Beethoven Symphonies on Period Instruments: A New Tradition?
Author(s): Channan Willner
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Beethoven symphonies on period instruments: a new tradition?

Channan Willner

Several years have now passed since the Early Music revival began embracing the Beethoven symphonies: as the ensuing intense examination of the symphonies' performance *vis-à-vis* newly risen questions of tempo, authenticity and artistic interpretation begins to ebb, and as feelings regarding the performance of Beethoven on period instruments become more balanced, one can begin to sort out and judge the different qualities of several sets of the nine symphonies (all but one still incomplete) from a wider perspective of performing practice, one that takes in the venerable Germanic tradition and the modern, highly *secco* style of the post-war era as well. How – and how well – do the recent accounts by Goodman, Huggett, Schröder, Hogwood, Norrington and Brüggen fit in with those of Furtwängler and Klemperer, Toscanini and Szell, Muti and Maazel? Can their traversals yield results of equal or, as the case may be, perhaps greater distinction?

The essence of the Germanic tradition (Furtwängler, Klemperer and Jochum, for example, to name three conductors whose recordings are generally accessible to us), aside from the successful capture of the symphonies' spiritual quality, is almost as difficult to define as the authenticity to which the most recent trend appears to subscribe.[1] For one thing, it comprises individual approaches that are vastly different from each other in their treatment of both the 'long line' and detail. If one were to seek a common thread that ran more deeply through these diverse styles than their remarkable textural clarity and often beautifully cultivated sound, one would find a recurring fulfilment of one of the most fundamental but, in practice, most elusive principles of sonata form (even in movements based on other forms, which in Beethoven the spirit of sonata form often permeates): namely the sweep and momentum that propel each movement inexorably from one thematic and tonal area to another, making for a dramatic statement of matchless power and intensity.[2]

The momentum embodied in the Germanic tradition had little to do with tempo or surface intensity: it was engendered, rather, by an intimate familiarity, developed gradually in both the concert hall and the opera house over the span of many years, with the means of pacing and shaping the dramatic and rhetorical design of each symphony both in the small and in the large, of balancing each symphony's judiciously timed agogic accentuation with the articulation of its harmonic design and thematic fabric. A performance might be slow (Klemperer), metrically seamless (Furtwängler) or intimately scaled (Jochum), yet almost as a matter of course attain a degree of sweep and power rarely matched by later traversals. Despite lingering vestiges during the 1960s, the early 1970s and again quite recently – the concert performances, distinctly superior to their recorded counterparts, of Böhm and Schmidt-Isserstedt, the recent recordings of Günther Wand, and several concert performances by Günther Herbig – the Germanic tradition and the performance ideals it represents have given way to a highly polished and competent but relatively impersonal approach in the concerts and recordings of the stereophonic and digital eras. These (including, despite many evidently admirable qualities, those of Haitink, Karajan, Ormandy and many others), have simply failed to capture – nor have they made much of an effort to capture – the dramatic or spiritual essence of the symphonies. Instead of tending to the tightly knit design of the corpus, they have (at best) given precedence to the cultivation of elegant sonorities and individual detail, often divorcing these from their larger narrative context.[3] As Taruskin has intimated, this is perhaps an outcome of the straightforward, no-nonsense 'modern' approach established by Toscanini, but it makes for an indifferent and essentially bloodless style with which the master conductor would not have cared to be identified.[4]

It is against the pale backdrop of these modern renditions that the performance of Beethoven symphonies on period instruments has made its entrance. To the possible surprise of some, it turned out that there was in fact much, above and beyond 'authenticity', in the instruments' light and astringent sonorities that could play an active role in the reification of the

[1] The Germanic tradition, as an artistic movement, properly begins with Beethoven performances. Its Haydn and Mozart heritage, such as it is, remains problematic and must await another occasion to be considered at length.

[2] The rhythmic flexibility of, say, Mengelberg and Furtwängler did not extend into all corners of the tradition (one need think only of Klemperer), and even its most accomplished representatives showed occasional rigidity; yet one generally finds compensating strengths in those performances that are in some ways unyielding.

[3] These are of course generalisations; there have been valuable 'modern' accounts, especially of individual symphonies, that can't be typecast (C. Kleiber, Bernstein/VPO, and others).

