Chapter 16: Beethoven

I. Life and Early Works
A. Introduction
   1. Beethoven was compared to Mozart early in his life, and the older composer noted his potential in a famous quote to “keep your eyes on him.”
   2. Beethoven did not arrive in Vienna to stay until he was twenty-two, when Count Waldstein told him to receive the spirit of Mozart from Haydn’s tutelage.

B. Life and Works, Periods and Styles
   1. Beethoven’s music is seen often as autobiographical.
   2. The stages of his career correspond to changing styles in his music: early, middle, late.

C. Early Beethoven
   1. Beethoven gave his first public performance at age seven, playing pieces from Bach’s “Well-Tempered Clavier,” among others.
   2. He published his first work at eleven.
   3. He became court organist in Bonn at age ten.
   4. His first important compositions date from 1790 and were shown to Haydn, who agreed to teach him in 1792.
   5. The lessons with Haydn didn’t last long, because Haydn went to England. Beethoven then gained recognition as a pianist among aristocratic circles in Vienna.
   6. His first success in Vienna as a composer was his second piano concerto and three trios. Thus his own instrument was the main one for his early publications.
      a. This is perhaps best demonstrated in his piano sonatas, which show signs of his own abilities of performer, improviser, and composer.
      b. The Pathetique sonata illustrates the experimentation inherent in Beethoven’s music, challenging expectations.
   7. Until 1800 he was better known as a performer than a composer; however, this soon changed, particularly with his first symphony and septet, Op. 20.
      a. The first symphony was hailed as a masterpiece, and critics noted its originality.
      1) It begins in the “wrong” key.
      b. The septet resembles an outdoor divertimento, but it too has unusual elements, such as a cadenza in the finale. While it brought the composer success, he thought it not as worthy as some of his other works.

D. Disaster
   1. Beethoven acknowledged he was losing his hearing in 1801, and contemplated suicide. He realized his critics could use this information against him.
   2. He moved to Heiligenstadt in 1802 and wrote his famous letter that outlines his despair at becoming deaf: the Heiligenstadt Testament.
      a. The letter credits music with preventing him from taking his own life.
      b. The letter was discovered after his death and became famous soon thereafter. The personal nature of its contents was not something people were used to hearing from composers. As such, it contributed to his fame.
c. The context of triumph over such an affliction contributed to Beethoven’s mystique.

3. Beethoven’s compositions took a stylistic turn at this time, and the composer mentioned this in his Variations for Piano, Opp. 34 and 35.
   4. The *Eroica* is often seen as the symphony marking this period in his life, musically expressing the struggles he felt. But this view is simplistic, and we need to acknowledge that the exuberant second symphony was composed at the same time as the Heiligenstadt Testament.

II. Middle Period
A. The *Eroica*
   1. Almost everything about the *Eroica* is more than previous symphonies: length, size of orchestra, technical demands on players, harmonic drama, rhetorical vehemence, and unity of the whole.
   2. He intended to dedicate it to Napoleon, but was disillusioned with the leader when he proclaimed himself emperor.
   3. First performed in 1805 and published in 1806, early reviewers remarked on its sublime qualities, not beauty, and noted that it was original but bizarre.
   4. Even though early commentary thought the symphony too long and demanding, within a few years public opinion had changed and noted with appreciation the deep spiritual aesthetic.
   5. Musical analysis of the *Eroica*:
      a. A low C# in the melody, far removed from the tonic, hints at the conflict to come.
      b. The second movement is a funeral march, beginning somberly in C minor but moving to a much brighter section in C major. The minor section returns, fragmented, at the end.
      c. The scherzo (joke) plays with meter, moving between two and three.
      d. The final movement is a supersized set of variations, beginning with only the harmonic outline in the bass. He used this theme in three previous pieces.
      e. The heroic style of the *Eroica* continued for about ten years, including such works as the sonatas Opp. 53 and 57, the Violin Concerto, and the Fifth Piano Concerto.

B. *Fidelio*
   1. Beethoven’s longest work is his only opera, *Fidelio*, which dates from the middle period.
   2. It was initially a flop and subsequently revised (three versions and four overtures now exist).
   3. Recognizing that his theater music was artistically limited, Beethoven focused on incidental music, most notably his *Egmont Overture*.
   4. *Fidelio* began life as a work entitled *Leonore*, and it falls under the genre of “rescue operas.”
   5. The final chorus is one of several works that moves the work from light to dark (see also his Fifth Symphony).

C. The Fifth and Fate
   1. Beethoven took four years to compose the Fifth Symphony.
   2. While it is his most famous work today, it was not during his lifetime.
3. It has attracted much commentary through the years, and that made by Berlioz associates it with the attitudes we have inherited, including the darkness-to-light trajectory.

4. The symphony also includes a feature of his music known as organicism: all movements grow out of a single germ/idea.
   a. Organicism, like sublime, is a central idea of Romanticism.
   b. Goethe believed that such a process reflects nature, and the Romantics adopted this position.
   c. The rhythmic motive S-S-S-L unites each movement of the Fifth Symphony.
   d. More than previous symphonies, the four movements move in a procession from dark to light and must be seen as moving toward a goal—this places emphasis on the final movement, quite a change from the tradition of weight being in the first movement.

5. Several unexpected passages, such as the short oboe cadenza, force the listener to ask questions of why the music behaves as it does. This is a new self-conscious subjectivity, and it is purely instrumental music making a point without reference to text.

