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978-0-521-38634-0 - Beethoven's Critics: Aesthetic Dilemmas and Resolutions During the Composer's Lifetime

Robin Wallace

Excerpt

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Introduction

This book will present the history of Beethoven's reception in the musical press of his time. Few writings about music can have been as little read or as widely misused as the reviews whose first published history appears in the following pages. Only one critic – E. T. A. Hoffmann – is known to most historians, even though he is in many ways the least representative of all the authors we shall examine. This rather limited view has not prevented some scholars from repeating time-honored clichés about Beethoven's critical reception.

No myth can have been so obstinately preserved as the claim that Beethoven's music was not well received by the press. Anyone who has read Nicolas Slonimsky's *Lexicon of Musical Invective* can quote the Leipzig *Zeitung für die Elegante Welt*, which described the second symphony as 'a hideously writhing wounded dragon that refuses to expire and, though bleeding in the finale, furiously beats about with its tail erect',¹ or Alexander Oulibicheff, who found in the Fifth Symphony 'discords to shatter the least sensitive ear'.² Slonimsky deliberately gives the impression that these quotes are typical. They are not. Beethoven was almost at once, and universally, recognized as a composer of genius, and this recognition is reflected in practically everything that was written about him during his lifetime.

Even more surprising, perhaps, is the fact that these reviews, with the exception of those by Hoffmann, provide no evidence that Beethoven's contemporaries accepted the views of early Romantic philosophers on musical aesthetics, even though the contrary opinion has been almost universally maintained by modern writers on the subject. In his otherwise much maligned book *Music in the Romantic Era*, Alfred Einstein presents what has since become the canonical view of music theory in the first half of the nineteenth century. Quoting the Danish philosopher Hans Christian Oersted, whom he juxtaposes with Schelling, Hegel and Schopenhauer, Einstein finds that one of the central characteristics of this epoch was its rejection of an earlier preference for vocal and imitative music in favor of the pure instrumental music represented by Beethoven's symphonies. 'A Romantic feature of (Oersted's) philosophy,' Einstein writes, 'is the assertion that the inner agitation occasioned by hearing a good piece of

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music does not arise from conscious reflection, but from obscure depths of consciousness.'³

A few years earlier, in 1944, Paul Henry Lang presented an equally familiar characterization of German musical thought during this time. 'French musical genius,' Lang wrote in a review of Leo Schrade's *Beethoven in France*, 'has a definite affinity with literature, just as the essence of German music is in the abstract instrumental . . . How then could the symbol of this German symphony, Beethoven, become the idol and spiritual savior of the country least receptive to abstract symphonic thought?'⁴

Einstein and Lang both imply that the attitude of early nineteenth-century Germans, at least, toward instrumental music was simple and easy to grasp. This new music was superior to vocal and 'representative' music precisely because it was accessible to the inmost depths of the soul, and was hence the most spiritual of all the arts. In this view, music's expressive character could only be vaguely defined, but this was seen as a strength, not a weakness.

Such theories, however, are drawn entirely from the writings of philosophers and poets, who, with the exception of Hoffmann, were not practicing musicians. Much of their aesthetic theory is foreshadowed by Kant, who is known to have rather disliked the music of his time. Their preference for so-called 'absolute' music is highly attractive because it forms a unified, linear progression away from eighteenth-century Aristotelian theories which traced all art, including music, to the imitation of nature. Music's special role was considered by eighteenth-century theorists to be the arousal of the passions. The final demise of this attitude is supposedly found in Eduard Hanslick's 1854 treatise, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*, which for the first time rejected entirely the concept of expression as a key to understanding music.

Not all twentieth-century writers endorse this view. Carl Dahlhaus, for example, takes E. T. A. Hoffmann as the most representative critic of his time, and traces his glorification of the sublime, spiritual aspects of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony to the late eighteenth-century poet-philosophers Ludwig Tieck and Wilhelm Wackenroder. Unlike the writers just cited, Dahlhaus does not ignore the fact that many distinguished nineteenth-century musicians wrote representative and programmatic music as well as abstract symphonies, and were influenced by literature. He finds the key to this apparent contradiction in Wagner's characterization of his later music dramas as 'ersichtlich gewordene Taten der Musik' – 'deeds of music become visible'. In Dahlhaus' view, nineteenth-century musical programs differ from their eighteenth-century predecessors in that they do not attempt to paint events and feelings, but to illuminate the mysteries

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of the musical processes which they describe.⁵ Other modern writers have proposed less radical interpretations,⁶ but to the majority of musicians today, there exists an unbridgeable gap in the musical aesthetics of Beethoven's time, symbolized by the emphasis placed by the eighteenth century on expression and by the nineteenth on formal analysis.