[4] Taruskin's Beethoven symphonies recording reviews (especially his substantial essays in *Opus*, October 1987, and *19th-Century Music*, Spring 1989) must be singled out for their penetrating thought and virtuosic presentation. While my conclusions often differ from his, I find myself in admiring agreement with many of his observations.

nine symphonies, above all the tension inherent in their pungent sound and the clarity made possible by their characteristic individuation of detail. Beethoven's nervously active orchestral fabric and mercurially resourceful writing for strings appeared exceptionally well served by the instruments' expressive immediacy, a quality that the full complement of the modern orchestra could not easily provide. And Beethoven's vertical sonorities, which often made for a thick, opaque and unduly dark effect when realised by modern complements, gingerly sprang to life and disclosed countless felicitous timbral permutations once unsaddled of their overbearing and oversized modern baggage.

Circumstances, then, would appear to be highly favourable to renewing the quest for the symphonies' inner essence on period instruments: at last, it would be possible for the tension of sonata form to be reunited with the inherent tension, for many years lost but now happily regained, of the performing medium. Thus there would be no reason, really – at least in the abstract – why a Beethoven symphony performance on period instruments at the Furtwängler or Klemperer calibre could not emerge, unlikely or faintly ridiculous as the notion might appear to some. Such a performance would of course require the leadership of a historically informed conductor of the same high quality, one who possessed commensurate experience (especially the once-traditional long apprenticeship) and could draw the right kind of expressive response from a group of period players. If most of the ongoing Beethoven symphony recording projects on period instruments fall short of achieving this kind of distinction, it is often on account of shortcomings on the part of their conductors.

Of the five sets under consideration, the only one completed thus far is the Hanover Band's (Nimbus NI 5144/8; Symphonies nos.1, 2 and 5 were recorded in 1982-83 under Monica Huggett; the rest were done in 1987-88 under Roy Goodman). For all its earnestness (and occasional *naïveté*), and despite Goodman's apparent affinity for the scores, the set remains an exercise in awkwardness: the orchestral playing is undisciplined and lacking in unanimity (the results in 8/IV, for instance, are ungainly, if novel), and the brass players brazenly howl their parts for no discernible purpose. Except for the 'Eroica' and the Fifth, which exude intermittent flashes of pioneer spirit liveliness, the renditions are essentially without shape, moving stiffly from phrase and phrase with little intervention of personal or musicianly give and take. The decidedly inauthentic and disconcertingly reverberant acoustics which plague the entire set act not only as a most unwelcome and intrusive guest, but preclude the essential maintenance of textural clarity; sonorities consequently appear inconsistently thought out and indifferently woven, little attention having been paid to their management and treatment.

The recent account of the first three symphonies by the Smithsonian Chamber Orchestra under Jaap Schröder, part of a six-disc package entitled 'Early Years Through the *Eroica*' that also includes the op.18

Jaap Schröder

string quartets and the op.5 cello sonatas (played by the Smithson String Quartet, cellist Kenneth Slowik, and fortepianist James Weaver; Smithsonian Collection of Recordings ND 0321-4) espouses very different sound ideals and is considerably more successful, if not entirely so. In addition to following Beethoven's celebrated metronome markings (about which more later), Schröder and the group employ 'minimalist recording techniques, coupled with natural room resonance' in order 'to faithfully capture [*sic*] the sounds – and above all the expressions – of period instruments'. The results are minimalist indeed, but not ungainly: while the room's limited resonance recalls that of Toscanini's Studio 8-H and the resulting sound picture is somewhat boxy and constricted, the performances' highly intimate scale nevertheless doesn't prevent them from retaining the measure of tension necessary to support the three symphonies' structural weight. Listening to this ascetically conceived and executed set is not unlike watching a well-made black and white film from the 1950s: outlines are starkly but effectively drawn, and a strong, affecting atmosphere – taut rather than sensuous – is maintained throughout. Despite occasional roughness, the biting passage-work in the upper strings repeatedly reflects Schröder's own instrumental expertise, and woodwinds, often at the forefront, offer 'choral' harmonic underpinnings and solos of uncommon vividness. The set is deeply flawed, however, by a prevailing monochromaticism and sameness of expression, underscored in turn by a grimly uniform adherence to Beethoven's brisk tempos; each symphony flows into the next as if part of the same larger composition. (The cello sonatas are done in somewhat glacial 'modernist' style supported by close-up recorded sound harking back to the early decades of stereo recitals; both players avoid the casual, noncommittal spirit of the recent A. Pleeth/Tan collaboration, the vehemence of Bylsma/Bilson, and the searching lyricism of Coin/Cohen, opting instead for a winning and often exciting granitic strength. The Smithson's muscular, resolute approach to op.18 compares very favourably with most modern accounts though not with the Smetana Quartet's consummate virtuoso account released by Denon not long ago.[5]

