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# Perspectives on Beethoven

Clive Brown

After a Philharmonic Concert in London in 1820 a critic deplored the audience's lukewarm reception of Mozart's 'Jupiter' Symphony and its enthusiasm for Beethoven's Fifth, asserting that it was 'only to be accounted for by this rage for extravagance'.<sup>1</sup> And the following year the reviewer of a concert in which Beethoven's Seventh Symphony and one of his string quartets were performed expanded on a similar theme, commenting:

We confess we are not so far gone in the extravagance of the present day, as to relish the unconnected vagaries which some admire in the works of Beethoven. [The symphony] seemed to us crude, though forcible – and tiresome, though fanciful . . . Upon the merits of the quartet we agree entirely with the silent but sensible adjudication of a lady of rank, who slept profoundly from the beginning to the end of it.<sup>2</sup>

This kind of attitude was by no means uncommon at that time. During Beethoven's lifetime his works were the object of divergent opinions. His genius was generally admitted, but few accepted all his major compositions as unflawed masterpieces and many, who saw the works of Haydn and especially Mozart as representing the summit of classic perfection, were disturbed by what they regarded as the destabilizing element in Beethoven's music. While his earlier works were widely admired, much of his output from the *Eroica* onwards aroused puzzlement and distaste in many and proved a serious stumbling-block to the understanding of musicians and audiences. One of his most celebrated musical contemporaries felt that his later work showed him to be 'wanting in aesthetic feeling and a sense of the beautiful'.<sup>3</sup>

But throughout the 19th century Beethoven's popularity grew steadily. The programmes of the Leipzig Gewandhaus, the London Philharmonic and other concert organizations leave no doubt as to the dominating position his music increasingly occupied; performances of his symphonies far outnumbered those of any other composer and his piano sonatas and chamber music, particularly from his early and middle period, became indispensable in recitals and domestic music-making.

This is not the place for a detailed *Rezensionsgeschichte* of Beethoven's posthumous reputation, but it is worth noting that despite the heroic efforts of his great 19th-century biographer, Thayer, and the pioneering work of Nottebohm, Beethoven became an almost mythical figure.

The creative artists of succeeding generations saw in him what their own artistic temperaments prompted them to see and, since many were also active in the literary field, they propagated their myths regardless of historical fact. Even within his own lifetime Beethoven the mythical phenomenon had begun to be more important than Beethoven the musician. It would be absurd to minimize the importance of his musical techniques for the following generation (this can be seen, for instance, in the young Mendelssohn's opp. 6, 13 and 106 and some of Schubert's works), but it was rather his music's scope and scale, together with a few striking but superficially appreciated details, that fired the imaginations of younger composers. His attitude to chromaticism and his command of the relationship between form and content, for instance, had little obvious impact.

The extent to which Beethoven has been seen as the dominant feature on the early 19th-century musical landscape has led to a distortion of our view of musical developments. Not only have the musical traditions of France and Italy been imperfectly integrated into the picture, but there has also been only a partial recognition that even within the German tradition the legacy of Haydn and Mozart found other beneficiaries. While failing to match Beethoven in greatness, these composers nevertheless interpreted and developed the inherited traditions in different ways and, maybe because their music was easier to grasp, provided an equal if not more important stimulus to the next generation of composers.

In writings on music history there has often been an unhappy tension between history and aesthetics. Historical approaches attempt to describe how things were and why they developed as they did. Recognizing an inevitable degree of distortion, it is still the historian's task to use all available resources to analyse historical relationships. Too much music history has been – and still is – a confusion between this and a different kind of writing which starts from an aesthetic standpoint (rather like the moral stance of Victorian political historians) and confuses this with 'objective' history. Aesthetic criticism in art is, of course, necessary and desirable; the problem occurs when the distinction between aesthetics and history becomes blurred.

The dominant position Beethoven's music also occupies in the concert repertory has hindered appreciation of the context in which it was composed. The music of his lesser contemporaries has been unfairly overshadowed and Beethoven's has been seen as the criterion of excellence by which everything else was to be judged. That has not

<sup>1</sup>Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review, ii (1820), 383

<sup>2</sup>London Magazine, iii (1821), 448

<sup>3</sup>L. Spohr: *Lebenserinnerungen*, ed. F. Göthel (Tutzing, 1968), i, 180

only tended to obscure the complex web of influences and relationships that made up early 19th-century musical life, but has also impeded a balanced aesthetic appreciation of the music itself. The stature of Schubert's instrumental music, for instance, was long denied because its structure and content were unfavourably compared with Beethoven's.