6. The second movement is an unusual variation set with two alternating themes.

7. The last two movements are linked.
   a. The trio of the scherzo contains particularly difficult passage work for the strings, which may be parts of the joke. (Such virtuoso writing was uncommon for orchestras at the time.)
   b. There are false starts, which further confuse the listener.
   c. The key changes to C major as the movements collide with a loud blast from the brass that now includes trombones.
   d. The scherzo interrupts the finale, unexpectedly returning to C minor. This enhances the harmonic tension and adds to the sense of triumph at the end.
   e. The fourth movement is in sonata form, uses the main idea, as does the coda.

8. For the design of a symphony to cover all four movements, the overarching tension and release, the sheer power of Beethoven’s Fifth demonstrates what Hoffmann called “the spirit world of infinite.”

D. “More Expression of Feeling than Tone Painting”: The Pastoral Symphony

1. Not all of Beethoven’s middle period works are dynamic and heroic. He wrote the Fifth and Sixth symphonies simultaneously, and they were premiered at the same concert.

2. The Sixth Symphony is intentionally programmatic. Beethoven even said it was “more expression of feeling than tone painting.”

3. He gave each movement a descriptive title, but he noted that tone-painting is lost in instrumental music if carried too far.

E. Concert Life in Beethoven’s Vienna

1. Beethoven planned a special concert for Advent 1808, and he included the premieres of both the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies and the Fourth Piano Concerto, among other works. It was four hours long and contained only new works by Beethoven.

2. Because of a lack of standing orchestras, enough rehearsals, etc., concert performances such as this one were probably subpar by today’s standards.

F. Struggle and Victory
1. The way Beethoven’s music was described by Hoffmann and others cast it as “universal”—as if the values and aesthetics extended equally to everyone.

2. This view can unfortunately lead to the assumption that any music that does not follow his lead is deficient, yet there were those who chose not to model their works after his.

3. Beethoven’s music has been interpreted as “manly” and has been used to praise aggression, violence, and victory. Some even associate it with German national character. This is not always positive.

III. Later Period
A. Rising Fame and Decreasing Productivity
   1. After the monumental concert of 1808, Beethoven took his music in yet another direction, one marked by a period of depression.
   2. Contemporaries such as Goethe found him socially difficult, if genius.
   3. In the summer of 1812 he penned the letter to the “Immortal Beloved,” found in his effects after his death. This unknown woman (although two likely candidates have been identified) refused his suit for marriage.
   4. In 1815 he sought custody of his nephew, Karl. The ensuing legal battles, made worse by the composer’s possessiveness, went poorly and hurt all involved. Karl’s attempted suicide in 1826 was a decisive blow to the composer.
   5. The composer’s production of major works declined in these years, but his compositional ambition grew, even if the number of works trailed off.
   6. Beethoven’s social life also diminished, his deafness making social interaction and performance difficult. Around the age of fifty he began to use conversation books in which he had people write their comments to him.
   7. When critics prophesied that Beethoven had reached the end of his creative genius, he warned them to wait and see.

B. Late Beethoven
   1. An invitation to London in 1817 spurred the composer to embark on several new compositions, including the “Hammerklavier” Sonata, which occupied him for almost a year.
   2. Other large works from this period include the last three intense sonatas for piano, Missa Solemnis, the Ninth Symphony, and several works for string quartet, including the Grosse Fuge.
   3. Even though commentators came to see the late works as Beethoven’s greatest, the initial reception was not so positive. Some of the words used to describe them were “incomprehensible,” “vague,” and “chaotic.”
   4. Beethoven’s late works were not written to please or entertain. With Beethoven the composer became the ultimate musical being—not the performer. He knew that he wrote for future audiences who, with the benefit of having heard them in new contexts, would understand them better than his contemporaries.

C. The Ninth Symphony
   1. Like the unidentical twin Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, the Missa Solemnis and the Ninth Symphony form another unofficial pair.
      a. The Missa Solemnis premiered in Russia in 1824, having been completed in 1823.
b. Beethoven considered premiering the Ninth Symphony in Berlin, as Beethoven felt the Viennese had ceased to enjoy his music (Italian opera being in vogue). Those loyal to him, including Czerny, convinced him to do it in Vienna.

c. The premiere in Vienna was highly successful, and stories circulated of the completely deaf composer having to be told that the music was finished (even though he was conducting) in order to acknowledge the applause.

2. The Ninth Symphony is more unusual than any of his previous symphonies.
   a. The 1st movement opens mysteriously with octave A’s that become the dominant of D minor, the tonic.
   b. Beethoven switches the scherzo and slow movement, the former a popular movement because of the exciting tympani part, the latter a movement of depth and tranquility.
   c. The last movement is the most famous, opening with loud dissonance and confusion that leads to an instrumental recitative.
   d. Fragments of previous movements return in the finale.
   e. Seemingly out of nowhere, the now-famous “Ode to Joy” melody appears in the lower strings, monophonic. It grows in various textures and writings styles.
   f. Almost seven minutes into the movement, the entire music heard thus far begins again, this time with the recitative sung by a solo bass voice.
   g. The Ode to Joy becomes the theme for continuing variation, pretty much for the duration of the movement.

3. Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was a force to be reckoned with for the remainder of the century. Some saw it as the ultimate musical—and therefore artistic—expression. Others thought it beyond comprehension, all the dissonance being too much. Beethoven did not write for us, however, and loudly proclaimed his freedom from our judgment.

D. Inwardness: The Late String Quartets

1. At the very end of his life, Beethoven returned to the string quartet. He completed six more works for this medium.

2. The fugue that was to have been the finale of Op. 130 outgrew its place and had to be published as a separate work.
   a. Beethoven acquiesced to his publisher, Artaria, and agreed to publish it alone.
   b. It was extremely difficult to play and to understand.