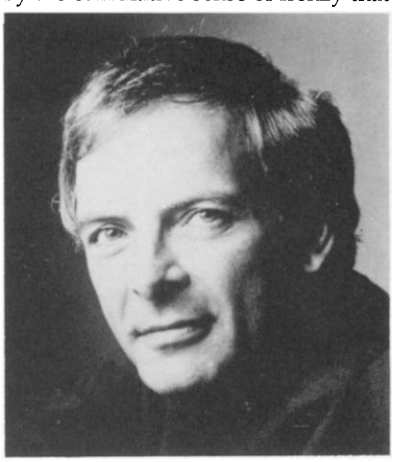
With Christopher Hogwood's version of the first six symphonies (L'Oiseau-Lyre 414 338-2, nos.1 & 2; 417 235-2, no.3; 417 615-2, nos.4 & 5; 421 416-2, no.6) we re-enter the world of predictably comfortable recorded sound. Though unadventurous and often too neutral and 'uninterpreted' for comfort (or inspiration), Hogwood's Beethoven does have its virtues: it cultivates, principally, a beautifully varnished orchestral sound without sacrificing the instruments' exotic quality and immediacy (an important accomplishment for which Hogwood has not received sufficient credit in the past). The ravishing sonorities he draws from the Academy of Ancient Music help build up a measure of surface unity and agreeable stylishness that many other Beethoven symphony traversals, on whatever instruments, lack. In general, Hogwood's treatment of expository material abounds in nicely turned phrases and succeeds in maintaining just enough character and cohesion to work very well, even

[5] The essentially barren rhythmic life of Norrington's approach has such far-reaching repercussions because, in the final analysis, mastery of rhythmic inflection remains the foundation of musicianly playing (cf Edward T. Cone's perceptive observations throughout *Musical Form and Musical Performance* [New York, 1968], especially p.31).

though it makes little overt attempt to put those phrases together or etch a truly distinct structural profile; the first movement expositions of nos.1 – 2 and 4 – 5, in particular, display a refreshing directness and an unforced liveliness which stand in welcome contrast to the ponderous and charmless execution of these sections that one usually hears. Hogwood tends to lose his bearings in development sections, however, and also in developmental material in general (parts of his brisk *Pastoral* are particularly deficient in this regard); because thematic, tonal and, in a cumulative sense, dramatic development form the core of the Beethoven symphonies, a larger movement-long sense of tonal and rhythmic direction and coherence often fails to materialise (blocks of sequential writing, for example, follow each other in relatively mechanical and aimless fashion, impeding the formation of the 'long line'). While Symphonies 1 – 2 escape largely unharmed somehow, this becomes a serious obstacle in the later works, especially in nos.4 – 6; in the *Eroica* it has the curious consequence, particularly in the first movement, of underscoring the Symphony's streaks of genial *Gemütlichkeit*, an important feature often overlooked by other conductors because it is so difficult to reconcile with the Symphony's more obvious characteristics; but the performance does little, if anything, to bring out the Symphony's portrayal of musical and human conflict. Possibly because Hogwood has become sensitive to critical frustration with his perceived lack of involvement (especially from Taruskin), he adopts an alternately fussy and driven approach in the *Pastoral*, occasionally robbing the Symphony of at least some weight and substance. In all, my impression is that these recordings were prematurely done; in time, Hogwood might yet become a Beethoven conductor of considerable distinction.

Certainly the most original and most highly touted of the 'authentic' Beethoven orchestral cycles has been Roger Norrington's (EMI CDC 7 49746 2, nos.1 & 6; 7 47698 2, nos.2 & 8; 7 49101 2, no.3; 7 49221 2, no.9). Because it has received such wide and largely favourable attention, one needs only summarise its considerable advantages. These include the London Classical Players' electric vitality and febrile drive, their brilliant virtuosity and quasi-soloistic involvement, the ensemble's exceptionally well-drilled and meticulously rehearsed execution, and the repeatedly astonishing translucence of the orchestral fabric. In symphonies nos.1, 2, 6 and 8 at least, the group (despite Norrington's tight controls) attains the revelatory quality of a first-time experience and unravels the innumerable felicities of Beethoven's orchestral design in the most refreshing way: at last, the nervously pulsating strands of Beethoven's turbulent textures regain their breathlessly mobile quality.

Stunning though it certainly is, Norrington's approach is not free of problems, and some of them are quite serious. While under the spell of the many heretofore hidden treasures, one has little opportunity to respond to other important but more subtle aspects of the design; as it turns out, not only are these often overwhelmed by the cumulative sense of frenzy that



Christopher Hogwood

attaches itself to the playing, but it appears that not a few have been neglected or even overlooked amidst attempts to achieve results that are immediately palpable and exciting. The excitement, however, *is* short-term: in the long run, it is outweighed by the absence of basic expressive gestures without which few Beethoven performances can attain much lasting power.