In recent years there has been a growing awareness among music historians that the view of 19th-century music which sees developments dominated by and encapsulated in the achievements of those composers whose music still has a prominent place in the repertory is partial and misleading. As recently as 1953 P.H. Lange wrote: 'If we persist in consigning the dim figures behind Beethoven to complete oblivion we shall never understand why Brahms developed as he did, while Berlioz, Chopin and Liszt went their own way'.<sup>4</sup> In the last couple of decades, however, scholars have begun to make headway in their investigation of the vast reservoir of unexplored music from the period and a more balanced view is beginning to take shape. Nevertheless, volume viii of the *New Oxford History of Music*, which appeared in 1982, uniquely in that series contains a composer's name. Old orthodoxies die hard; Gerald Abraham remarked in the preface: 'no other period of musical history is so dominated by one composer; in popular thought the years 1790 to 1830 are the Age of Beethoven. It is certainly a convenient title if not an accurate one'.<sup>5</sup>

It is difficult for us properly to appreciate early 19th-century musical life. Beethoven seems, as Abraham observed, to dominate the age; but it is clear from contemporary accounts that he was only one among many admired and widely performed composers. Much as he may have been idolized by some, his music made up only a small portion of the theatre and concert repertory of his day, most of which consisted of contemporary music.

The most striking difference between musical life of the late 18th century and early 19th and that of today is that virtually every branch of activity was dominated by contemporary music. Audiences had a very different attitude towards novelty. A few favourite pieces were retained from a previous generation and somewhat more from a previous season, but the cultural environment in which tried and tested masterpieces formed the staple constituent of the concert repertory had hardly begun to develop. Mozart was, perhaps, the first composer whose star has never been significantly dimmed since his lifetime; he and Haydn (though Haydn's reputation slumped significantly in the century after his death) were among the earliest permanent exhibits in the musical museum culture that was to develop during the 19th century. In Beethoven's lifetime, however, programmes contained a constantly changing selection of music. Even if discussion is confined to Germany, it is

clear that the range of influences on any young composer during this period was far greater and more diverse than can easily be appreciated today, since the aesthetic attitudes and the vagaries of fashion of succeeding generations have relegated the bulk of this repertory to obscurity.

The world of the public concert has inevitably been slower than the world of scholarship to recognize the inaccuracy of regarding the period 1790 – 1830 as the age of Beethoven. Music is the most difficult art in which to obtain reassessment because even for the scholar the gulf between the primary source (the score) and the living art work (the performance) is difficult to bridge. The passage of time constantly produces subtle, sometimes radical, shifts in the hierarchy of works of art and their creators. Schubert is a classic example of the waxing reputation as Spohr is of the opposite. Older and younger contemporaries of Beethoven have experienced similar, if less extreme, fluctuations of fortune: Hummel, Dussek, Prince Louis Ferdinand of Prussia, Clementi, Cherubini (another composer whose stock had fallen heavily) and others have enjoyed a limited revival during the present century. But a host of composers whose music roused more than ordinary enjoyment among their contemporaries have virtually disappeared without trace.

In his formative years Beethoven was subject to diverse influences. His first important teacher, Christian Gottlob Neefe, introduced him to Bach's *Wohltempierte Clavier* and through his own compositions to a watered-down version of the *Empfindsamer Stil* of C.P.E. Bach. Haydn and Mozart played a prominent part in his musical experience during the Bonn years (Beethoven's three piano quartets of 1785 are closely modelled on violin sonatas published by Mozart in 1781); but many other forgotten contemporaries helped to make up his musical background. As a member of the Bonn orchestra he encountered an extensive range of orchestral music and opera. At this time he may well have played *Le portrait musical de la nature* (1785) by J.H. Knecht, a forerunner of his own 'Pastoral' Symphony, and he would also have been familiar with works by more significant composers. One was Cherubini whom, according to Cipriani Potter, he came to regard as his greatest musical contemporary; others were Clementi, whose exposition of a more legato and idiomatic treatment of the piano found a ready response in the younger composer, and Viotti, father of 19th-century violin playing, whose cultivation of a broad, varied bowstroke was to bear fruit in Beethoven's own treatment of the violin. He was familiar, too, with the music of other composers born in the 1740s and 1750s – Leopold Kozeluch, Salieri, Johann Schenk (from whom he secretly took counterpoint lessons when Haydn's teaching proved negligent), Peter von Winter, Paul Wranitzsky and Franz Krommer.

The picture is further enhanced by a knowledge of composers who were more nearly his own age. Among his exact contemporaries in the Bonn orchestra was Anton Reicha, later composition teacher to Berlioz, Liszt and Franck,

<sup>4</sup>*Musical Quarterly*, xxxix (1953), 234

<sup>5</sup>op cit

and a prolific composer in his own right. Also members in the 1790s were the Romberg cousins, the violinist Andreas and the cellist Bernhard, who were not only distinguished executants but also widely admired composers. Their music (together with that of such other contemporaries of Beethoven as Friedrich Witt), much of whose works merit performance today, illustrates the persistence of High Classical idioms as a vital factor in early 19th-century music.

