

“O FRIENDS, NOT THESE TONES”:  
BEETHOVEN’S NINTH SYMPHONY AS INSPIRATION PORN

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In an August 2021 article in the *New York Times* defending the prevalence of older generations in the concert hall, Anthony Tommasini argues, seemingly innocuously: “Whether old or young, if you have the patience to embrace such experiences [in the concert hall], you are primed to love classical music. If you’re too fidgety, then this art form is probably not for you. It may be that simple, whether you’re 25 or 75.”<sup>1</sup> Yet despite the innocent pretenses, most disabled people will recognize terms like “fidgety” or “distracted” as indicators of an exclusionary space. Disabled people face significant barriers in accessing performance spaces that western art music inhabits and are most certainly excluded from performing on the actual stage. Since the pioneering work of Joseph Strauss, there is a paradoxical divide where disability and disability theory has extreme relevance in musical analysis and no relevance in audiences or performers.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, despite the often exclusionary practices of concert performance culture, the presence and centralization of Ludwig van Beethoven in the same concert halls is not challenged despite Beethoven’s status as a disabled person. Recognizing this and considering a disabled Beethoven provides a new perspective on the idealized historical figure and creates a new understanding and embodiment of his works.

Disability is one of the central tenants of human existence, despite society’s insistence that disability is inherently a negative attribute. Disability activists have been trying for generations to break away from the negative associations of the word “disabled,” and it is in this spirit that disability should be brought to Beethoven. This is not to say Beethoven is a model of psychological health after acquiring a disability—in fact, this paper will show the opposite. The

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1. Anthony Tommasini, “Classical Music Attracts Older Audiences. Good.,” *The New York Times*, August 6, 2020, sec. Arts.

2. See Joseph N. Straus, “Normalizing the Abnormal: Disability in Music and Music Theory,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 59, no. 1 (2006): 113–84.

title of this work comes from Beethoven's own addition to the libretto of the Ninth Symphony, quite literally asking his audience to ignore painful or lamenting thoughts and sing more joyous ones. Looking at Beethoven as a disabled figure proves significant to the historiographic interpretations of Beethoven as well as modern conceptions of the Ninth Symphony. In other words, interpretations of Beethoven and the Ninth Symphony that endure today are predicated upon usages of inspiration porn and were fostered in large part both by society's and Beethoven's views on his disability.

Inspiration porn is ubiquitous in society and, in many cases, appears on the nightly news. One such video shows a three-month-old who cannot stop giggling at the sound of their sibling's voice.<sup>3</sup> The baby has just had their cochlear implants turned on and has made national news for the video documenting this interaction. Inspiration porn is something that most non-disabled people would find innocuous and incredibly positive, yet it is predicated on harmful processes.<sup>4</sup> As Stella Young observes, inspiration porn "objectif[ies] one group of people for the benefit of another group of people. So in this case, we're objectifying disabled people for the benefit of non-disabled people. The purpose of these images is [sic] to inspire you, to motivate you, so that we can look at them [disabled people] and think, 'Well, however bad my life is, it could be worse. I could be that person.'"<sup>5</sup>

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3. *Baby Girl Gets First Hearing Aids, Can't Stop Laughing at Big Sister's Voice*, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4oDIumq\\_k0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4oDIumq_k0).

4. I use the terminology "non-disabled" instead of "able-bodied" to avoid the connotations that disabled people have bodies that are in any way "not able."

5. Stella Young, "I'm Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much," accessed October 24, 2022, [https://www.ted.com/talks/stella\\_young\\_i\\_m\\_not\\_your\\_inspiration\\_thank\\_you\\_very\\_much](https://www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much).

Inspiration porn acts can be broken down into three processes: objectification, stigmatization, and transcendence or curing. In the first part of the triadic process of inspiration porn, an individual's dimensionality is flattened under the label 'disabled.' This objectification occurs through the creation of the non-disabled gaze, which presents the disabled individual as a spectacle of abnormality.<sup>6</sup> Now that the disabled person is an object, the non-disabled gaze creates a systematic binary wherein certain actions, behaviors, and appearances render someone a spectacle or a spectator.