The critics whose work is the subject of this book provide a link between these two explanations of music. Most of them were familiar with the aesthetic theories of the German idealists, from Kant through Schopenhauer, who ultimately saw music as the key to the transcendental world of absolute ideas. With few exceptions, though, they were little interested in these theories, which have been taken by modern writers as representative of the Romantic attitude toward music. Ironically, these same writers may only have emphasized what was seen by early nineteenth-century critics as a significant break between musical aesthetics and Romantic epistemology – the theories of knowledge which were crucial to early nineteenth-century philosophy.

In a recent book, James Engell provides support for the idea that diverse thought processes were synthesized within Romantic epistemology. Engell finds that the concept of the active imagination as a central element in human thought has its roots in the early eighteenth century, and is thus by itself hardly characteristic of Romanticism. However, in those writers who were most Romantic, imagination tended to become a force for reconciling opposing points of view. In Schelling's system, for example – a system which has been used to support musical 'absolutism' – it is only through imagination that 'perception and reality, the ideal and the real, work through each other and become one'.⁷

It is precisely this sort of synthesis, formulated in musical terms, which is found among the critics who wrote about Beethoven during his lifetime, Hoffmann not excepted. If there is a unifying principle in their writings, it is that of an assumed identity between approaches to music which may at first seem antithetical: specifically, those of analysis and extra-musical interpretation. Their reviews, although they differ drastically from one another, all combine abstract, idealistic views of Beethoven's works with sincere attempts to anchor these views in the everyday world of sense perception.

These critics, then, bridge the gap between Enlightenment theories about music and the 'absolute' ideal of later nineteenth-century writers. In their attempt to unify opposing viewpoints in a single approach, however, they are more than simply transitional figures; they are characteristically Romantic, just as they believed Beethoven to be the most Romantic of all composers.

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It is these assertions which I will seek to document in the following pages. I will examine French as well as German sources, since the similarities between the two suggest a common set of priorities which transcends national boundaries, and is therefore more universally valid than any viewpoint which can be traced to German writers alone. This is not, however, a comprehensive study of Beethoven's reception by the press. I have limited myself, with few exceptions, to those articles published in musical journals in Germany before 1830, and in France between 1825 and 1840. I have not even attempted to examine the countless newspaper reports of Beethoven performances which appeared during this time, many of which are no longer than a few lines long. To do so would be the work of a lifetime, and a thankless lifetime at that. This study is devoted to specialized music journalism, which began in Germany, and whose spread to France is nearly coincidental with the course followed by Beethoven's music. It is also shortly after the first appearance of works by Beethoven in Germany that serious music critics gained their first permanent forum, earlier, unsuccessful attempts to start a lasting journal notwithstanding.

Let us, then, begin at the beginning, in Leipzig at the close of the eighteenth century.

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The *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* was a weekly magazine published at Leipzig from 1798 to 1848 by the firm of Breitkopf und Härtel and devoted to reviews of recent music and books, theoretical articles and reports by correspondents on the musical life of Europe's major cities. During its first 20 years it was edited by Friedrich Rochlitz, a prolific writer and amateur composer who had studied theology and, like his acquaintance Goethe, dabbled in science.¹ Rochlitz was only 29 when he assumed the position which quickly made him one of the most familiar figures in the German musical world, and it was presumably due to his integrity and his skill in managing an exceptionally large staff that the *AMZ* enjoyed the pre-eminence which it could safely claim during his tenure and for many years thereafter.²

So much has already been written about the *AMZ* that further description would be superfluous. The early period is particularly well documented in secondary sources. Marthe Bigenwald's *Die Anfänge der Leipziger Allgemeinen Musikalischen Zeitung* and Hans Ehinger's *E. T. A. Hoffmann als Musiker und Musikschriftsteller*³ are considered authoritative, and Peter Schnaus' *E. T. A. Hoffmann als Beethoven-Resenzent der Allgemeinen Musikalischen Zeitung*⁴ deals at length with some of the material of the present chapter in its historical context as *AMZ* journalism.⁵

