and unreason jostle side by side. This would be more tolerable if we could easily tell which was which, but the disturbing thing is that it is never clear. Listening to Beethoven can be a grotesque guessing game because just when you think you have the measure of his mind, he pulls the rug from under, he slips like a genie through your fingers, he slams down the lid of the piano.

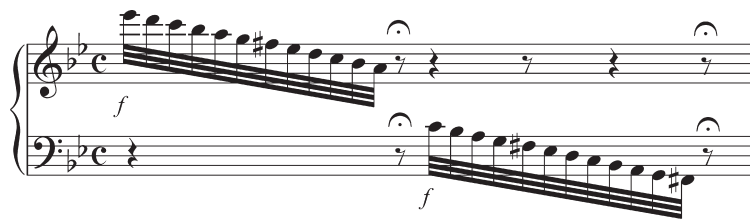
Some of these extremes can be illustrated. For example, it is hard to comprehend the contrast between the *Missa solemnis* and the little A Major Bagatelle, op. 119 no. 10, which lasts about eleven seconds (or six seconds if you omit the repeat). How can these be the product of the same mind and the same years? How are we to admire the broad discursiveness of some of the larger middle-period works and then accept the fierce concentration of the first movement of the F Minor String Quartet, op. 95? These abrupt contrasts were clearly an expression of his nature. Some movements are relentlessly unified by thematic and other means; elsewhere his goal is clearly the sharpest possible disunity both within and between movements. The first two movements of the 'Moonlight' Sonata offer an example, and the two movements of the last piano sonata, op. 111, are deliberately as different in mood, key, pace and character as could reasonably be contrived, with virtually nothing in common between them. Yet a performance of one

movement without the other would be roundly condemned as betraying the wholeness of Beethoven's plan. But who can tell what that wholeness is?

The clearest illustration of Beethoven's capacity to baffle us is the *Phantasie* for piano, op. 77, which deserves a closer examination if only because it is very little known and scarcely ever played. Most writers on Beethoven give it no more than a passing nod. It presents a number of problems that admit no easy explanation; or rather, it presents a single considerable problem that can only be solved if we jettison a number of cherished views about criticism, analysis and musical response. It is a short piece that might be thought innocuous enough to be left in the general obscurity in which it lies, but it has the potential to derail the whole apparatus of criticism. Of course it would be typical of Beethoven to undermine many of our long-established notions with a piece such as this, and that is what I believe it does.

The *Phantasie* was composed in 1809. On 22 December 1808 Beethoven gave the famous concert that included the first performances of the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, the Fourth Piano Concerto, various vocal pieces and the Choral Fantasia, op. 80. He also played a 'Phantasie' for piano alone, which may or may not bear any relation to the *Phantasie* published as op. 77. Most probably it was improvised, as we know that he improvised the opening cadenza of the Choral Fantasia. This cadenza was written down in 1809, and the *Phantasie* was probably composed at the same time, along with the Fifth Piano Concerto and the two piano sonatas op. 78 and op. 79. It was published in 1810. By any standards it is a most extraordinary composition. Since C. P. E. Bach the title 'fantasia' had embraced all kinds of freely composed pieces that belonged to no recognised category of composition; Mozart's and Schubert's fantasies can be, structurally, very loose. But the *Phantasie*, op. 77 is, even within this tradition, the most violently disconcerting of any. It begins in G minor and ends in B major; in between it passes through D minor, A \flat major and many other unrelated keys. It has no thematic skeleton, the tempo fluctuates wildly. Pauses, cadenzas, flourishes and violent changes of dynamic and direction abound. Only two clear formal elements can be isolated: one is the descending (and sometimes ascending) scale, like a harp glissando, that is heard at the beginning, the end and elsewhere in between (see ex. 1.1). The other is the set of variations in B major that begins at bar 157 and which makes the composition inconsistently inconsistent by introducing the semblance of musical order into what has begun as a totally disorderly piece.

The *Phantasie* has turned out to be one of Beethoven's least-known compositions, but by no stretch of the imagination can it be called dull or commonplace. It has been neglected by critics, scholars and pianists probably for the very reason that it is so baffling, for there are doubtless as many responses to this piece as there are listeners. The questions it poses are, among others, the following: Why does it begin, after the scale, with a cadence rather than a theme? Why is that cadence immediately repeated a tone lower? Why does the D \flat section occur where it does (bar 6)? Why should Beethoven introduce a banal little folkish



Example 1.1

melody at bar 15 and abandon it with such violence at the switch to D minor (bar 37)? Why does the same D minor section move abruptly into an A, Adagio, of all things, which in turn fails to establish any but the most transitory existence? Why does the B minor 'più presto' section (bar 102) introduce a quasi-fugal texture? And why, ultimately, should all this scrambling and switching conclude with a serene but not particularly profound (by Beethoven's standards) set of variations in, of all keys, B major?