This binary allows for pleasure by comparison, which forms the basic system of gratification that is necessary for inspiration porn. As Sara Ahmed shows, individuals can take pleasure from something regardless of its perceived consciousness. Given this perception, it then stands that happiness can be garnered from the absence of an object, or in this case, the happiness that results from being non-disabled.<sup>7</sup> This pleasure is rooted in the systematic framework of stigmatization that surrounds disability. As previously mentioned, the hegemonic view of disability is a non-normative deviation that necessitates eradication. This is a direct result of the medical model of disability, which locates disability as analogous to illness or disease and therefore requiring medical intervention.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the transcendence/curing of disability occurs as the basic narrative arc that inspiration porn employs, thereby implying that a disabled state is meant to be left and fixed.

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6. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 26.

7. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 23.

8. See Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

This was very clearly illustrated to me the first time I, as a disabled person, witnessed inspiration porn because of my disability. During the final number of *Hairspray* at a professional theater company, a disabled person stood up from their wheelchair and danced for a moment to the overwhelming applause and standing ovation from the audience. This moment was evidently so important to the production that it is one of six images used to promote the musical and is still archived on the website.<sup>9</sup>

These processes of inspiration porn rely on conceptions about disability that are far from anachronistic. Many historical accounts describe the medical model of disability that frames disabilities like deafness. Ylva Söderfeldt asserts that German and Austrian conceptions of deafness went hand-in-hand with a presumption of incompetency.<sup>10</sup> The commonly used word for ‘deaf individual’ was ‘*Taubstummen*’ translating quite literally to deaf-mute.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, a *Taubstummen* was at risk of being assigned a guardian and infantilized under the law if they could not communicate in court. A *Taubstummen* who failed to meet the requisites for personhood in court faced charity or institutionalization, and was commonly characterized by

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9. “Hairspray 2019,” Oregon Shakespeare Festival, accessed November 20, 2022, <http://www.osfashland.org/en/productions/2019-plays/hairspray>.

10. R. A. R. Edwards, *Words Made Flesh [Electronic Resource] : Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture*, History of Disability (New York: New York University Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.18574/9780814724033>.

11. Ylva Söderfeldt, *From Pathology to Public Sphere: The German Deaf Movement, 1848-1914* (Bielefeld [Germany]: Transcript Verlag, 2013), 29. Despite the fact that Beethoven spent most of his time in Vienna after reaching adulthood, I use this reference given the limited scholarship on historical deafness and also due to the geographical and cultural proximity of the two empires.

their oppression.<sup>12</sup> Societal oppression defined deafness as a disability and subjected individuals to the hegemonic model of disability: the medical model of disability.

Given this social climate surrounding deafness and disability, it becomes apparent that beyond the musical and aesthetic implications, there is an inherent relegation of social status that comes with an inability to hear. This loss of social status is a result of the stigmatization that is the first process in inspiration porn, and it is evident through some of Beethoven's earliest writings on his deafness. One letter from 1801 to Franz Gerhard Wegeler from Beethoven reads,

*Nur meine ohren, die sausen und Brausen tag und Nacht fort; ich kann sagen, ich bringe mein Leben elend zu, seit Jahren fast meide ich alle gesellschaften, weils mir nun nicht möglich ist, den Leuten zu sagen, ich bin Taub. [I must confess that I lead a miserable life. For almost two years I have ceased to attend any social functions, just because I find it impossible to say to people: I am deaf.]*<sup>13</sup>

Two days later, Beethoven also wrote,

*Ob es wird wieder können Geheilt werden ... wie traurig ich nun leben muß, alles was mir lieb und theuer ist meiden, und dann unter so elenden Ego istischen Menschen wie die Zmeskal, Schuppanzig etc. [We must wait and see whether my hearing can be restored... You will realize what a sad life I must now lead, seeing that I am cut off from everything that is dear to me and, what is more, have to associate with such miserable egotists as Zmeskall, Schuppanzigh and the like.]*<sup>14</sup>

Although Beethoven would go on to be friends with Zmeskall and Schuppanzigh, he clearly describes a clear loss of social standing based on his deafness. The essence of these statements

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12. Söderfeldt, 54.