The attitude of the *AMZ* toward Beethoven neatly parallels Rochlitz' own: awed but skeptical, and becoming more so with the passage of time. The tenor of the reviews printed during Beethoven's lifetime reflects, on the whole, neither condemnation nor outright acceptance, and this was as true in the later years as it had been from the beginning. What they do show is an acutely tuned sensitivity to musical fashion, broken in rare instances by genuine insight and sympathetic understanding. There are, of course, dangers involved in equating insight with sympathy; if all the critics who understood Beethoven's music were sympathetic, then that music must have been predestined to succeed. Sympathy, however, means in this context not the awe of the disciple but rather that state of intellectual preparedness which makes advanced criticism possible. A review of a new serialist work which showed only the vaguest awareness of the nature of the style and

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its historical antecedents, and took no stand on the aesthetic problems it has created, would be unsatisfactory regardless of the ultimate verdict it expressed; but in truth many of the *AMZ*'s critics seem to have been no more prepared than the hypothetical author of such a review to evaluate the progressive music of their own day. Their writing is predictably bland, interesting from an historical standpoint for the opinions it contains, but frustrating and pedestrian nevertheless. In this chapter, such articles will be considered only to the extent that their historical interest justifies, extended treatment being reserved for those which really have something to say. It will quickly become clear just what this difference involves.

Two critics in particular stand apart from their contemporaries for the level of intellectual integrity with which they approached their task. It is unusually fortunate that both of their names are known since the majority of articles in the *AMZ* were printed anonymously. E. T. A. Hoffmann needs no introduction; he was one of the most influential figures in the entire Romantic generation, and the partial eclipse he has since suffered is probably due to the same factors which made him outstanding in his own time: unbridled, often bizarre fantasy, and a quite unprofessional reluctance to let himself be tied down to any one field of artistic endeavor. Amadeus Wendt, by contrast, is known only to specialists, but, like Hoffmann, he contributed lengthy and profound articles on Beethoven which attracted the composer's attention. These writers will be discussed in a separate section of this chapter, since their work provides as convenient a framework as any around which to structure the entire subject of Beethoven criticism in the *AMZ*.

I will begin, therefore, with a survey of those articles printed before Hoffmann's monumental review of the Fifth Symphony in July, 1810, and conclude with an overview of the last period, when Beethoven's works began to meet with widespread incomprehension for the first time in his life. Neither of these surveys will very much deal with aesthetic or philosophical issues, since these issues did not really become current until the last decade of Beethoven's life, and they tended to arise in other sources than the conservative *AMZ*. This chapter, therefore, is primarily a documentary one, and as such should help to fill a significant gap in current knowledge of Beethoven's career: the story of his reception by Germany's most influential music journal.

The early reviews

In the 12 years before Hoffmann reviewed the Fifth Symphony, Beethoven's name appeared continually in the pages of the *AMZ*. Not a single volume passed without mention of the composer, and most contain five or more.

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There are 29 reviews, as compared with 2 for Haydn, 11 for Peter Winter, 9 for Jan Vanhal, and only 4 for the prolific Pleyel. These statistics are misleading, however. During the last 16 years of his life, Beethoven received only 37 reviews in the *AMZ*. Since this was the time during which he achieved almost legendary status in the eyes of the musical public, it is surprising to find that the numerical average of reviews per volume is actually lower than it was in the early years of the journal. The reviews themselves tell a different story. The early ones rarely cover more than a single column of print, and many are limited to a few inches, often under the rubric 'Kurze Anzeigen'. Even the important set of violin sonatas, Op. 12, was slighted in this manner. From 1810 on, however, there was no significant publication of Beethoven's music reviewed in the *AMZ* which was not treated at length, regardless of the critic's opinion. Hoffmann's review of the Fifth Symphony covers 18 columns, and had to be serialized in two successive issues, while the enormous review of the last three piano sonatas covers 13 columns in a single issue. The true measure of the journal's regard for a composer was not the number of reviews printed, but the amount of space which the reviewer was allowed.

