The "Better" Symphony

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Beethoven's Eighth Symphony is his shortest, and it is the only completed symphony in a key he already used—F major. When taken at face value, these facts seem to set it up to pale in comparison to the Seventh Symphony, with which it was paired. The Seventh's rhythmic action, its enchanting second movement that in Beethoven's day was "demanded to be repeated at every performance," and its finale of "Bacchic fury" all add up to make it "one of the most fully satisfying of all Beethoven's works" (Lockwood 159-165). The Eighth simply has no parallel to this power of sweeping away listeners. Furthermore, his other F major symphony (the Pastoral) is more attractive and clearer in meaning to an average listener, only doubly overshadowing the Eighth.

Thus, the audience's rather lukewarm reaction—the *AMZ* wrote that "in short...it did not create a furor" (Solomon 214)—should come as no surprise, especially considering that the Eighth Symphony premiered in a concert where the Seventh was played first (Young 163-164). Yet Beethoven was greatly angered by the Eighth's reception and, according to Czerny, remarked, "That's because it's so much better" (Lockwood 171) than the Seventh. This statement probably strikes us as absurd, because the Eighth looks small and forgettable next to the Seventh, and we may wonder how seriously Beethoven meant what he said. Yet a deeper examination of the structure and background of the Eighth reveals that it too has much to be appreciated. In its own way, the Eighth Symphony is grand in scale, genius in composition, and fitting for the last of Beethoven's instrumental symphonies.

The Eighth Symphony's length is closer to the symphonies of Haydn and Mozart, and its second movement would have made them "wish that they had written it themselves" (Tovey 62).

Put together with the third movement's reversion to a minuet in place of a scherzo, the Eighth Symphony's "return to late eighteenth-century symphonic proportions is a defining feature" (Lockwood 171). Yet this retrospection does not hinder Beethoven from creating a gigantic work that breaks into new ground. Adorno wrote that the "*limitation*, the invocation of the *dix-huitième*, is a means of making clear the pioneering, transcending, ecstatic, frenzied aspect of the work." When "measured by what is enclosed, it *seems* gigantic" (112). Beethoven places the symphony within the constraints of late eighteenth-century style and proceeds to show himself to be a master of it while simultaneously shattering its expectations, a move that gives the symphony a sense of grandness and innovation in its reduced scale.

In the third movement, Beethoven displays his "vast knowledge of dance style," combining in the first four measures a heavily accented "*Deutsche*, lower-class style" followed immediately by "graceful, aristocratic minuet style" (Young 184). The movement serves as a reminder and showcase of his extensive portfolio of successful ballroom dances from the 1790s. Furthermore, the trio is "virtually a chamber-music episode within the symphony" (Lockwood 183), which David Young describes as "Haydnesque" and "worthy of his teacher's most delectable creations" (Young 184). In the fourth movement, a circle of fifths progression reveals "Beethoven's training in Fuxian counterpoint through his teachers Haydn and Albrechtsberger" (Young 186). Throughout the symphony, Beethoven makes it clear that he is just as competent in the style of his predecessors as he is in his own—namely the constant stretching of bounds and pushing for grander that manifests itself in the Eroica, the Seventh, and would eventually lead to the Ninth.

At the same time, Beethoven breaks with this high Classical framing in several ways. Though the symphony begins with a "compact twelve-bar period in the 'classical' tradition"

(Geck 130), Beethoven soon surprises us with unusual harmonic shifts and rhythmic structures, causing the late eighteenth-century style to fall apart. These unusual moves, which might be interpreted as musical jokes, will be discussed in more detail later on. The structure of the finale has long confused listeners, with some (including Tovey) believing its coda to comprise "47% of the total length of a movement" (Gauldin 4), while others propose a form more similar to a rondo. Gauldin proposes a unique "double-sonata" form, with two developments and two recapitulations. As a result, this movement serves as "a most instructive example of Beethoven's alteration of normative structural procedures" (10) beyond the traditional structures of Haydn's era. Even the emphasis placed on the finale, which "draws a bead on the final frenzy of the Seventh" (Geck 133), is a break from high Classical, where the first movement was the most important. Thus, it makes sense when David Young states, "just as the Seventh established A major as a suitable key for a grand symphony with trumpets and drums so the Eighth similarly establishes F major" (177). By imposing a restriction of late eighteenth-century style and then both mastering it and stretching its boundaries, Beethoven has created a symphony that, within the context of its constraints, looks no less grand and innovative than his others. Accordingly, Lockwood says that "his re-animation of the classical manner in the Eighth should be seen not as a regression, but as a further widening of artistic space," displaying "curious and subtle play with form and expectations about continuity that foreshadow aspects of the late style" (171-172). Beethoven may have liked the Eighth in part for this expansion of artistic freedom. He would look towards far older "white note" and modal styles to use in *Missa solemnis* and the late string quartets, and he would incorporate all sorts of musical styles into the Ninth Symphony. Thus, the Eighth may have been especially important to him as an early demonstration of his ability to competently wield diverse styles and cross temporal boundaries.