13. Ludwig van Beethoven, *Selected Letters of Beethoven*, ed. Alan Tyson, trans. Emily Anderson, vol. 1, Papermacs (London: Macmillan, 1967), 60; Ludwig van Beethoven, "65. Beethoven an Franz Gerhard Wegeler in Bonn," accessed November 20, 2022, <https://brieftext.beethoven.de/henle/letters/b0065.phtml>.

14. Ludwig van Beethoven, "67. Beethoven an Carl Amenda in Wirben," accessed November 20, 2022, <https://brieftext.beethoven.de/henle/letters/b0067.phtml>; Beethoven, *Selected Letters of Beethoven*, 1967, 1:63–64.

made by Beethoven exemplifies the stigmatization that he felt both internally from his own view and externally from how others would perceive him.

In the “Heiligenstadt Testament,” Beethoven begins to express sentiments that his deafness has conflated and superseded other aspects of his identity, writing:

*Und doch war's mir noch nicht möglich den / Menschen zu sagen: sprecht lauter, schrejt, denn / ich bin taub, ach wie wär es möglich daß ich dann die / Schwäche eines Sinnes angeben sollte; der bej mir in / einem vollkommenern Grade als bej andern sein sollte, / einen Sinn denn ich einst in der größten Vollkommenheit / besaß, in einer Vollkommenheit, wie ihn wenige von / meinem Fache gewiß haben noch gehabt haben.*  
[Yet it was impossible for me to say to people, ‘Speak up, shout, for I am deaf.’ Alas! How could I possibly refer to the impairing of a sense which in me should be more perfectly developed than in other people, a sense in which I once possessed in the greatest perfection, even to a degree of perfection such as assuredly few in my profession possess or have ever possessed.]<sup>15</sup>

The most important word in this quotation is should. Beethoven’s argument that his status as musician and composer is predicated upon the sensorial experience of hearing points to the ways in which there is a rigid line of definition between what is happening, and what he thinks should be. Beethoven’s inability to admit to the hearing loss he had shows that he was concerned with the ways in which labeling himself as disabled would flatten his musical and social life into ‘disabled’ instead of Beethoven. In a letter addressed to the aforementioned Zmeskall, Beethoven laments, “Let me add that it drives me to despair to think that owing to my poor hearing I am condemned to spend the greater part of my life with this class of people, the most infamous of all, and partly to depend upon them.”<sup>16</sup> The objectified Beethoven is capable of being pitied and, as Beethoven writes, is condemned to be a part of the lower class that Söderfeldt suggests.

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15. Beethoven, *Selected Letters of Beethoven*, 1967, 1:1351–52; Ludwig van Beethoven and Hedwig Mueller von Asow, *Heiligenstädter Testament*, 2. Aufl., Veröffentlichung Des Internationalen Musiker-Brief-Archiv (Wien: L. Doblinger, 1969).

16. Ludwig van Beethoven, *Selected Letters of Beethoven*, ed. Alan Tyson, trans. Emily Anderson, vol. 2, Papermacs (London: Macmillan, 1967), 691.

Before bringing up the pressures for transcendence and curing of disability, it is necessary to clarify definitions and usages of the term ‘deafness.’ As seen with the term *Taubstummen*, the language that is used to describe groups of disabled people has implications much broader than simple spelling. As such, Deafness with a capital ‘D’ is different from deafness with a lowercase ‘d’. While the latter is merely a descriptor, Deaf Studies scholar Patty Ladd distinguishes Deafness as a cultural definition that creates a social and linguistic minority.<sup>17</sup> The lowercase “d” deafness applies to people who have the inability to hear, whereas uppercase “D” Deafness refers to a subset of deaf people who share a language and culture.<sup>18</sup> With this in mind, it becomes apparent that Beethoven conceived of himself in ways that are analogous to the modern label of deafness both from previously mentioned letters and from his well-documented usages of hearing-assisted technologies.<sup>19</sup>

Given Beethoven’s acquired deafness, he was not subject to many of the other oppressions that people in the late-eighteenth century born with congenital deafness would have experienced. Through the usage of conversation books and other assistive technologies, Beethoven was able to continue functioning in the public’s eye. Some have even argued the technologies created for him changed the course of instrumental technology.<sup>20</sup> Beethoven’s

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17. Dr. Paddy Ladd’s *Lecture: Deafhood, Deaf Culture & The Wall of Silence*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wc8M4G7d1Z8>.

18. Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988), 2.

19. For the rest of this paper, “deafness” will refer to the condition of being unable to hear and the conception of this inability as a disability.

20. Gabriela Lena Frank, “I Think Beethoven Encoded His Deafness in His Music,” *New York Times*, December 27, 2020, sec. arts.



image as a musician whose deafness did not seem to encumber him at all completes the third axiom of inspiration porn: transcendence/curing. While those closest to Beethoven would have been familiar with the intimate and painful details about Beethoven's lived experiences, this did not stop them from using creative interpretations. One biography from Anton Schindler states:

May we indeed not term it heroic when we recall that the composer had to struggle against prejudice of every kind, against the traditions of his art, against the jealousy, the conceit, the ill-will of the vast majority of the other musicians, and moreover against the one sense so indispensable on many counts to the practice of his art, namely his sense of hearing; and again when we recall that despite all adversity he reached such an exalted position?<sup>21</sup>

As seen in this quote, the hallmarks of inspiration porn were evident in one of the earliest descriptions of Beethoven as inspiration porn. Since Beethoven reached an exalted position despite all of the hardships he faced, he is celebrated for triumphing over not only his disability but, above all non-disabled people. Schindler and others' messages invoke the playground taunt, 'I can beat you with one hand tied behind my back.'

Through accounts like Schindler's, modern hegemonic conceptions of Beethoven are similarly based on the one-hand-tied-behind-the-back assertion. While analyzing the broad cultural understandings of a historical figure like Beethoven is incredibly fluid and complex, media representations that require knowledge to be understood and broadly children's literature allow for a generalized approach. The media representations that are most useful for this requisite are memes and mimetic expressions. Internet memes have been shown to be highly effective forms of qualitative data given their mass distribution and detailed meaning structure. Since their rhetorical expression is limited to images and a few lines of text, memes use tropes and metacommentary to achieve a reaction based only on visual references and commonly

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21. Anton Schindler and MacArdle Donald, *Beethoven as I Knew Him: A Biography*, trans. Constance Jolly (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966), 205.

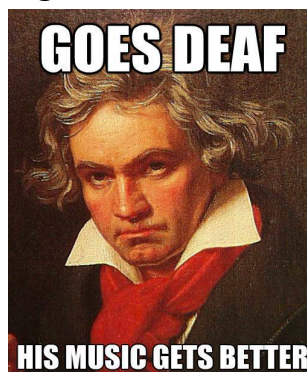
accepted knowledge or collective experience.<sup>22</sup>

Of the twenty-five Beethoven memes most popular on Google, fifteen included references to deafness.<sup>23</sup> Three of them are particularly illustrative of inspiration porn's embeddedness within the mythos of Beethoven.

**Fig. 1**



**Fig. 2**



**Fig. 3**



All three of these memes rely on the conception of Beethoven's deafness as a limitation to provide its humor. Fig. 1 gives an example of Beethoven using a humble brag to draw value away from the present popularity of Lil Pump.<sup>24</sup> This meme uses the format of 'Swole Doge vs. Cheems' which compares two figures of a group across historical eras. Swole Doge, the

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22. Constance Iloh, "Do It for the Culture: The Case for Memes in Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 20 (January 1, 2021): 16094069211025896.

23. "Beethoven Meme - Google Search," accessed November 21, 2022, [https://www.google.com/search?q=beethoven+meme&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiB\\_e\\_MhcH7AhUaLUQIHRDcA9IQ\\_AUoAXoECAIQAw&biw=1304&bih=916&dpr=2](https://www.google.com/search?q=beethoven+meme&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiB_e_MhcH7AhUaLUQIHRDcA9IQ_AUoAXoECAIQAw&biw=1304&bih=916&dpr=2). I wish to make it very clear that this list is by no means exhaustive, and is not representative of meme culture. Rather, I use this methodology as a way of obtaining memes that come from as diverse populations as possible, given that Google harvests information from multiple social media platforms. This allows a perspective that emphasizes numerous individuals who created memes with the expectation that viewers would understand the meme with limited context and their own existing knowledge.