In this respect, then, Beethoven's standing with the editorship of the *AMZ* can be seen to have increased beginning with the fourth volume, and to have risen dramatically with volume 6, after which it remained at a fairly constant level during the period now under discussion. I should emphasize once again that this was a measure of the esteem in which Beethoven was held and does not reflect the actual opinions of the reviewers, which tended to be unpredictable throughout the composer's lifetime. Only during the first six years can a general improvement in opinion be traced, counterbalancing the decline which took place more than 20 years later.

Little justice is done to Beethoven in the first volume of the *AMZ*. There are four reviews, three of them totally unfavorable and two of them extremely short. Two sets of variations, on Mozart's 'Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen' for piano and cello and Grétry's 'Une fièvre brûlante' ('Mich brennt' ein heisses Fieber') for piano solo, leave no doubt that Beethoven is an accomplished keyboard player, but 'whether he is equally fortunate as a composer . . . is more difficult to affirm' (*AMZ* I, col. 366). The piano variations on Salieri's 'La stessa, la stessissima' provoke the same comment in more forceful terms: 'Hr. v. B. may be able to improvise, but he does not understand how to write variations' (*AMZ* I, col. 607). The diatribe against the violin sonatas, Op. 12 (*AMZ* I, col. 570) needs to be read in full, preferably aloud, to be appreciated as the lyrical peroration that it is.⁶ Only the Piano Trio, Op. 11, receives a favorable nod (*AMZ* I, col. 541).

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Taken together, these reviews demonstrate either a maddening non-chalance or a forceful consistency of opinion, depending on one's point of view. Why, at a time when seven piano sonatas and some important chamber music were already in print, should Rochlitz have settled upon such generally insignificant works, giving the greatest priority to variations? These works may have been more likely to interest the amateurs among his readers, but it is also possible that newly published music at first found its way into the hands of the *AMZ*'s reviewing staff in a rather arbitrary manner. At least two critics must have been assigned to Beethoven, since the author of the Op. 12 review states his agreement with opinions already expressed on the composer in the same pages. His own attitudes, however, are revealing. He begins by disclaiming any prior knowledge of Beethoven's keyboard music. This and other remarks of a similar nature indicate that these early critics felt no need to be generally familiar with the music of a composer whose individual publications they had been assigned to review. Since the editorial policy of a well-managed journal is reflected in the attitudes of its writers, Rochlitz, too, must have had other priorities in this inaugural year.

There is nothing arbitrary, however, about the musical judgments expressed in these reviews. Beethoven is recognized as an important composer, and the first critic does not hesitate to compare the 'Mich brennt ein heisses Fieber' Variations favorably to a (spurious) work by Mozart on the same theme,⁷ while reserving his criticism for the other, more audacious, set. The intensity of the violin sonata critique also needs to be seen in context; the reviewer had expected the music to be ingenious ('genial'), and had found it only learned ('gelehrt'). The implications of this contrast are clear: if Beethoven could make his music more accessible, he would be a composer of the first rank. This is precisely what is said, in so many words, in the review of the Piano Trio, Op. 11, a piece which the critic finds wholly acceptable because of its flowing ('fliessend') style and its avoidance of affected ('gesucht') mannerisms.

Exactly the same criteria are applied in the reviews of Beethoven printed in the second volume of the *AMZ*, even though these may seem dramatically more favorable than those of the previous year. The difference is not one of kind; a review of the piano sonatas, Op. 10, still features the by now familiar appraisal of Beethoven's works to date:

His abundance of ideas . . . still leads Beethoven too often to pile one thought wildly upon another, and, in a rather bizarre manner, to group them in such a way that not infrequently an obscure artificiality ('dunkle Künstlichkeit') or an artificial obscurity ('künstliche Dunkelheit') is produced. *AMZ* II, col. 25

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The critic continues, however, by affirming that Op. 10 is well above Beethoven's average, and he singles out one passage which he particularly admires: the famous syncopated chord progression toward the end of the rondo of Op. 10, no. 3. For the rest, Beethoven is still advised to practice greater economy.

In the extraordinarily favorable review of the 'Pathétique' Sonata which appeared four months later (*AMZ* II, col. 373), there is only the slightest hint of criticism, but there is an implicit thesis which explains why this sonata was so well received. The clear return to the mood of the first movement in the finale, after the lyrical interlude of the Adagio, gives the work a binding aesthetic unity which, one is led to conclude, transcends the 'künstliche Dunkelheit' and the 'gelehrte Masse ohne gute Methode' of Beethoven's earlier works.

