

From the “Pigtail” to the Lion’s Mane: Classical and Romantic Elements in Beethoven’s Symphony No. 8 in F Major

The name Beethoven is synonymous with the heroic, the larger-than life genius able to conquer chaos and to defy mortal constraints. Straddling the divide between the preceding era of Haydn and Mozart and the Romantic music of the nineteenth century, like a musical Colossus of Rhodes, he had one foot planted firmly in the Classical tradition and the other staking out ground for what would come. To posterity he leaves us the figure of the Promethean virtuoso who, as Joseph Machlis asserts in *The Enjoyment of Music*, can be seen as the “major prophet of the nineteenth century, the architect of its heroic vision of life” (243). Indeed, from his writings it is clear that Beethoven claimed this role for himself: “I am the Bacchus who presses out the glorious wine for mankind,” he wrote. “Whoever truly understands my music is freed thereby from the miseries that others carry about in them” (qtd in Machlis 243). How Beethoven transformed the standard Classical forms of his day, the symphony and sonata allegro first movement, for example, into a vehicle for the Romantic ideals of intensity, emotion, the unique and individual, the heroic and transcendent, is a ceaselessly fascinating chapter in the history of music.

An extra-musical and obvious indication of the changes Beethoven wrought can be immediately grasped by a study of contemporary representations of the musical giant from the very beginnings of his career. In all portraits, especially those of his mature years, his famous unruly mane flows out from his powerful head as if galvanized by a supernatural energy, framing the uncompromising features of a man equipped with a Nietzschean will. It is not surprising, then, to hear Classical music before Beethoven characterized (however unfairly) as *zopfmusik*, or “pigtail music” (Baker’s 137). Beethoven’s wild hair, “luxuriant in its unkempt splendor” bespeaks the uncontainable energy and heroic spirit of this man who would come to characterize the revolutionary age upon which he put his stamp. Beethoven’s music is as titanic as the martial exploits of his contemporary, Napoleon.

Yet, Beethoven is clearly heir to the classical tradition of Mozart and Haydn and one would be hard-pressed to place him squarely in the camp of composers such as the high Romantics, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Chopin and Liszt. Indeed, his symphonies have been said to “represent a culmination of the Classical symphony as embodied in the later works of Mozart and ... Haydn.” They possess a tightness and precision that loosens up as the century progresses. Though Beethoven “extended and expanded virtually every element of the symphony,” his ideal remained the dramatic sonata principle of the late eighteenth century (Harvard 858). His conformity to both the form and the spirit of the Classical period can especially be seen in his early period, traditionally seen to have ended by 1802, and one encompassing only the first of his nine symphonies, the more traditionally Classical First Symphony of 1800. It is interesting to read contemporary reactions to the maestro’s Second Symphony of 1803 in which, according to the contemporary *Zeitung für die elegante Welt*, “the striving after the new and surprising is already more apparent” (qtd in Osborne). This early move towards the new notwithstanding, in later symphonies and in particular movements, such as the middle movements of the Eighth, such conformity to Classical form, both tonally and thematically, would continue to assert itself.

By his middle period, Beethoven had wrought significant changes to the overall form of the symphony. Along with the replacement of the minuet by the scherzo, he shifted the center of gravity from the beginning to the end, an element already foreshadowed by Mozart in the *Jupiter* Symphony, and he added more conceptual content, such as the heroic character of the Third (*Eroica*), the struggle and triumph of the Fifth and Ninth, and the evocation of nature in the Sixth (*Pastorale*) (Harvard 858). Emphasizing powerful expression over elegance, Beethoven introduced stronger dynamic contrasts, explosive accents, and longer movements (Machlis 244). Moreover, Beethoven ended the era of the “mass production” of symphonies; never again would there be another Haydn whose output of symphonies exceeded one hundred. Beethoven perfected a new “symphonic ideal,” one that exploded with music that was individual and emotionally charged. (Baker’s 138).

Both Classical and Romantic elements can be seen in Beethoven’s Symphony no. 8 in F major, a work the composer referred to as his “little sym...” (Baker’s 138) and one said to be “a salute to the symphonic ideal of the previous age” (Grove 384). On the one hand it conforms to Rowell’s criteria for Classical music: As with all nine symphonies, Beethoven retains the standard four-movement form and includes a powerful and intellectual first movement, the melody of which is song-like and memorable. At just over nine minutes, this first movement, employing the typical sonata allegro form, is in line with the length of the first movements of Mozart’s *Linz*, *Prague*, and *Jupiter* Symphonies; indeed it is shorter than the last two of these. And like his predecessors, in the first movement of the Eighth, Beethoven combines dramatic and lyric elements, creating “a miniature drama of statement, conflict, resolution” which is played out on the thematic as well as the tonal level (Rowell 114). This neat analysis belies the organic vitality of this piece of music, however. While the symphony as a whole may be said to represent the Classical period more easily than the titanic Ninth, for example, its first and fourth movements strain against this classification.

In the liner notes to the 1962 Deutsche Grammophon recording of the Berliner Philharmonic under Herbert Von Karajan, Richard Osborne rightly asserts that “Few symphonies are launched in a more exhilarating fashion than Beethoven’s Eighth.” He notes the way Beethoven, in his sketch books, pared away the inessentials, leaving a music that is “lean and athletic,” one with a “snapping vitality and coruscating wit.” Here one can hear the way Beethoven develops his themes; one thrills to what Rowell refers to as “the swelling of sonority by means of long, sustained [and repeated] crescendi” (117). While the inner movements – the slow second movement and the minuet - may be more in line with the Classical age, we hear the “Flashes of middle-period power [that] occur only in the outer movements” (Grove 384). Here one feels the Romantic temperament in all its intensity and dynamic interplay, both thematically and tonally. Again, Osborne describes it brilliantly; “How irresistibly he builds towards the first movement’s central *fortissimo*, a fearsome point of arrival,” indeed, a moment best characterized by Sir George Grove as a “wild tornado.” Here one understands at a gut level the greater dynamic range made possible by developments in the instruments of the period, a development which brought into fashion “the heaven-storming crescendos, the violent contrasts of loud and soft that lend contrast to the music” (Machlis 286) and which moved the symphony from salon to concert hall.

Beethoven is recorded as having said to be “in an unbuttoned mood” – *aufgeknöpft* - when he wrote the Eighth (Osborne). This is an apt description for the way an audience experiences this symphony as well. The sublime strings leading, with the cellos and basses singing out the movements central theme below; the sylvan voices of the woodwinds picking up the melody; the feeling of expectation as the movement builds again and again like storm clouds massing, an effect sweetly offset by the short pauses which only serve to heighten the expectation of more to come; all combine to produce a life-affirming music that leaves one breathless with exhilaration. It is sublime in its contrasts, evoking both rapids and stream, thunder and breeze, a build up of dark clouds and shafts of light. This is undeniably not “pigtail music.” It is not salon music. It is music fully cognizant of its place in a heroic and revolutionary age, music that Beethoven himself anticipated would transcend his world. This is music for eternity.

Works Cited

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