24. "Twitter 上的 Dank Memes," Twitter, accessed November 21, 2022, <https://twitter.com/theMemesBot/status/1264619929782964233>.

character on the left, represents the stronger figure and Cheems, the character on the right, represents the weaker.<sup>25</sup> Yet this meme still can be understood without the implications of its format given the textual information that is also provided. The Beethoven Doge declares musical accomplishments and adds deafness with the implication that it makes the accomplishments that much more impressive. Fig. 2 demonstrates a slightly altered transcendence from Fig. 1. Instead of Beethoven using his deafness as an amplifier of value, an omniscient narrator expresses the exasperation of Beethoven's music getting "better" after he "goes deaf."<sup>26</sup> Fig. 3 uses the "Oh No! Anyway" meme format, which employs Jeremy Clarkson's stereotypical lack of sympathy to imbue a similar indifference to various subjects.<sup>27</sup> In this case, Fig. 3 has a similarly characterized Beethoven to the Doge Beethoven in Fig. 1, which seemingly does not care in the slightest about his inability to hear. Based on these memes, there is clear evidence regarding a broad cultural understanding of Beethoven's deafness as a limiting factor that was overcome by Beethoven satisfy the three processes of inspiration porn and are sentiments that are echoed in children's literature.

Children's literature is especially useful in examining general public opinions as it prioritizes content for younger generations and serves to shape hegemonic collective understanding of the world. The most distributed example of this is *The Value of Giving: The Story of Beethoven*. The fifth most-held book in children's literature about Beethoven of libraries

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25. "Swole Doge vs. Cheems," Know Your Meme, accessed November 22, 2022, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/swole-doge-vs-cheems>.

26. "WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE BEETHOVEN... - Elgin Symphony Orchestra," accessed November 21, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/ElginSymphony>.

27. "Oh No! Anyway," Know Your Meme, accessed November 22, 2022, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/oh-no-anyway>.

registered with WorldCat, it has clearly been disseminated widely despite the dissolution of the publisher.<sup>28</sup> Beethoven's life is depicted with the addition of an imaginary friend in the form of a cat, named Keys, who gives advice to Beethoven throughout his many crises. Keys encourages Beethoven to keep on going and making music despite Beethoven's deafness and depression, eventually remarking, "'You've given the world something [the Ninth Symphony] that will last forever.'"<sup>29</sup> Keys's comments set up the moral of the story bringing the value of giving named in the title of the work, front and center. The book remarks in its conclusion that Beethoven gifted the world his music despite his limitations, and that the reader should strive to give their own gift to the world.<sup>30</sup>

This collective understanding of hegemonic perspective through memes and children's literature creates a Beethoven that has achieved despite the limitations imposed by his deafness. This view is not entirely anachronistic as shown through the writings of Schindler and the letters from Beethoven himself. Consequently, there is an unmistakable association between Beethoven and deafness, which contributes to modern views of deafness as undesirable and as a disability. This association, as Mark Evan Bonds asserts, bleeds into conceptions and understandings of Beethoven's writings. Bonds writes, "listeners are not blank slates... even before hearing a

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28. "Su:Beethoven, Ludwig van, 1770-1827 Juvenile Literature - Search Results," WorldCat, accessed November 22, 2022, <https://www.worldcat.org/search?q=su%3ABeethoven%2C+Ludwig+van%2C+1770-1827+Juvenile+literature&limit=10&offset=1&orderBy=mostWidelyHeld>.

The first and second results also have references to inspiration porn, but for the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to limit my focus to this specific text.

29. Ann Donegan Johnson and Steve Pileggi, *The Value of Giving: The Story of Beethoven* (La Jolla Calif.: Value Communications, 1979), 61.

30. Johnson and Pileggi, 61.

single note of music in the concert hall, listeners entertain assumptions (whether they realize it or not) about the relationship between composers' lives and works."<sup>31</sup> Nowhere are these assumptions more prominent within modern conceptions than Beethoven's magnum opus *Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125*.

Perhaps the most propagated story of musical history is Caroline Unger's prompt to turn Beethoven around to see the thunderous applause from the audience upon completion of the Ninth Symphony. This is a case study in the conflation of personal and musical identity. Historical accounts of Beethoven being turned around are mixed, as Thayer points out, with some sources stating that this occurred at the end of the second movement, and others like Anton Schindler and Caroline Unger asserting that it happened at the finale of the work.<sup>32</sup> It seems that the collective imagination of this story is itself turned around, given that most accounts of this event do not mention this discrepancy. This is a testament to the collective desire for this event to be true, showing that this moment of constructed irony is too salacious to resist—especially with the possibility of creative license. These elaborations ignore the pornographic nature of a nondisabled person helping a disabled person see their own transcendence of their disability.

