

Late Beethoven and Romantic Aesthetics

April 3, 2018

Some Features of Romantic Aesthetics

Turning inward

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I am commencing an undertaking hitherto without precedent, and which will never find an imitator. I desire to set before my fellows the likeness of a man in all the truth of nature, and that man myself.

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ETA Hoffman, "Beethoven's Instrumental Music", 1794

When we speak of music as an independent art, we should refer only to instrumental music which, scorning the association of another art, namely poetry, expresses that peculiar property which can be found in music only. It is the most romantic of the arts, one might almost say the only really romantic art, for its sole object is the expression of the infinite. The lyre of Orpheus opens the doors of Orkus. Music discloses to man an unknown world having nothing in common with the external sensual world which surrounds him and in which he leaves behind him all definite feelings in order to abandon himself to an inexpressible longing.

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Kant and Hoffmann: Words in music

Kant: Instrumental music is merely agreeable, pleasant, since it is agreeable to the sensations but doesn't engage the intellect.

Hoffmann: Words are merely representational, hence “external,” while music should properly look inward and represent “the infinite,” or, an “inexpressible longing.”

*That condition is the condition of **autonomous, "absolute" spirituality** and expressivity. The whole history of music, as Hoffmann viewed it, was one of progressive emancipation of music from all bonds that compromised the autonomy and absoluteness of expression that Hoffmann took to be its essence.*

(Taruskin 2005, p. 642)

Philosophical Climate (very briefly) I

- ▶ Kant: aesthetics has special status as the site of the harmony of “imagination” and “understanding”
- ▶ Hegel: Art is part of the operation of *geist*, a world-driving force that animates history. Art is “the unfolding of truth.” cf. Keats, 1819, Ode on A Grecian Urn
- ▶ **Schiller**: art, specifically the fine arts (not just is prerequisite to a theory of morality.
- ▶ Schopenhauer: Art bypasses cognition (“the Idea”) and expresses something essential in an unmediated way (“things in themselves”). Engagement with “eastern” philosophy, emphasis on the sublime. Hierarchy of artistic forms, with music at the top – but only “absolute music.” (more on this later)

Philosophical Climate (very briefly) II

*It does not express this or that individual or particular joy, this or that sorrow or pain or horror or exaltation or cheerfulness or peace of mind, **but rather joy, sorrow, pain, horror, exaltation, cheerfulness and peace of mind as such in themselves, abstractly...***

(World as Will and Representation, 289)

- ▶ Nietzsche: Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music. Philosophy itself aestheticized, Wagner lionized (later repudiated). “Philosophy that sings and sizzles.” (Walter Kaufman) Radical subjugation of drama to music.
- ▶ Frankfurt School: Art is where you can decode/unearth the truth about social problems.

Compare with Opera

Opera (florentine camerata) derives ultimately from Aristotle, where art must imitate nature. Renaissance sees flowering of interest in Classical thought; Opera is part of that: *stile rappresentativo*.

This is *not* Romantic aesthetics of music. Why not?

- ▶ It relies on words.
- ▶ It deals with archetypal emotional content; “human nature” as an object of representation rather than the uniqueness of the individual self as object of expression.
- ▶ It deals with particular, nameable human emotions, rather than the inexpressible.

It was not an absolute art, let alone an autonomous or emancipated one. It dealt in the common coin of shared humanity, not the elite currency of genius.

Taruskin 2005, p. 643

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The sublime above the merely beautiful

The Beautiful and the Sublime I

Art that pleases vs. art that threatens, especially nature.

Hoffmann: Haydn vs Mozart (and, especially, Beethoven)

Kant: “the irresistibility of [nature's] power certainly makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical powerlessness, but at the same time it reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent of nature and a superiority over nature. . . whereby the humanity in our person remains undemeaned even though the human being must submit to that dominion” (from Stanford dictionary of Philosophy)

The Beautiful and the Sublime II

Beethoven's music opens up to us the realm of the monstrous and the immeasurable. Burning flashes of light shoot through the deep night of this realm, and we become aware of giant shadows that surge back and forth, driving us into narrower and narrower confines until they destroy us – but not the pain of that endless longing in which each joy that has climbed aloft in jubilant song sinks back and is swallowed up, and it is only in this pain, which consumes love, hope, and happiness but does not destroy them, which seeks to burst our breasts with a many-voiced consonance of all the passions, that we live on, enchanted beholders of the supernatural!

