

Beethoven the Revolutionary | Program Notes

The Epic Struggle Echoes in our Time

by Jeannette Sorrell (April 2017)

On Monday morning this week, the *London Times* arrived in my Inbox as usual. The headline was not so usual though: “**A new French revolution: voters reject the political establishment.**” Of course this is only the latest in a series of tremors that have rocked our society in the past year.

No one was a bigger fan of the first French Revolution than Ludwig van Beethoven. His lifelong struggles against a society stratified by social class shaped his life and work. If Beethoven were here now, no doubt he would be one of those shaking his fist at the establishment.

After the French people took their aristocrats to the guillotine in 1789, two decades of chaos followed – culminating with Napoleon, a populist who initially inspired many intellectuals including the young Beethoven. The composer was in his early 30s during Napoleon’s rise, and he dedicated his *Eroica* (“heroic”) symphony to the French leader. But in 1804, Napoleon crowned himself Emperor. Beethoven, feeling betrayed, ripped up the dedication page of the *Eroica* symphony. In November of the following year, as Beethoven sat in Vienna writing his Fifth Symphony, his own city fell to Napoleon’s army. The French forces marched into the streets of Vienna and captured 100,000 muskets, 500 cannons, and the bridges across the Danube. Five years later, as Beethoven wrote the *Egmont* Overture, the Napoleonic Wars were still raging.

And so, both the Fifth Symphony and *Egmont* are full of the turbulence and tension of their time – an era that resembles our own in many ways. When I designed this concert program a year ago, I knew that this music would be timely for us. I knew that class tensions were rising due to dramatic income inequality. But I did not know we would also be seeing such explosive chaos. Perhaps music shows us how history repeats itself.

The repertoire on our program comes from one of the most difficult decades in Beethoven’s life, when he was reeling not only from the political turmoil around him but also from personal tragedy. The music undoubtedly reflects both. Throughout the period of the Fifth Symphony (1804-5), the Violin Concerto (1806), and *Egmont* (1810), he struggled with growing deafness, two hopeless romantic relationships, and the injustices of social class.

Since turning 30 in 1801, Beethoven had been suffering from devastating hearing loss. On the advice of his doctor, he spent 7 months in 1802 in the small Austrian town of Heiligenstadt, just outside Vienna, in an attempt to come to terms with his condition. There he wrote his *Heiligenstadt Testament* – a letter to his brothers where he confessed his thoughts of suicide due to his growing deafness, and ultimately reconfirmed his resolution to continue living for and through his art.... “I will seize Fate by the throat; it shall not bend or crush me completely.”

On top of this, it seems that Beethoven went through two different heartbreaking romantic relationships during this decade, both with young aristocratic women who were socially out of reach for him. Both situations ended hopelessly due to family disapproval. Thus, the chains of class inequality tore at him with bitterness. Though he did have a few generous aristocratic patrons, his rebellious attitude toward the nobility was no secret.

Artists throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries struggled against a society that treated them like servants. Fifteen years before Beethoven wrote his Fifth Symphony, Mozart wrote of his deep resentment at being seated below the butler but above the cook at the Salzburg Archbishop’s dinner table. As the class tensions leading to the French Revolution were brewing (in 1786), Mozart risked his career by composing and presenting *The Marriage of Figaro* in Vienna – an opera based on the subversive play by Pierre Beaumarchais, which had been banned in Vienna. But while Mozart playfully thumbed his nose at the establishment, Beethoven went to battle against it – in his life and in his music.

Though Beethoven chose not to give a programmatic title to the **Fifth Symphony**, nevertheless this intensely dramatic work seems to convey a narrative. A heroic life struggle emerges in the progression of emotions, from the fateful opening in C minor to the triumphant C-major coda of the finale. The symphony was premiered in 1808 in a famous concert organized and conducted by Beethoven. The wildly ambitious program lasted four hours and included the fifth and sixth symphonies, the fourth piano concerto, and the *Choral Fantasia*. The critic Johann Friedrich Reichardt observed, “Singers and orchestra were composed of the most heterogeneous elements [i.e. some professional, some amateur], and it had been found impossible to get a single full rehearsal for all the pieces to be performed, all of them full of the greatest difficulties.”