True to form, early biographies of Beethoven set the stage for the appropriate interpretation and sentiment for the following two centuries. Anton Schindler wrote,

Alas! the man to whom all this honour was addressed could hear none of it, for when at the end of the performance the audience broke into enthusiastic applause, he remained standing with his back to them. Then it was that Caroline Unger had the presence of mind to turn the master towards the proscenium and show him the cheering crowd throwing

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31. Mark Evan Bonds, *The Beethoven Syndrome: Hearing Music as Autobiography* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 197.

32. Alexander Wheelock Thayer, *Thayer's Life of Beethoven*, ed. Elliot Forbes, vol. 2 (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1964), 909.

their hats up in the air and waiving their handkerchiefs.<sup>33</sup>

Yet, Schindler seems to potentially contradict himself in conversation books that Thayer includes in his biography.<sup>34</sup> The conflicting testimonies proves a lack of historical consensus between primary sources, thereby eliminating historical accuracy as a rationale for the propagation for the story. This only leaves a motivational force of pathos for telling this story.

Twentieth and twenty-first century accounts of this story seemingly conflate each other for grandiosity. In *The Value of Giving: The Story of Beethoven*, Keys's commentary referenced above comes immediately after Beethoven is turned around to face the audience after conducting the Ninth Symphony.<sup>35</sup> A graphic novel jointly published by ZZ Comics and Deutsche Grammophon proclaims immediately after illustrating Unger prompting Beethoven to turn around, "Beethoven is the man who freed music. But that's because he needed the music to free himself. A singular talent. He was unique among us. But in all the ways that matter he was **among** [sic] us."<sup>36</sup> One MIDI piano roll video entitled "D-E-A-F" uses the motif in its name as musical material while telling a similar story of Beethoven being deaf at the premiere of the Ninth Symphony. This video by Sheet Music Boss has had 1.7 million views and 64,000 likes on YouTube.<sup>37</sup>

And yet, the media that takes the trophy for most dramatic usages of this story are

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33. Schindler and Donald, *Beethoven as I Knew Him: A Biography*, 280.

34. Thayer, *Thayer's Life of Beethoven*, 2:909–10.

35. Johnson and Pileggi, *The Value of Giving: The Story of Beethoven*, 61.

36. Frank Marraffino and Brandon Montclare, *The Final Symphony: A Beethoven Anthology*, ed. Rantz A. Hoseley (New York: Z2 Comics, 2020). Bolding appears in original source.

37. *D-E-A-F*, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLy3SRCKSao>. Paradoxically this video uses quotations from the fifth symphony throughout the composition.

biographical movies. Within these films, sound worlds allow audiences to have an embodiment of what the audience hears and what Beethoven hears in a very short time. Playing with digesis, each film uses its soundtrack to give slightly different takes of deafness. As film scholars have shown, diegetic and nondiegetic music has the ability to lend states of affect to listeners.<sup>38</sup> In this way the hegemonic view of deafness and disability can be forced upon the audience through their viewership.

1961's *The Magnificent Rebel*, ignores all auditory opportunities to create experiences of sympathetic deafness. Instead, the audience hears only diegetic musical material before they observe the deaf Beethoven being turned around by the conductor after he is unable to hear applause.<sup>39</sup> The soundscape brutally divides Beethoven from the audience's perspective and reinforces his otherness as a result of deafness. This different sensorial experience 'other-izes' Beethoven from the audience and, as such, causes a lens of objectification to distort Beethoven's humanity.

In *Copying Beethoven*, dialogue between Anna, Beethoven's fictionalized copyist, and Beethoven reveals that the conductor has not arrived for the premiere of the ninth. In an additional example of a non-disabled person helping a disabled person transcend their disability, Anna leads Beethoven in conducting the ensemble. All the while, camera cuts and movements disorient the audience during the closing moments of the work. The auditory position of the audience also mirrors this rapid movement where the audience's listening position shifts every few seconds. The only resolution happens as the audience is forced into a different sonic space

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38. See Stan Link, "Sympathy with the Devil? Music of the Psycho Post-Psycho.," *Screen* 45, no. 1 (March 1, 2004): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/45.1.1>.