In addition to its retrospective style, the Eighth Symphony also stands out for its frequent musical jokes, which Young describes as "artful imitation of incompetence" (187). The second subject of the first movement's exposition begins in D major instead of the expected dominant key of C major. Tovey describes this as a "chuckle," which soon corrects itself to C major, "explaining that it didn't mean to turn up in such a gaudy key, and will, if you will kindly overlook that indiscretion, continue in the orthodox dominant" (63). Later on in the same movement, the opening theme comes returns in the cellos, basses, and bassoons. However, the orchestra is playing in the dynamic of *fff*, which drowns out this supposed recapitulation. Some conductors have thought that "perhaps his deafness had gotten the better of him," but it is more likely a purposeful "illusion" (Lockwood 177). Michael Broyles notes that this passage comes at an odd place rhythmically and the orchestral harmony is the unstable six-four chord rather than having the tonic in the root (39). He demonstrates that the true recapitulation comes eight measures later, but says that Beethoven was intentionally being ambiguous and "has succeeded in clouding the issue" (44). This move is reminiscent of the early horn entry in the Eroica, serving as another example of the deviation from high Classical style (where the recapitulation was clearly defined) and continuing the "imitation of incompetence."

The second movement was not, as the anecdote tells, based on a party canon imitating Mälzel's invention of the metronome, as the canon was most likely a Schindler forgery and the metronome had not yet been invented (Kinderman 181). However, the suggestion of something mechanical is certainly there and probably takes its cue from Haydn's "Clock" Symphony, "which Beethoven probably knew better than anyone" (Lockwood 181). Yet the movement is "anything but a mechanical instrument that runs with predictable regularity" (Geck 129). The orchestra has extended passages of off-beat duplets, and there are shocking fortissimo sixty-

fourth notes throughout that also end the movement (Young 183). Near the end, "the whole apparatus seems to fall part" and only picks up again "as if someone has kicked the mechanism in order to get it going again" (Geck 130). Finally, in the last movement there is the unison C-sharp that seems to come out of nowhere and "rudely interrupts a *pianississimo*," which Louis Spohr described as "someone sticking out his tongue at him in the middle of a conversation" (Geck 128). Though C-sharp is the same "wrong note" used in the first movement of the Eroica, it does not seem to serve the same function here. Not only is C-sharp the raised dominant in F major (as opposed to the raised submediant in E-flat major), but it juts out shockingly, whereas the Eroica's C-sharp is smoothly woven in to the flow of the music. Furthermore, the C-sharp in the Eroica is eventually resolved as we get the first theme again in the coda, but with regular I-V phrases in place of accidentals. The Eighth's C-sharp is never given satisfactory closure, and we never know why it was here: After appearing again several times, it finally tries to make itself useful by bringing us into an F-sharp minor passage. Yet the only way back to F major from this distant key is just to drop down and "hammer away at it until they have thoroughly convinced the orchestra that they mean it for the tonic" (Tovey 67). Soon after, we continue with the second subject, also played briefly in the basses, which Tovey describes as Hephaestus unwilling to leave as the gods' cup-bearer. "Straightway unquenchable laughter" results, which eventually disperses into "joyous shouts" that end the symphony (ibid).

A symphony filled with so many humorous moments earned from A. B. Marx the title of "most jovial" (Geck 125). Maynard Solomon notes that both the Seventh and the Eighth lack a mourning slow moment—the Eighth even more so because at least the Allegretto of the Seventh feels slow. As a result, both symphonies "exist in a festive Paradise" and "transport us into a sphere of laughter, play, and the exuberant release of bound energy" (213). The Eighth

symphony shows Beethoven's capabilities to compose not only powerful, emotionally moving passages, but delightfully clever and humorous moments as well. Such a playful and celebratory symphony is undoubtedly to be beloved by its creator.