So, this under-rehearsed orchestra was attempting to play difficult music they had never heard before, and they were led by a conductor who was mostly deaf. The concert did not go well. The complete breakdown in the *Choral Fantasia* has been described by Reichardt, Beethoven’s student Carl Czerny, and others. However, a year and a half later, the score of the Fifth Symphony was published and music critic E. T. A. Hoffmann wrote an ecstatic review in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*. In addition to highest praise, Hoffmann provided a detailed analysis of the symphony in order to show his readers the devices Beethoven used to arouse particular *Affekts* (emotional moods) in the listener.

The Symphony’s first movement explodes with restless turmoil of a city besieged – and an artistic soul besieged. The great Viennese period-instrument conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt says that the opening four-note motif conveys an oppressed people rattling their chains, struggling for freedom. Beethoven allegedly told his assistant Anton Schindler that this four-note motif represents “fate knocking at the door.” The lyrical second movement, a set of variations on two themes in alternation, evokes a dream of peace and tranquility, perhaps a vision of a future utopia. The dreamy mood becomes briefly triumphant at the end, as if humanity has arrived at the gates of heaven.

That dream is shattered by the restless Scherzo, a genre that Beethoven pioneered as a replacement for the more traditional Menuet movement of a classical symphony. The word *scherzo* means “joke,” though the humor of this particular Scherzo is mostly grim. Beethoven takes the four-note motif of the first movement and converts it to an ominous march, introduced loudly by the horns near the beginning of the movement. Following a wild and exuberant romp led by the cellos and basses, the Scherzo eventually simmers down to a long moment of quiet suspense, as the timpani continues the ominous march over a carpet of hushed strings.

And then... the triumphant finale erupts, like the arrival of a rescuing army. Beethoven throws in piccolo and trombones – military instruments that had not been seen in the early Classical orchestra – to evoke the joyous sense of military victory as well as victory of the human spirit. And here Beethoven lays his cards clearly on the table: the finale quotes from a popular revolutionary song by Claude Joseph Rouget de Lisle, composer of *La Marseillaise* – the song of the people’s uprising. No message could have been stronger.

The finale includes a very long coda, in which the main themes of the movement return in compressed form. Towards the end, Beethoven winds up tension with an *accelerando* (speeding up) to an even faster tempo. The symphony ends with an astonishing 29 bars of C major chords, played *fortissimo*. Music writer Charles Rosen has suggested that this “unbelievably long” C major cadence is needed to ground the extreme tension of the Symphony.

Like the Fifth Symphony, the **Egmont Overture** is also an expression of heroic defiance against oppression. Goethe’s play *Egmont*, for which Beethoven wrote the overture and incidental music, depicts the Spanish persecution of the Dutch people in the 16th century, and the Dutch hero Egmont’s struggle against tyranny. The subject matter of *Egmont* – the struggle for freedom – appealed to Beethoven greatly. He snatched up the opportunity to write this music when the commission was offered.

The Overture encapsulates the plot of the play: the malevolent Duke of Alva, sent by the Spanish king to subjugate the Dutch, arrests the Dutch hero Egmont and sentences him to death. Despite the efforts of Egmont’s beloved, Clara, who tries to save him, the hero is executed. However, he dies with the knowledge that the rebellion is in progress and his people will find freedom.

The overture’s slow introduction conveys a dark mood of oppression. The opening five-note motif, in the rhythm of a Spanish *sarabande*, seems to represent the Spanish tyrant. This quickly gives way to heroic defiance in the Allegro, with a cello theme that descends into the depths to do battle. The tyrant’s motif evolves and builds throughout the overture, stopping suddenly in an outcry from the violins – suggesting the moment of Egmont’s execution. The mood then turns triumphant and celebratory, as we see Egmont’s ecstatic vision of the victory that his people will soon achieve. Thus in *Egmont*, Beethoven expressed his own political ideals through the exaltation of a hero’s sacrifice. The Overture later became an unofficial anthem of the 1956 Hungarian revolution.