39. *The Magnificent Rebel* (Walt Disney Pictures, 1961).

defined by the absence of sound.<sup>40</sup> As Stan Link writes, “This view [of silence] traps silence between what precedes and follows it . . . A meaningful silence is one which is bound to its immediate context.”<sup>41</sup> In this sense, the silence heard is given meaning by the musical performance and the audience roar when Beethoven is turned around by Anna. This creates a deceptive resolution provided by the meaningful silence, where the embodiment of Beethoven’s deafness extends the tension and ambiguity that had been built by visual and auditory movements. The disability is finally cured by Anna as she turns both Beethoven and the camera to see the audience’s applause, allowing the audience to finally hear the reception of the work. Once sound enters, the audience becomes nondisabled once more and the narrative of the film can continue.

Mirroring this process of sonic disability, the film *Immortal Beloved* portrays deafness as being completely dependent on diegesis. The soundscape begins with a heard performance of the ninth, but the silence before the baritone solo continues as the camera stays on Beethoven. The music only enters as non-diegetic music, while a young Beethoven runs from his abusive father. Through occasional slippages back to the Beethoven at the premiere of the ninth, the non-diegetic nature of the music is emphasized as the young Beethoven goes swimming in a pond that reflects the night sky. The vocal entrance at measure 213 thunders, as the camera pulls further away until all that is left is an image of the Milky Way.<sup>42</sup> The *Andante maestoso* is then

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40. *Copying Beethoven* (California: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, 2007).

41. Stan Link, “Much Ado about Nothing,” *Perspectives of New Music* 33, no. 1/2 (1995): 218.

42. *Immortal Beloved*, Special ed. (Culver City, California: Columbia TriStar Home Video, 2000); Ludwig van Beethoven, “Eighth and Ninth Symphonies: In Full Orchestral Score,” ed. Max Unger, *Dover Publications, Inc.*, 1976.



played, while the camera shows the audience's reception of the work. Through this deliberate omission, the audience is left permanently disabled as the narrative of the film moves on without allowing the real audience to hear the musical fulfillment that the fictionalized audience heard.<sup>43</sup>

Portrayals of Beethoven and the Ninth Symphony, both fictional and literal, play into the conceptions of the Ninth Symphony. From Beethoven's own views on his deafness to contemporaneous biographies of Beethoven, these works lay the groundwork for Beethoven's deafness to be perceived as a limitation that was transcended. As seen from broadly syndicated children's literature as well as the creation of memetic materials, this perception is both widely distributed and accepted in modern society's views of the composer. Due to the positionality of the Ninth Symphony occurring during the late stages of Beethoven's deafness, the linkages between these two events become undeniable and incredibly important to dissect in order to understand the prevalence of the Ninth Symphony. And yet, the Ninth Symphony amplifies this process by the nature of the music itself.

Returning to disability theory for one last infusion of structural and methodological framework, it becomes useful to understand the futuristic structural implications of happiness and the mythology of a collectively imagined future. Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* dismantles the perceived uniformity and unconditionality of the positivity of happiness and asserts that, "Happiness is weighty not because of its point, as if it simply had a point, but because happiness evokes a point that lies elsewhere, just over the horizon, in the very mode of aspiring for something."<sup>44</sup> In this way then the Ninth Symphony and, perhaps more significantly the "Ode to Joy," become symbols for the active trait of desiring a time when people become

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43. *Immortal Beloved*.

44. Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 204.

siblings.<sup>45</sup> The very nature of this appeal then creates a teleological conundrum wherein which the symphony creates an alternate future that has righted itself of all evils, like disability. The work creates a ‘now’ that is happening while the audience experiences the work, and also the existence of a perfect ‘will be.’