In the third volume of the *AMZ* there are no reviews of Beethoven's music, but those in the next few volumes show, for the first time, a marked shift in attitude. It is tempting to speculate that this was the result, at least in part, of a letter written by Beethoven to Breitkopf und Härtel on April 22, 1801. The composer begins by apologizing for not having written earlier. He then states that at present he is unable to satisfy a request for new music, although he would be glad to accede in the future. Mollo, he says, is bringing out eight new works, Hofmeister, another Viennese publisher, four. Then he gets down to business:

I may just mention that Hofmeister is publishing *one of my first concertos*, and Mollo, one actually composed later, but neither *do I reckon among my best of the kind*. This is just a hint for your *Musikalische Zeitung* with regard to the reviews of these works, though they can be best judged if one can hear them well performed. Musical policy necessitates the keeping to one's self for a time the best concertos. Advise your critics to exercise more care and good sense with regard to the productions of young authors, for many a one may thereby become dispirited, who otherwise might have risen to higher things; for myself, though I am indeed far from considering myself to have attained such a degree of perfection as to be beyond censure, the outcry of your critics against me was so humiliating, that when I began to compare myself to others, I could scarcely blame them; I remained quite quiet, and thought they do not understand it. And I had all the more reason for being quite quiet when I saw how men were praised to the skies who here are held of little account.⁸

Gottfried Christoph Härtel, the *AMZ*'s publisher, could certainly be forgiven if he read into this passage a less than veiled threat, and advised Rochlitz that if the *AMZ* reviewers were not kept at bay, lapses in Beethoven's correspondence, during which his new works would be given to other publishers, might become more and more frequent. There is no way to tell whether Rochlitz was so advised, but there is no question

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whatsoever that Beethoven had been following closely the first volumes of the *AMZ* and that he felt, quite apart from his resentment of the stinging criticisms, that his true merits were not represented in the music chosen for review. Rochlitz may have begun about this time to look for a critic who could write thoroughly sympathetic, analytical articles on Beethoven's major works.

Such a critic did not appear until 1804, but in the meantime the *AMZ*'s attitude toward Beethoven was almost completely transformed. In May, 1802 (*AMZ* IV, col. 569) the two violin sonatas, Opp. 23 and 24, brought forth the following re-evaluation of their creator:

The original, fiery, and intrepid spirit of this composer, which even in his early works could not escape the attention of astute observers, but which did not always find the most cordial reception, probably because it sometimes sprang forth in a manner that was ungracious, impetuous, dismal and opaque ('unfreundlich, wild, düster und trübe'), is now becoming ever clearer, ever more disdainful of all obstacles, and without losing its character, ever more pleasing. *AMZ* IV, col. 569

In this ponderous sentence the author concedes, for the first time in the 4½-year-old journal, that Beethoven is entitled to write music noticeably different from the stylistic vernacular of his time. The review reads almost as an atonement for the harsh words elicited by the previous set of violin sonatas. The critic praises the scherzos in particular, and mentions that the first sonata is more accessible since it is easier to perform. A few years earlier, however, these would have been backhanded criticisms of the other works under review; now the tone has changed completely. Never again (with a few notable exceptions) will Beethoven be advised in these pages to abandon his natural inclination and write in a more accessible manner. He is now recognized, not only as a gifted composer, but as a creative personality whose idiosyncrasies are valued in their own right, for the pleasure which they can afford to discriminating listeners.

In the review of the piano sonatas, Opp. 26 and 27, which appeared the following month (*AMZ* IV, col. 650), these sentiments are codified: 'Less educated musicians, and those who expect nothing more from music than a facile entertainment, will take up these works in vain.' The critic feels that some elements of the music are too intricately worked out ('allzukünstlich'), but he once again praises the unity of the three-movement cycle in the 'Moonlight' Sonata, and despite some minor criticisms he is able to understand the entire group of sonatas by virtue of what must have been a newly awakened sympathy for the style of the music. He points, in what seems to be the customary manner, to previous unspecified articles which express the same opinion on Beethoven's newest works. He was mistaken, however, if he believed that anything approaching his own nearly