The lyrical and beautiful **Violin Concerto** is an oasis of joyful contemplation between the revolutionary sandwich of *Egmont* and the Symphony. From the quiet solo timpani that sets this piece in motion, the piece evolves with gorgeous melodies and transcendent violin writing. Sadly, the premiere in 1806 was not well received, as it seems that Beethoven did not finish the piece in time for the soloist Franz Clement to practice it. Clement did not play well. We are fortunate to have Noah Bendix-Balgley, who has lived with this piece for years and who performs his own brilliant cadenzas, just as an artist of the time would have done.

Interpreting Beethoven: Sources Reveal a Surprising Approach

The following notes are excerpted from Ms. Sorrell's longer article, "Orchestral Performance Practice in the Vienna of Beethoven and Schubert," which can be found online at apollosfire.org/beethoven-schubert-performance-practice. The full article includes documentation of sources as well as the annotated score of the Pathétique Sonata referred to below.

There are many surviving descriptions of playing in the early 19th century. They all reveal a vastly different manner of playing this music, compared with how it has usually been played in the last 80 years. The following citations show that Beethoven, Schubert and their contemporaries cultivated a style of playing which was intensely personal and dramatic – one might even say theatrical. It was a style in which the imprint of the performer was burned into the concept of the piece with a firebrand. In short, it was true Romanticism.

FREEDOM OF TEMPO AND RHYTHM

It is clear that performers were expected to take freedom with tempo when the tension, expression or the music moved them to do so. The implication of the word "expected" is that the composers did not feel the need to mark such tempo fluctuations in their scores; any musical performer would have known what to do without specific markings, and his response would have been an appropriately personal one. A few examples:

Daniel Gottlob Türk's *Clavierschule* of 1789 provided the following instructions to pianists:

"The final and indispensable requirement for a good performance is a proper feeling for all expressive passions and emotions... There are cases in which the expression can be heightened by exceptional means...: (1) playing without strict measure, (2) hurrying and drawing back and (3) the so-called tempo rubato... Certain passages should be played more according to feeling than to strict time... In music whose character is impetuosity, anger, scorn, rage, frenzy, and the like, one can perform the most forceful passages somewhat accelerando [speeding up]. In exceptionally tender, languishing, melancholy places, where the emotion is brought to a point, so to speak, the effect may be unusually strengthened by an increasing ritardando [slowing down]."

Türk was not alone in his opinions. Beethoven's assistant Anton Schindler tells us that Beethoven, the great pianist of the period, was very impetuous in matters of tempo. "In general, he played his own compositions in a very capricious manner... In the performance of a crescendo passage, he would make the time ritardando, which produced a beautiful and highly striking effect."

Perhaps the most stunning evidence regarding freedom of tempo and rhythm comes from Schindler's instructions on playing Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata, based on how Beethoven and his student Czerny played the piece. Schindler offers an edited score of the sonata's second theme, showing where Beethoven and Czerny would slightly delay or stretch the length of certain notes in the melody, to make them more expressive. Schindler wrote,

"Even the most dried-up piano teacher would not hesitate to recognize a particular significance in this theme... The necessary nuances as marked opposite are clear as day. The frequently repeated sign V [annotations in the score] indicates... a short pause on the note so marked."

This is *not* the way the piece is taught today, nor have I found a concert pianist who plays it this way. The theme is normally performed in strict tempo. The editorial suggestions that Schindler considered obvious would actually shock many conservatory-trained musicians today.

Clearly, the comments by Türk, Schindler, and others carry sweeping implications about the freedom and drama that were expected of early 19th century performers. Interpretations bore the personal imprint of the performer – a performer who did not hesitate to use whatever expressive devices s/he had available, regardless of whether or not they were marked in the score.