What can we say? We can turn away baffled and even repelled, as perhaps many have. Or we can follow Czerny, as most critics do, in describing it as an example of Beethoven's art of improvisation. Czerny is good authority, of course, but one should pause for a moment to ask why Beethoven should improvise in a style so much more disorderly than usual. He was certainly capable of improvising without abrupt shifts of tempo and material, and could surely improvise whole movements in the same key and tempo if he wished. The implication of Czerny's comment is that Beethoven was a highly undisciplined improviser, which is hard to believe.

Alternatively one may see the piece as the enactment of a drama. Wilhelm de Lenz, who lived a good deal closer to Beethoven's age than we do, described the *Phantasie* as some kind of medieval legend that Beethoven was relating, incident by incident, although he was no more specific than that.⁴ Even Tovey, in a 1923 programme note, attached descriptive significance to the opening phrases:⁵ the scales, he says, are a 'note of interrogation' and the adagio cadence that follows is 'an expression of resigned hopelessness'. To the piece's extraordinary structure he shows no reaction save to say that the B minor 'più presto' section leads somewhere, that is to say into the B major variations, unlike all the preceding passages, 'all these questions and efforts', as he calls them.

Paul Bekker, who is generally sound on Beethoven's improvisatory pieces, has another poetic interpretation (written in 1912):⁶ 'Has the Soul found its balance and rest?' he asks. No, is the answer. But Bekker also strikes a more modern note, claiming to demonstrate the unity of the *Phantasie* on the basis of its 'one-tone motif' from which everything is organically developed.

A more recent writer, Jürgen Uhde,⁷ concludes that not the one-tone motif, the major and minor second, was the important interval, but the third. Uhde sees the chaotic tonality as a reflection of improvising and treats the opening scale not as an occasional recurrent event but as a thematic motif with transformations as an arpeggio and as a scale. In other words it breeds anything in the piece that descends or ascends, whether it is a scale or not.

Uhde comes to the fantastic conclusion that in Beethoven the function of a passage is more important than its beauty or any other intrinsic qualities, a tendentious attitude that is given only the slightest support by the presence of major and minor thirds and ascending and descending scales—as though any work of Beethoven could be declared innocent of major thirds, minor thirds and scales.

A further approach to the *Phantasie* is provided by a short essay published in the 1970 Bonn *Kongressbericht* by Jürgen von Oppen,⁸ which places it against the context of the Fifth Piano Concerto, the 'Emperor', whose slow movement has many points of resemblance with the B major variations, and which was composed at about the same time. More boldly he relates the B major tonality to the F# Piano Sonata, op. 78, and the high E_b on which the *Phantasie* begins to the E_b tonality of the concerto. This putative kinship with adjoining compositions is also evident from the sketchbooks, two of which contain material for op. 77. They reveal work on op. 73 (the concerto), the *Phantasie*, op. 77, the F# Piano Sonata, op. 79, and the Choral Fantasia, op. 80, in progress simultaneously, or at least interlocking. Beyond placing the work in its chronological background and pointing to elements that Beethoven notated in isolation (for example, the harmonic shift in bar 37), the sketches provide little help and certainly no illumination about the piece's structure or purpose.⁹

How then is the *Phantasie* to be understood and studied if the search for structural logic is unavailing? Very little of it can be explained, in any useful sense. The only workable interpretation, it seems to me, is to regard the piece's disunity, diversity, illogicality, inconsistencies and contradictions as themselves the principal idea of the piece. The unspoken assumption has been that because it lacks the formal balance and clarity usually found in classical music it is a bad piece, however we circumlocute that judgement. Now Beethoven, as we all know, was quite capable of composing poor music, though the works that fall into that category are generally dull and obvious. The *Phantasie* is not dull and it is anything but obvious. Furthermore there can be no question of Homer nodding while he let pass an unworthy product; it was put together in Beethoven's full maturity and in full consciousness of what he was doing. His genius consists precisely in his capacity to surprise and astonish, and all his greatest works do exactly that in a fine balance with giving us what we do expect. In the *Phantasie* his urge towards the unpredictable, which is pronounced in all his music from op. 1 onwards, becomes the *raison d'être* of the piece. Its purpose is to revel in strangeness, to mislead our dull brains and to leave us baffled and breathless. It

is defiantly illogical. Here Beethoven is taking a particular principle—the principle of disunity—to an extreme, and would surely smile at our well-meaning attempts to find the structural point of the work and our absurd talk of ‘progressive tonality’,¹⁰ ‘inner unity’ and the even more absurd search for structural seconds and structural thirds. The point of the work is that it has no structural point.