A particularly interesting contemporary of Beethoven who has been almost totally forgotten was the Viennese composer Anton Eberl. He was four years Beethoven's senior and was probably a pupil of Mozart; some of his early works appeared under Mozart's name, apparently with the elder composer's acquiescence. Up to his early death in 1807, Eberl was seen as a serious rival to Beethoven, both as pianist and composer. A study of the music he composed during his last ten or 12 years reveals many stylistic and formal traits that seem strikingly Beethovenian. This was so evident to contemporaries that a controversy arose over plagiarism in the two composers' piano concertos in C. After a critic in Prague in 1806 had levelled the charge, a Viennese critic was moved to reply:

The correspondent asserts that the celebrated Piano Concerto of Eberl in C major (the one which was declared to be masterly in no.28 of the music journal) has little or no originality and is manufactured from Beethoven's concerto. But can it be derived from the C major one? Now this reviewer knows by chance, but with absolute certainty, and Eberl himself can easily prove it, that Eberl publicly performed this concerto, which he had already composed earlier, to great applause at the beginning of the year 1798 in Petersburg. This was several years before a Beethoven Concerto in C appeared before the public, or at least when it was only known to a very few. At that time Eberl had already been in Petersburg for several years and could therefore have had absolutely no knowledge of the Beethoven concerto. And yet it is maintained that he borrowed the passagework from this concerto!<sup>6</sup>

Eberl's piano trios op.8, too, contain many Beethovenian features and his later piano sonatas show the further development of this style, still with a recognizable kinship to Beethoven's but with formal procedures unlike anything in Beethoven's music (the arch-like sonata form of the first movement of op.27, for instance).

The Viennese correspondent of the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* was inclined to prefer Eberl's music to Beethoven's and was responsible for a comparison of the E $\flat$  symphonies of both composers, given their premières in consecutive concerts at von Würth's in January 1805, which judged Eberl's to be the better. No-one could now maintain that Eberl was a better composer than Beethoven – his music has neither the same level of inventiveness nor comparable technical mastery – but the performance of Eberl's best work would not only provide us with attractive music but would also help deepen our understanding of Beethoven. Perhaps even more interesting than

Eberl and others whose musical development followed similar lines are those who took a different direction. A clearer awareness of the polarities in German music at this time can help us appreciate the forces that were to produce the generations of Schumann, Mendelssohn, Wagner and Brahms.

In some respects, Beethoven's music proved to be a stylistic cul-de-sac. Apart from the fact that most of his later work found few to admire it and even fewer to learn from it, other composers offered very different models in the treatment of harmony, melody, form, orchestration etc which were equally if not more alluring to the generation of composers born in the first quarter of the 19th century. These composers, just as much as Beethoven, provided the bridge between late 18th- and mid-19th-century music.

The music of such composers as Clementi, Viotti, Rode, Kreutzer, Cherubini, Dussek, Prince Louis Ferdinand of Prussia, Hummel and above all Spohr and Weber, used different stylistic and technical means to explore areas of expression largely alien to Beethoven's musical temperament. Some features were given wide currency by the concertos of the French violin school, which flowered under Viotti's influence; the military Allegro has often been cited, but more significant was a type of singing melody expressive of nobility or melancholy, or both, which was the prototype of much later Romantic melodic writing. In addition, these works and the piano concertos and chamber music of, for instance, Dussek and Hummel included brilliant figurations which were to be developed and elaborated by the generation of Chopin and Liszt. In orchestration, too, a more sensuous, colouristic approach than Beethoven's was gaining currency, particularly in the music of Weber and Spohr. Weber revelled in the drama of orchestral sound, providing a model for, among others, Mendelssohn, while Spohr strove for a smooth, integrated sound that was to find its consummation in Brahms's orchestral works.

Another way in which these composers differed radically from Beethoven was in their attitude to chromaticism in harmony and melody. Whereas Beethoven moved away from the type of chromaticism found in late Mozart, they developed and intensified its use. Beethoven's op.59 quartets (1805–6), for example, contain markedly less chromatic embellishment in melody and harmony than those of op.18 (1798–1800); where chromatic chords occur in the later works they are most often used as powerful gestures whereas in the earlier works they are more frequent and more purely decorative. Others among his contemporaries, however, moved in precisely the opposite direction.