At this moment, however, Beethoven biographers may raise an objection. The period of his life coinciding with the Seventh and Eighth symphonies was particularly turbulent. It seems unfitting for a piece as light-hearted as the Eighth to come at such a time. Beethoven not only experienced financial difficulties that forced him to be dependent on Archduke Rudolph, but underwent personal struggles that made life in Vienna hard to bear (Lockwood 146-147). In particular, this was the peak of the "Immortal Beloved" affair, the only time in his life that he "found a woman whom he loved and who fully reciprocated his love" (Solomon 159). Solomon shows this woman to be Antonie Brentano, who was already married, and to whom Beethoven wrote several letters in July 1812 while in Teplitz (166). Coincidentally, he also sketched the Eighth Symphony in the summer of 1812 in Teplitz (Kinderman 176). As Beethoven and Antonie were not to be, the Immortal Beloved letters, full of uncontrolled passion and conflicting emotions, may ultimately represent "a final renunciation of marriage, and an acceptance of aloneness as his fate" (Solomon 188). The first entry of his *Tagebuch*, the diary which he also began while writing the Eighth, says that "with A [likely Antonie] everything goes to ruin" and "there is no longer any happiness except within yourself, in your art" as Beethoven accepts "deepest submission to your fate" (Solomon ed. Tyson 212). The aftermath of the Immortal Beloved affair clearly left Beethoven emotionally distraught and changed. Combined with the other struggles in his life at the time, the playful light-heartedness of the Eighth Symphony seems inappropriate. Perhaps the fact that he wrote it while these turbulent events were going down suggests there is something heavier and darker than joyful, innocent humor at play here.

Of course, we must be careful not to extrapolate too much of Beethoven's biography into his music. We would not think of more classical artists such as Mozart and Haydn as composing in response to events in their lives, and while Beethoven may be the first composer with whom the idea of the individual, self-expressing artist emerges, this paradigm need not apply to every one of his works. Tovey writes that the second movement has such a youthful "healing touch" that it "shows how much less the sad distractions of the artists' biography can tell us of him than almost any one of his works" (64). Ultimately, "Beethoven wanted to be understood through his music alone" (Geck 119). Yet on the other hand, even critics such as Carl Dahlhaus who advocate for separating Beethoven's life and his works still find it "difficult to make plausible the idea that an oeuvre exists in itself, as a 'whole' independently of its author" (Lockwood 148). Returning to the music, we can keep this biographical context in mind and examine it from another perspective, while not being too quick to draw parallels between his art and his personal struggles.

Lockwood cites Broyles in saying that the C-sharp in the finale is "too defiant, however, to be the typical good-humor of Haydn" (185). The fortissimo accidental note would have been more shocking to listeners unaccustomed to modern chromaticism and atonality. Thus, Wilhelm von Lenz described it as a "note of terror" (Geck 128). Beethoven was not Haydn, who "gives us the whole joke, punch line and all, and we understand it," but rather earned early on a reputation of being "difficult to understand if not incomprehensible" (Bonds 327). The Eighth Symphony's sense of humor might not be the lighthearted playfulness of Haydn's jokes, but a harsher and more obscure irony. If we read irony in the symphony's mode of expression, perhaps that aligns better biographically, as we imagine an embittered Beethoven trying to make sense of the lonely station to which fate has confined him. Rey M. Longyear, writing about Beethoven's use of

romantic irony, explains that irony through the "interruption of a mood can be achieved…by surprising tonal shifts" (446), of which the Eighth Symphony abounds. Moreover, Lockwood notes that another characteristic of the Eighth is that while the Seventh "expands similarities," the Eighth "pursues the opposite tack, that of linking together a chain of highly diverse thematic segments" (174). This could further hint at its ironic nature, as Mark Evan Bonds writes that "Beethoven would go on to juxtapose incongruous elements in his music to an even more extreme degree [than Haydn] and as a result earned repeated approbation during his lifetime as a 'musical Jean Paul'" (306). Jean Paul was a contemporary of Beethoven, and along with figures such as Friedrich Schlegel and Ludwig Tieck, was one of the main literary figures in the romantic discourse on irony (302). Such a comparison was not taken lightly by later commentators: Adorno, in his never-completed book about Beethoven, writes "Jean Paul!!!" at the end of a fragment on the Eighth Symphony (112). Martin Geck uses Jean Paul and romantic irony as a basis for his unique interpretation of the symphony.