VIBRATO AND PORTAMENTO

Orchestral players in the early 19th century used vibrato rarely, and only as a special effect. As the scholar Clive Brown has pointed out, “It is reasonable to assume that many of the rank and file players did not practise [vibrato and portamento] to a great extent.”

The issue of *portamento* (sliding expressively over a melodic leap) is more complicated. During the first decade of the 19th century, *portamento* became increasingly fashionable in Germany. By 1811 it is clear that a number of Viennese players were using *portamento* liberally, not only in their solo playing but also in the orchestra. In that year, the conservative Salieri attacked the practice in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*:

“For some time an effeminate and laughable manner of playing their instruments has crept in with various weak solo violinists, which the Italians call maniera smorfiosa, stemming from an abuse of sliding the finger up and down the string. This feeble and childish mannerism has, like an infectious disease, spread to some orchestral players and what is more ridiculous, not merely to our courageous violinists, but also to violists and double bass players.”

Of course by this time, Salieri would have seemed definitely an “old-school” musician to the Viennese. His negative opinion of *portamento* was certainly not shared by all. In any case, he was obliged to write a similar protest against *portamento* four years later, so the practice had not exactly been abolished by his first attempt.

In our performance, you will hear a few moments of vibrato in the first violins and cellos, as well as a few *portamenti* (expressive melodic slides).

TEMPOS AND BEETHOVEN’S METRONOME MARKINGS

Beethoven published metronome markings for all of his symphonies, so that performers would know the correct tempos to use. But for the past 80 years, conductors have considered his metronome markings to be insanely fast and impossible. Growing up as a conducting student, I was taught (as all students are) that either Beethoven’s metronome must have been faulty, or perhaps he did not know how to use it. For me though, the idea that this composer, whose music was his life’s salvation, would have casually published faulty tempo indications... it never seemed believable.

In the late 1980s, conductor Roger Norrington (with whom I studied at Tanglewood) showed the world that the tempos indicated by Beethoven’s metronome marks are possible, on the instruments he was actually writing for. His recordings with his period band, the London Classical Players, are zealously wedded to Beethoven’s metronome indications. However, this means that the *freedom* of tempo, so essential to the performance of this music as discussed above, is mostly lacking in those recordings.

Period instruments are lighter and more fleet-footed than their modern counterparts. We are performing the Fifth Symphony with approximately the tempos indicated by Beethoven and his metronome – not to prove a point, but simply because this is the way the music feels best, when playing on these instruments.

ORCHESTRAL BALANCES

Like all serious conducting students, I was taught that Beethoven was not a good orchestrator and that his scores must be significantly edited in order to correct the balances, so that the various themes and counter-themes could be heard. This means changing Beethoven’s dynamic indications (soft and loud) for the players. In general, this is much less necessary when playing on the instruments that Beethoven intended. I have done some editing of dynamics for our players, but not to the extent that is usually needed for modern instruments.

On a personal note... At the end of my summer studying conducting at Tanglewood, Roger Norrington kindly offered me the opportunity to move to London and be his assistant. This would have included “being the keeper of the metronome” during rehearsals. However, I had already made plans to move to Amsterdam instead, to study harpsichord with the great Gustav Leonhardt. What to do? The decision was one that shaped the rest of my life. I had already studied conducting that summer with such luminaries as Leonard Bernstein, Leonard Slatkin, and the great German conductor Kurt Sanderling. At 23, I was the youngest student in the class and the only woman – therefore the teachers were very kind to me. While it was clear that London and Norrington would have been the better “career” choice, I chose for Leonhardt, the deeply profound artist whose burning intellect forged the early music revival for us all.

I have no regrets. But I am blessed to have worked with both of these visionary musicians, as well as with several other excellent and patient conducting teachers including George Trutwein, David Loebel and Robert Spano. All of them gave generously of their time and spirit, to teach an obsessed girl who certainly did not look like anyone’s idea of a “conductor” in the late 1980s.

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