There seems to be no way of judging the *Phantasie* except as a deliberate attempt to stress the disruptive elements of music. It is so narrowly aimed at this uncomfortable target that it cannot possibly be counted among Beethoven’s greater works, but it does illustrate his command of musical resource in that when he wished to contradict the usual patterns of classical order he was able to do so in characteristically extreme fashion.

The lesson to be learnt from this is that the more we recognise Beethoven’s supreme mastery of musical material and his consciousness of his own power, the more we must acknowledge that our habitual criteria of excellence (and its opposite) are false. If structural coherence is to be applauded, incoherence must be condemned. We have no grounds for condemning the *Phantasie* for being structurally incoherent since that is, if I am right, the main purpose of the composition. It follows that structural coherence and logical patterns of form are not the invariable touchstones of quality they are generally supposed to be. We have long taken coherence for granted as a musical virtue because it is so rewardingly to be observed in the great works of the German classical tradition. But how much coherence do we really want? How much can we stand? When does too much coherence become obviousness? The banalities of second-rate music are frequently the banalities of over-coherence, of knowing all too certainly what will happen next. The bones extrude all too plainly from the flesh.

Music that tries to offer surprise in every bar is intolerable, which explains why Beethoven’s anarchic *Phantasie* has won few admirers. Yet the power to surprise has always been recognised as a principal ingredient in Beethoven’s supremacy as a composer. By definition surprise defies expectation and therefore logic. But surprise only works in a context of expectation, hence the balance in the best music between what we can predict and what we cannot. In Beethoven’s case the surprise often takes the form of pure invention, as it does in Mozart too: we are simply impressed and astonished by the unexpected originality or beauty of an idea or event.

Some of Beethoven’s surprises occur so regularly that they hardly seem surprises any more. In his early music, for example, the habit of dropping unannounced into a remote key a page or two before the end of a finale or a set of variations is so frequent as to be a mannerism. He obviously loved the effect of such surprises but used them more to divert than to tease. They occur in any case in Mozart and Haydn, especially the latter, and were within the norms of classical practice.

A Beethoven surprise can also take the form of an interruption or deviation that does not apparently enhance the mood or shape of the piece but simply happens as a diversionary tactic without explanation. Take, for example, the introduction to the finale of the ‘Eroica’ symphony. The scherzo ends in E_b and the symphony is clearly going to end in E_b . But the finale opens with a strong unison D, a stinging deception that is only mildly rectified when a passage follows in G minor. This in turn, but quickly, becomes a B_b dominant, and the finale proper can then begin (see ex. 1.2). The deceptions continue, since the melody, so dramatically introduced, is not a melody but a bass line; when the top-line melody does arrive, it turns out to be a trivial tune from a discarded ballet, not kosher symphonic material at all (see ex. 1.3). Ballet music! Beethoven then works the most devastating deception of all by fashioning these contradictory opening gestures into the most powerful and stirring finale he ever wrote.



Example 1.2



Example 1.3

As an example of an inexplicable event in a well-known work of Beethoven let us take the passage in the finale of the Ninth Symphony at the end of the opening section where the famous melody has been expounded for a little while by the orchestra alone in a series of variations. Suddenly the temperature and level of activity increases sharply, a sure sign of something important about to happen. But what happens is shown in example 1.4. This one-bar motif is heard nowhere else in the symphony and it behaves here in the most puzzling fashion. One statement in A major, one in B minor, one in—preposterously— E_b minor, in a halting hesitant fashion, all differently harmonised, and then a triumphant version in A major, swept away by the second *Schreckensfanfare* and never heard again.



Example 1.4

This passage is too short to attract the attention of most writers, even those who have studied the work in detail. It is also too puzzling. No explanation for events of this kind is possible, and there may also be a lurking fear that this is some kind of joke. Beethoven's music is full of jokes, but when they occur in the most elevated music we brush them uneasily aside. The timpani joke in the scherzo of the Ninth Symphony is not often accepted as a joke and we never laugh at it. Nor do we laugh at the apparently false horn entry at the recapitulation in the first movement of the 'Eroica', and no longer regard that as a joke either.