(Hoffmann, "Beethoven's Instrumental", cited in Taruskin, p. 648)

Features of musical Romanticism recognizable today

- ▶ Rise of museums and concert halls: canon and the "work"
- ▶ Rise of the "genius"
- ▶ Rise in cultural capital of bourgeoisie, esp. after French Revolution (1789)
- ▶ Sacralization of concert culture and performance practice, rise of concert etiquette

Where previously the work served the performer, now the performer and the critic too were to serve the work

(Taruskin 2005, p. 471)

- ▶ Abandonment of improvisation, rise of the conservatory, sanctity of the score

Score as recipe for performance vs. score as inviolable authority
"whose meaning is to be deciphered with exegetical interpretations." (Dahlhaus 1989, p. 9)

- ▶ Prestige of composer over performer

More Hoffmann on Beethoven

He scorns the exploitation of his personality in any way whatever, and all his poetic imagination and intellectual understanding are bent towards the object of calling forth into active life, with all the brilliant colors at his command, the noble and enchanting images and visions which the Master with magic power has shut up in his work, that they may surround mankind in bright, sparkling rings...and carry him in wild flights into the distant spirit kingdom of sound.

and elsewhere of Beethoven: “his kingdom is not of this world.”

Taruskin on the new Romantic aesthetics

Beauty, in the name of the new art-religion, had to give way before greatness. From now on music expressive of the new world-transcending values would be called not beautiful music but “great music.” It is a term that is still used to describe – or at least to market – “classical music,” and Beethoven is still its standard bearer.

(Taruskin 2005, p. 650)

Ludwig Van Beethoven, 1770-1827 and Romantic Aesthetics

Musical family, early career as virtuoso performer, by 1796 his position as “heir” to Haydn more or less secure. Heiligenstadt “Testament” reflects despair over deafness but also desire to overcome. Taruskin:

Beethoven's deafness not only became the chief basis of the Beethoven mystique, and the chief source of his unprecedented authority as a cultural figure; it also served as one of the chief avenues by which Beethoven's personal fate...became the most commanding and regulating single influence on the whole field of musical activity from his time to ours.

The idea of a successful deaf composer is virtually a superhuman idea. It connotes superhuman suffering and superhuman victory, playing directly into the emerging quasi-religious romantic notion of the great artist as humanity's redeemer.

Schiller, Aesthetic Education of Man, letter 2

I hope that I shall succeed in convincing you that this matter of art is less foreign to the needs than to the tastes of our age; nay, that, **to arrive at a solution even in the political problem, the road of aesthetics must be pursued, because it is through beauty that we arrive at freedom.** But the voice of our age seems by no means favorable to art, at all events to that kind of art to which my inquiry is directed. The course of events has given a direction to the genius of the time that threatens to remove it continually further from the ideal of art. **For art has to leave reality, it has to raise itself bodily above necessity and neediness; for art is the daughter of freedom, and it requires its prescriptions and rules to be furnished by the necessity of spirits and not by that of matter.** But in our day it is necessity, neediness, that prevails, and bends a degraded humanity under its iron yoke. Utility is the great idol of the time, to which all powers do homage and all subjects are subservient.

Schiller, AEM letter 22

All other exercises give to the mind some special aptitude, but for that very reason give it some definite limits; only the aesthetical leads him to the unlimited. Every other condition, in which we can live, refers us to a previous condition, and requires for its solution a following condition; only the aesthetic is a complete whole in itself, for it unites in itself all conditions of its source and of its duration. Here alone we feel ourselves swept out of time, and our humanity expresses itself with purity and integrity as if it had not yet received any impression or interruption from the operation of external powers.

9th Symphony (1824), Choral entrance

► before entrance

► at entrance

Freude, schöner Götterfunken,
Tochter aus Elysium, Wir
betreten feuertrunken,
Himmlische, dein Heiligtum!
Deine Zauber binden wieder Was
die Mode streng geteilt; Alle
Menschen werden Brüder Wo
dein sanfter Flügel weilt.

O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!
Sondern laßt uns angenehmere
anstimmen, und freudenvollere.

Joy, beautiful spark of divinity,
Daughter from Elysium, We
enter, drunk with fire, Heavenly
One, thy sanctuary! Your magic
joins again What custom strictly
divided; All people become
brothers, Where your gentle wing
abides.

Oh friends, not these sounds! Let
us instead strike up more
pleasing and more joyful ones!

Nationalism and *Geist*

- ▶ *Geist*: “Spirit?” or “National Identity?”
- ▶ As opposed to *Sinnlichkeit* “Feeling” or “sensuality”
- ▶ The triumph of German *Geist* specifically
- ▶ Esteban Buch, *Beethoven's Ninth: A Political History*
 - ▶ 19th Cent French Nationalism
 - ▶ Third Reich
 - ▶ National Anthem of Rhodesia

Innerlichkeit inwardness of expression

► Beethoven, Qtet 15, III

“Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart” (Holy thanks giving song of a convalescent, to the diety, in the Lydian mode)

“Neue Kraft fühlend” (feeling new strength)

“mit innigster Empfindung” (with deepest feeling? Feeling? Emotion?) – (Innig – inniger – innigst) + Emp + finden = to find