For inspiration porn and the musical model of disability, this is an end and erasure of disability. In Alison Kafer’s *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, the result of an imagined future becomes an obvious ending to disability. “A better future, in other words, is one that excludes disability and disabled bodies . . . In this framework,” Kafer concludes, “a future with disability is a future no one wants, and the figure of the disabled person, especially the disabled fetus or child, becomes the symbol of this undesired future.”<sup>46</sup> Under this framework Beethoven’s imprint of disability becomes clear: “O friends, not these tones! Rather, let us begin to sing more pleasant and joyful ones.” These are the first words ever sung in a symphony—and Beethoven’s only addition to Freidrich Schiller’s poetry. They are a prophetic desire for the erasure of disability.<sup>47</sup>

The Ninth Symphony has become a seemingly universal ode to the better natures of humanity.<sup>48</sup> This explains else could the usage of the work as the national anthem of the European Union in addition to its usage to characterize the sound world of a psychopathic

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45. For the purposes of this paper, I use the gender-neutral version of the common translation of “Alle Menschen werden Brüder.”

46. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 2–3.

47. Beethoven, “Eighth and Ninth Symphonies: In Full Orchestral Score.” To be clear, like Kafer (see pg. 4), I do not wish to suggest that I wish for more disability, rather that disability is a defining part of what makes us human.

48. Slavoj Zizek, “‘Ode to Joy,’ Followed by Chaos and Despair,” *The New York Times*, December 24, 2007, sec. Opinion.

rapist.<sup>49</sup> The appeal to the basic sense of happiness that Ahmed theorizes explains this universality, even though the work lacks an explicit narrative for almost seventy percent of the work. The introduction of explicit narrative in the finale is so powerful it forces a psychological rejection of earlier movements in favor of this newfound joy.<sup>50</sup>

This minimization of the other three movements is also evident in the language that is used to market the Ninth Symphony to modern audiences. In recent years the Los Angeles Philharmonic said in its advertisement of the Ninth Symphony that it “celebrates the unity of humanity with a vast, all-inclusive embrace. It is not just a landmark in music history, but also a touchstone work for public occasions and anniversaries such as this, joyfully affirming universal ideals.”<sup>51</sup> The New York Philharmonic uses the ninth in part of their celebration of the newly renovated David Geffen hall, “the work’s iconic themes of unity and hope, fanfares awaken and illuminate every corner of the new hall.”<sup>52</sup> The San Francisco Symphony says the Ninth Symphony “celebrates the bonds of humanity and the glory of the creator in its triumphant ‘Ode to Joy’. . . Its music has become so universal that it is used as the official anthem of the European

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49. “European Anthem,” accessed October 31, 2022, [https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/symbols/european-anthem\\_en](https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/symbols/european-anthem_en); *A Clockwork Orange*, Stanley Kubrick’s *Clockwork Orange*, Digitally restored and remastered ed. (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2001).

50. Maynard. Solomon, *Late Beethoven: Music, Thought, Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 219–20.

51. “Symphony No. 9 (Ludwig van Beethoven),” LA Phil, accessed March 22, 2022, <https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/pieces/5193/symphony-no-9>.

52. “The Joy: David Geffen Hall Opening Gala,” accessed October 20, 2022, <http://nyphil.org/concerts-tickets/2223/joy-dgh-opening-gala>.

Union, quite literally fulfilling its prophecy that ‘all men will become brothers.’”<sup>53</sup> The language of unity that hegemony lauds upon the Ninth Symphony is not based in textual evidence. There are no direct action points for how to achieve this Elysium, and furthermore there are no actual descriptions of what Elysium will entail.

The Ninth Symphony only serves as a musical monument to some time in the future where all harms and oppressions are solved. But as Kafer suggests, to see disability in places where they might not be explicitly mentioned allows for possibilities of reimagination and new discoveries. Kafer terms this process as “cripping.”<sup>54</sup> Currently this world is far from any idealized future with its prevalence of racism, queerphobia, and ableism.

It would be foolhardy to suggest that musical performance by itself could solve any of these oppressions, but a reexamination of the work that is used to proclaim a world free from these evils is far from a small step. The Ninth Symphony has been a tool to proclaim hegemony’s Elysium, but crippling *Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, Op. 125* by Ludwig van Beethoven is essential to enabling the work to achieve the vision that includes everyone.

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53. “San Francisco Symphony - Beethoven: Symphony No. 9,” San Francisco Symphony, accessed March 22, 2022, <http://www.sfsymphony.org>.

54. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 23.

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