The antithesis to Beethoven's attitude to chromaticism is to be found in Spohr's music and it is significant that the only surviving criticism of him by Beethoven<sup>7</sup> should

<sup>6</sup>*Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, viii (1805–6), 656

<sup>7</sup>A. W. Thayer: *The Life of Ludwig van Beethoven*, rev. H. E. Krehbiel (London, 1960), iii, 203

have been directed at this characteristic of his music ('He is too rich in dissonances; pleasure in his music is marred by his chromatic melody'). However, to many, the expressive possibilities of chromaticism as revealed in the music of Hummel, Weber, Spohr and others who pursued the same paths were extremely alluring. Without it Wagner's chromaticism is hardly conceivable. As early as 1808 a critic in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* applied the term 'Romantic' to Spohr's overture in C minor,<sup>8</sup> and the effect this music had on the young Moritz Hauptmann a year later, though it may have been extreme, shows the sort of impact the style was capable of producing. Hauptmann recalled:

After hearing that overture I cried, cried again the whole way home, cried at home by the pailful, and cried for several days afterwards. I see myself even now, sitting alone in my room,

<sup>8</sup>*Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, xi (1808–9), 185

steeped in that music, kneeling on the ground with my head on a chair weeping like mad in a delirium of joy and despair.<sup>9</sup> It is significant that Spohr was widely regarded, after Beethoven's death, as the leading composer in Germany.

The more knowledge we gain of the music of Beethoven's contemporaries, the more we are likely to understand the development of 19th-century music and appreciate Beethoven himself. But that is not all; for we will also rediscover a wealth of music still capable of commanding our respect and affection.

<sup>9</sup>M. Hauptmann: *The Letters of a Leipzig Cantor*, trans. and arranged A. D. Coleridge (London, 1892), i, 13

*'Beethoven Plus', a festival during which Beethoven's music will be performed in the context of that of his contemporaries, will be held at the South Bank from 18 September to 10 December.*

## Trevor Wishart and 'Vox'

Dick Witts

There is a north and south divide in music, too. Take at random three dissimilar Yorkshire composers. First, say, Gavin Bryars (b1943), who comes from Goole and lives in Leicester, preparing his Arts Council Network tour this autumn. Then, John Casken (b 1949) of Barnsley, who is writing an Almeida Festival opera in Durham. Third, Trevor Wishart (b 1946) from Leeds, who has lived for the past 20 years in York. Each has an independent voice that has acquired international respect, but of a kind that leaves the little boys' room of London musical life quite undisturbed.

Trevor Wishart plays on this. In his latest work, *Vox 6* (which completes his *Vox* cycle), he instructs the four singers on pronunciation:

The word 'dance' occurs over 3,000 times herein. It is essential to the piece that it be pronounced correctly. It is under no circumstances to be pronounced 'darnss' (I believe this is something Radio 3 announcers do in private). 'Dance' must be pronounced with a short 'a' as in 'cat'. If in doubt, ask a Yorkshireman.

As Radio 3 has commissioned *Vox 6* (for a late-night Prom of the full *Vox* cycle sung by Electric Phoenix), the announcers had better watch their Yorkshire a's. John Drummond, who promised to bring pop music to Radio 3, is answered here with a vengeance: *Vox 6* is nothing less than 17 minutes of classic disco-funk, topped with verses of relentless 'rapping' (improvised rhymes chanted to a rhythmic accompaniment).

Wishart has a rich sense of humour and satire, as many will testify who have used his sound games as education

tools (*Sun, Sounds Fun*), absorbed his several tape-collage recordings (*Machine, Red Bird*) or witnessed his music-theatre (*Last Movement, Walden 2*). But the humour has a latent function, Wishart explained to me as we talked while he was preparing to begin the rehearsals of *Vox 6*.

*T.W.* I use humour because it subverts the critical distance, the stiff upper lip, that classical listeners too readily apply. It undermines that rational façade. I use it as a tool for a deeper purpose, and one that relates to the way we have been trained over the years to hear music as text rather than music as sound. I'm interested in effective and affective structure. By 'effective' I mean it's what you hear that matters and how your understanding of the music relates to that, rather than score-based analysis. By 'affective' I don't really mean the way music makes you cry, but more the way it's abstracted from time-flow experiences (social interaction, sex, for example, is a special experience that articulates duration). Music is a development of all such experiences and therefore has a subject matter. I can't accept the implicit belief that music is a spatial structure that is simply measured in terms of golden sections and permutation procedures. Why certain time proportions have impact while others fail is a question that a sophisticated psycho-acoustics might answer, could we but develop one.

*D.W.* So how did you come by the lengths and the subjects of the *Vox* cycle, on which you've been working for the last six years?

*T.W.* In the studio I get a particular 'feel' for the work's