Most prominent among these thorns, ironically (given Norrington's insistence on the metronome markings and 'correct' tempos), is the ineffective organisation of temporal relationships. Unconvincing extremes of tempo, in fact (except in the rigidly unfolded 3/I, cut and dried 9/II, mechanically rushed 9/III and in several squeezed and stretched parts of 9/IV), are not of themselves quite as significant an issue here as are the repercussions of Norrington's manner of maintaining the tempos and accentuating the various orchestral strands. The panoply of attacks, accents and emphases that marks his method of bringing out the various voices and keeping the strands abuzz is simply too aggressively insistent in its cumulative impact for the performances to remain merely pointed; too often the players accentuate and underscore tones that, though nearly hidden under other aspects of the tonal fabric, are already metrically or rhythmically prominent. As a result, there is very little rhythmic give and take in these recordings, and very little by way of rubato or emphasis through small agogic delays (perceptible or imperceptible) of the type that is absolutely indispensable to the well-being of any performance.[6]

Especially since the generation of busy but well-equalised textures has the (presumably unintended) effect of almost constant spotlighting, the sense of hyperactivity and unrelenting, high-strung tension is much more tiring here than it needs to be: what under more flexible circumstances would have made for continual excitement proves, on repeated hearings, to be only episodically thrilling and occasionally gripping.

An important component of the symphonies to which Norrington pays little attention is their harmonic progressions. Evocative deceptive cadences (for example 9/I, bars 23 – 24; III, bars 23 – 24) are repeatedly glided over, as are reharmonisations (3/I, bars 133-5), enharmonic changes (9/I, bars 107 – 8), and searching bass lines that bring in new roots (3/I, bars 61 – 71; 3/II, bars 31 – 33), to name a few obvious casualties. (Similarly, tricky points of juncture, such as 9/I, bars 145 – 46, are given short shrift.) Because so much of Beethoven's design – its rhythms, melodic continuity, thematic development and disposition of instrumental entries – is held together and impelled by the force of its harmonic and contrapuntal underpinnings, the surface of these traversals often tends to lose its essential directional framework and consequently its inner momentum, the prevailing frenzied drive notwithstanding.

As for Norrington's steady adherence to Beethoven's metronome markings, my own objection to it stems from the needless restrictions which the markings' consistent espousal tends of necessity to impose on a fundamentally artistic aspect of performance which has traditionally been and should continue to remain within the prerogative of the performer's musical temperament (this in addition to the objection that at least at their most extreme the markings only trivialise the music). Unlike such relatively 'fixed' parameters of performance

[6] Taruskin has dealt most perceptively with the illusions of these claims and their ramifications in the aforementioned reviews.

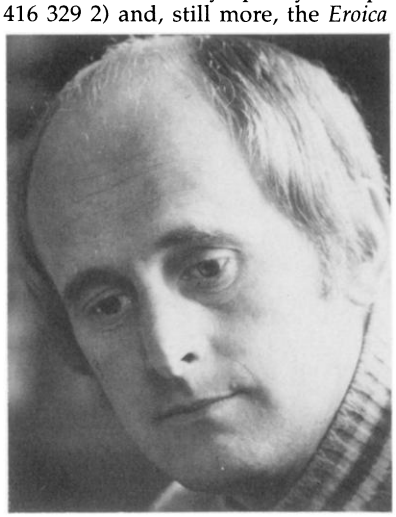
as slurs or dynamic indications (when these are unambiguous), tempo has generally been viewed and practiced as a relatively flexible, 'open' parameter: most cultivated musicians begin to vary their tempos as they depart from a composition's opening group of measures. Norrington's overbearingly uniform management of tempos over long spans, combined with his highly metrical treatment of detail, has the effect of begging the question of meaningful time-management at the phrase-to-phrase and theme-to-theme level, and makes for a serious flaw in many of his performances.

It is a measure of Norrington's great skills as a conductor that despite these substantial drawbacks some of his performances, and parts of others, earn an honourable position near the top of the relatively small list of distinguished recorded performances of the Beethoven symphonies. The recently issued pairing of nos.1 and 6, which shows a slight relaxation of tension and rather greater attention to the tuneful and graceful turns of the music, is indeed exceptionally fine; it is most instructive to observe how other elements of performance fall into place as Norrington loosens his reins ever so slightly.