As "Jean Paul, too, subverted humanitarian ideals in his novels, regaling his readers instead with all manner of aberrations and false leads," Geck sees Beethoven, through the symphony's mess of musical jokes and tricks, closely following Romantic tradition "as an ironist who destroys his ideal but who refuses to let it go" (133-134). Geck reads the Eighth as a satyr play following the Greek tragedy of the Seventh, each movement a parody and distortion of the corresponding movement in the Seventh. While the Seventh's first movement is "unusually discursive," the Eighth's is "exceptionally concentrated" and an "absurdity." The magical "inspired Allegretto of the Seventh" stands in stark contrast to the Eighth's "mechanical Allegretto scherzando." The Seventh's third movement's "scurrying quarter notes" are nothing like the "deliberate awkwardness" of the Tempo di Menuetto. Finally, while both finales are

frenzied, the Seventh's is a "constantly swelling river of euphoria" while the Eighth has "signs of chaos and aimlessness at every turn" (130-133). Geck concludes from this "sarcasm" and "self-destructive impulse" (127-128) that the symphony was rather pessimistic for Beethoven, serving as "depressing proof that a symphony will still be accepted in the concert hall even when its mechanisms are presented in such a distorted way that no one can fail to notice them" (134). Beethoven is an idealist disillusioned by the incompetence of audiences of his day, writing his Eighth symphony as a final acerbically sarcastic gesture before leaving behind purely instrumental symphonies for "something earth-shatteringly new" (134).

Such an interpretation is supported by the background of romantic irony. Longyear explains that the "pedestrian attitudes of musicians and audiences" were "ripe for parody, satire, and pranks" (454). Schlegel and Tieck expressed a similar attitude in their sphere of theatre. Thus, it is plausible that as a composer highly concerned with the ideal of art, Beethoven may have used irony to show his disappointment with the impossibility of achieving that ideal in his contemporary artistic environment.

On the other hand, we can also see a more personal, introspective element to the Eighth Symphony's irony. Lockwood says that the "loud, boisterous, and harmonically subversive C-sharps in the finale of the Eighth Symphony have a latent connection to his personality style" (186). If we add Geck's interpretation of the earlier movements as similarly crude and subversive, then the whole symphony becomes a character portrait of Beethoven. Due in part to his deafness, which forced "a deeply human being" into isolation and misery, and exacerbated by his constant wrestling with fate, Beethoven's "brand of humor was often boorish and extreme" (186). The Eighth's sharp irony becomes one way in which Beethoven expresses and makes sense of difficult moments such as the backdrop of 1812 and the Immortal Beloved affair. Rather

than reiterating the Fifth Symphony's trope of overcoming and seizing fate, Beethoven opts for a device that is more intimate and fuller of his personality. Perhaps this may explain his affinity for the Eighth, as he saw himself outlined in the work.

However, such a dark, ironic interpretation of the symphony seems hard to reconcile with the fact that it is simply a delight and joy to listen to. It is difficult to see Beethoven pouring over his *Tagebuch* in despair while hearing the jovial themes of the first movement, the comedic clock-like motions of the second, the happily simple dances of the third, and the celebratory, almost self-aware and self-parodying alternation between root and third in the coda of the finale. Why would Beethoven mean the exact opposite of what his work seems to say? A closer look at the nature and purpose of romantic irony may help resolve this conundrum. In romantic irony, "the artist, as an individual, animates his work and is constantly perceivable in it, yet must detach himself from it and regard it objectively" (Longyear 440). It is this sense of detachment that is central to irony's appeal to romantic thinkers as "an instrument of knowledge" that "insists that multiple perspectives are essential in any attempt to come to terms with the universe in all its complexity and chaos." Thus, understanding an ironic work of music requires "hearing the juxtaposition of contrasting voices not as contradictory but as complementary and constructive" (Bonds 302). Taken from this perspective, the Eighth Symphony might represent both crude humor in response to Beethoven's life circumstances and genuine playful comedy. It might be both a satire on the musical tastes of his day that leave an idealist wanting and a successful expansion into new artistic ground. It is what Schlegel calls the "constant alternation of self-creation and self-destruction" (Bonds 312) that defines the symphony. We are never given a definitive answer, but to Schlegel and his contemporaries, it is the most honest way to

approaching truth in a chaotic world. As a result, Beethoven the romantic treasures his Eighth Symphony, maybe even more than he treasures his Seventh in all its Classical Greek grandeur.

We may never know exactly what Beethoven meant when he said the Eighth was "much better" than the Seventh. For Tovey, this statement "is neither a matter-of-fact judgement nor wholly ironical" (62). Perhaps we can say something similar about the symphony itself. The Eighth Symphony sincerely shows us the full extent of Beethoven's cleverness as a composer and acquaints us with his character as a human being. Yet passages throughout still leave us puzzled and we finish the symphony uncertain of what to make of it. After creating works as diverse as the Eroica, the Fifth, the Pastoral, and the Seventh, Beethoven completes his repertoire of instrumental symphonies with a work that makes us come back time after time and ask new questions. Having succeeded in leaving the dialectic open like a true romantic ironist, his work in this area is complete, and he can move on to something entirely his own—his late style, and the symphony that towers as a giant over all of music history.

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