These are in fact jokes, but not jokes to be laughed at. They are anything but funny. The most elaborate joke in Beethoven is found in the set of variations for piano trio on the tune 'Ich bin der Schneider Kakadu', op. 121a, where a long introduction of immense profundity leads into a theme so trivial and childish that only Beethoven would have thought of composing variations on it. One might conceivably laugh at that moment, but it would be more the laughter of embarrassment at having allowed Beethoven to draw us into an emotional trance than the laughter of the absurd.

Whereas Haydn's jokes spring from wit, Beethoven's jokes rest on deception, and being deceived is never very amusing. One of his favourite procedures is hardly a joke at all, but it involves leading the listener on and then rudely disappointing him, just as in the 'Kakadu' variations. The earliest example is, I believe, the Horn Sonata, op. 17, whose slow movement is no movement at all but merely, as it turns out, an introduction to the finale. Whether the work is in two or in three movements is hard to determine. The listener is supposedly unaware of this, and his reasonable expectation that this is to be a full slow movement (nothing in the opening bars suggests otherwise) is abruptly denied.

There are more familiar examples. The middle section (not a movement) of the 'Waldstein' Sonata, op. 53, is headed 'Introduzione'. It is indeed an introduction to the finale, twenty-eight bars long, and it replaced the original slow movement, which was withdrawn and published as a separate piece entitled 'Andante', WoO 57, better known as the 'Andante favori'. This Introduzione is

very beautiful and much admired, but the streak of cruelty within it is unmistakable. After a few bars (an introduction within an introduction) it presents a melody that presupposes an immense span for its full statement. Harmony and texture are rich, and the unwary listener might well settle into his seat in delighted anticipation (see ex. 1.5). But it quickly becomes obvious that the movement has slipped off the rails. It turns into something quite different and the principal theme is never fulfilled, let alone completed. In a matter of seconds the finale has begun and the brief glimpse of a warm, melodious slow movement is shut off, as if by the slamming of a door.



Example 1.5

Most disappointing of all is the slow movement of the Cello Sonata in A Major, op. 69. Its melody is elegant enough when introduced on the piano, but once it passes to the cello's tenor register, the gates of heaven open (see ex. 1.6). There are few passages in Beethoven as beautiful as this, and the listener might well fall into an appropriately rapt mood for a full slow movement of ravishing eloquence. But this is not to be. There is no disruptive violence here, no rude intrusion. The music simply moves away from one mood, only just begun, and with perfect decorum prepares for another. Yet the effect is certainly violent. A promise has been broken; the unwritten contract between composer and listener has been torn up. Who wins and who loses? The listener loses every time since he feels manipulated, used, deceived, betrayed. Beethoven is the manipulator, the user, the deceiver, the betrayer, and without question he was fully conscious of this power over us.

Something of a similar kind occurs in the String Quartet in F Minor, op. 95. This is a tense and forceful work, full of dramatic gestures and alive with energetic musical argument. The finale is no triumphant conclusion in the major mode, but an earnest movement, with a grimly chromatic introduction. There is no lightening or brightening of the mood, and a sense of wholeness with the other movements is steadily and superbly built up. But the last pages, the quartet's famous—or rather infamous—coda, destroy this mood instantly. The music slips into F major, the tempo is very fast and the work ends in a brilliant display of string scales (see ex. 1.7). The full impact of this coda can only be experienced

(Adagio cantabile)

Example 1.6

Allegro molto leggiermente

Example 1.7

in the context of the complete quartet. Many explanations have been offered as to why Beethoven threw in this ending, like a feathery dessert at the conclusion of a heavy meal. Did he feel the mood had become too black and needed correction? Was it a grotesque aberration, as d'Indy argued? And how could Beethoven title the work 'quartetto serioso' if it concludes in the unmistakable language of *opera buffa*?

It seems to me that the joke he perpetrated in the 'Kakadu' variations, the horn sonata, the 'Waldstein' piano sonata and the A major cello sonata has here

become grossly inflated. If Beethoven took pleasure in leading his listeners to expect one thing and then gave them the opposite, the coda of the quartet is not a glimpse of sunlight to brighten a stormy landscape, not an apology or a sop or a mere gesture towards the world of smiles and laughter, but a deliberate slap in the face. It denies everything that the rest of the work has led the listener to expect. The quartet's darkness and profundity ends in a brief and brilliant F major vivacissimo unconnected with anything heard so far, of no profundity at all. Is Beethoven simply removing the tragic mask to reveal the cackling smile beneath? For most of the work he holds us in the hollow of his hand utterly convinced that the music means what it seems to mean. Then at the last possible moment he reveals the disturbing truth that it was all a horrible joke, mere sleight of hand.