The *Eroica* scherzo, too, is magnificent, possessing a rock-solid steadiness that lends it more weight and depth than it has known in years. The Ninth Finale, for all its unnerving 'authentic' tempos (especially the opening instrumental recitative, the Alla Marcia and the ensuing Fugue) and stiffly articulated tempo changes is extraordinarily well balanced, emerging as a unified piece of music rather than as an uncomfortably disjointed piece of theatre. The chorus comes beautifully through without straining its resources and obliterating the orchestra, and its clarity of diction adds immeasurably to an altogether electrifying effect.

Norrington is least persuasive in the *Eroica* first movement, which is mechanical and surprisingly thick (the orchestral playing and sound quality, too, lack the peppy and brilliant quality they assume elsewhere), and in the Ninth's odd-numbered movements, which, 'authentic' tempos aside, are done in an unyielding, inflexible style that can hardly suggest, let alone transmit, their dramatic content and ever-refreshing improvisatory spirit (especially 9/I). Symphonies 2 and 8 and the remaining movements of 3 and 9 fall somewhere in between, full of verve and animation on the one hand, yet too tense and charmlessly driven to give enduring pleasure on the other. Not unlike Hogwood, Norrington displays some difficulties in holding entire symphonies, if not entire movements, together; ultimately, this points to a certain superficiality in his conception of what a proper Beethoven performance should consist of.

While the four symphony projects considered up to this point strive to break tradition (one of several reasons they are authentically modernist, despite their claims to a more fundamental authenticity)[6], Frans Brüggen's is decidedly non-aligned, period instruments and small orchestral forces notwithstanding. That his recordings of the First (coupled with Mozart's G minor Symphony, Philips 416 329 2) and, still more, the *Eroica*



Roger Norrington

(Philips 422 052 2), both recorded live with the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century, are among the most finely nuanced and structurally integrated we have is more readily attributable to his artistry and to that of his players than to their adherence to any tradition or to any preconceived notions of interpretation. The performances' imposing power and strength are generated from within through the judiciously paced and deeply felt introduction of countless subtle shadings and expressive turns of phrase within the larger context of the 'long line'; even more so than Jochum's uncommonly warm and humane readings with the Concertgebouw and the LSO, they simulate a small-group intimacy without jeopardising the orchestral discourse to the point where it loses its broad (and of necessity slightly neutral) symphonic character. Despite the instruments' limited sustaining power (which Brüggen, more so than other conductors, doesn't attempt to hide), the climactic outbursts in the *Eroica*, intensified by a slight drawing-out (I, bars 248 – 79; II, bars 125 – 50 and 159 – 68), acquire a power more terrifying than ever.

To illustrate the kind of knowing musicianship one finds in such abundance here, one may cite Brüggen's treatment of the nearly continuous web of counterpoints and accompanimental figures in the *Eroica* first movement (the second violins' and violas' portentous repeated notes at the very opening, bars 3 – 8, the first violins' syncopations framing the E minor theme, for instance): in addition to generating the characteristically motoric momentum of the movement, they assume the role of a Greek chorus, commenting and reflecting on the movement's dramatic development at every turn. In most recorded performances, and throughout those on period instruments, such figures are treated as embellishments of little importance: Brüggen's is among the very few recordings altogether to take them into account as full-fledged participants in the dramatic and musical discourse. The heightened degree of tension that consequently accrues transforms his rendition into a gripping and genuinely stirring experience. This is magisterial conducting, as 'modern' as anyone's in its razor-edge sharpness and methodical probing of detail, yet musically and spiritually on a par with the great Germanic tradition of the past. The degree to which it in fact approximates the fabled older style is immaterial; far more important is its establishment of new standards of excellence – and perhaps a new artistic tradition – of Beethoven performance on period instruments. (Although Brüggen's accounts of the remaining seven symphonies are yet to appear, his brilliant recent Haydn symphony recordings do much to support this impression.)

Unlikely though it may have appeared only a few years ago, then, it is indeed possible, in practice as well as in theory, that the great Germanic Beethoven tradition might find a worthy and historically informed successor on period instruments after all. Whether such a 'new' tradition will in fact flourish remains to be seen: the obstacles it faces are certainly daunting, for more perhaps than any body of compositions, the Classical and Romantic symphonic repertoire must be re-lived through perspicacious musical penetration and vast interpretative imagination – well above and beyond executant virtuosity and historical awareness – of the sort that has become exceedingly rare in our time. While Brüggen and his players have met this formidable challenge with resounding success, it remains for Goodman, Huggett, Schröder, Hogwood and Norrington to contend with its magnitude.