For Beethoven unquestionably had the mastery and the power to play a trick of this kind. There was nothing he could not do in music, and he knew it. If the Fifth Symphony truly expresses the triumph of an indomitable will in the face of a cruel destiny, it equally celebrates the composer's complete mastery over the inexhaustible riches of music, a vivid contrast with his palpable and lamentable lack of mastery over the everyday demands of real life. His social uncouthness, his failure to find permanent lodging and to retain servants, the disorder of his living quarters, the unemptied chamber pot under the piano, his imperfect relations with publishers and other musicians, his exasperating relations with his brother's family, the wretched affliction of deafness—all these only made him more secure in his musical domain and more inclined to flaunt his command of music at the expense of less gifted mortals, which includes everyone. The ability to control and manipulate his audience was a talent he could use in any way he wished. He could set out to move and delight with high-quality music that moves and delights as it was expected to do. Or he could create the same effect by artificially setting in motion a reaction that the audience may enjoy but which Beethoven is free to disturb or prolong at will.

Two images come to mind. One is that of a puppeteer who makes his puppets dance or sing or cry. The other is that of a cat who plays with a mouse, as Beethoven plays with us, cruelly, feigning indifference but knowing that his victim has no chance of escape. He can make us admire his brilliance, his power, his invention, his logic or his attachment to unity even, if he wants to. But every time we think we have the measure of his mind, he steps deftly sideways, or he removes the mask. In the circumstances we are never likely to understand Beethoven, for it is easy to love a cruel master when you believe he is generous and kind. Sometimes he is indeed generous and kind, in fact often. The difficulty is that you never know when that is.

For all Beethoven's clear desire to write music of power and beauty, there is a cruel streak in his make-up of the kind that finds it amusing to beckon you closer and closer until you are near enough to receive a heavy punch on the nose. We know—and he knows—that his music is irresistible and that we will keep coming back for more.

For Beethoven could be a great composer or he could, equally, behave like one, knowing that his audiences could not tell whether he was acting or not. If they were taken in, he despised them. It will not do to claim that our superior scholarship protects us and that we have a better understanding than the Viennese of his day; all the evidence points the other way. We approach his work with an intense seriousness that only makes us more vulnerable to his ability to lead us astray. Whichever view of Beethoven we confront, there is always a hidden side. For any approach that seems to yield fruitful results, there is always an opposite approach that can be equally productive.

Is it possible to immerse oneself in this music, as its unearthly beauty and emotional magnetism seem to command? Of course it is. The risks are slight. We do it unscathed every day. But it would be wise not to forget the humiliation Beethoven meted out to his listeners for falling so weakly under his spell.

Notes

1. Reprinted in *Thayer's Life of Beethoven*, ed. Elliott Forbes (Princeton, 1970), 185.
2. Tchaikovsky's diary, cited by David Brown in his *Tchaikovsky: A Biographical and Critical Study* (London, 1992), iv. 96.
3. Alfred Einstein, *Music in the Romantic Era* (New York, 1947), 66.
4. *Beethoven et ses trois styles* (Paris, 1855), 195.
5. Reid Orchestral Series, 10 February 1923, reprinted in T. K. Scherman and L. Biancolli, *The Beethoven Companion* (New York, 1972).
6. *Beethoven* (Berlin, 1912); English translation (London, 1925), 90.
7. *Beethovens Klaviermusik*, i: *Klavierstücke und Variationen* (Stuttgart, 1968).
8. 'Beethovens Klavierfantasie Op. 77 in neuer Sicht', in *Bericht über den internationalen musikwissenschaftlichen Kongress Bonn 1970*, ed. Carl Dahlhaus and others (Kassel, n.d.), 528–31.
9. The sketches for op. 77 are described in Gustav Nottebohm, *Zweite Beethoveniana* (Leipzig, 1887), 274, and in J. S. Shedlock, 'Beethoven Sketches hitherto Unpublished', *Musical Times*, 50 (1909), 712.
10. Philip Barford, 'The Piano Music—II', in *The Beethoven Companion*, ed. Denis Arnold and Nigel Fortune (London, 1971), 192.