The Characteristic Symphony in the Age of Haydn and Beethoven

Associated through descriptive texts with literature, politics, religion, and other subjects, “characteristic” symphonies offer an opportunity to study instrumental music as it engages important social and political debates of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: the nature of individual and collective identity in an era of violent political transformation; the effects of a perceived acceleration of history after the French Revolution; the conflicts between “Enlightened” and “Romantic” ideals of artistic expression. This first full-length study of the genre illuminates the relationship between symphonies and these larger contexts by focusing on the musical representation of feeling, human physical movement, and the passage of time. The works discussed include Beethoven’s Pastoral and Eroica Symphonies, Haydn’s Seven Last Words of our Savior on the Cross, Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf’s symphonies on Ovid’s Metamorphoses, and orchestral battle reenactments of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras. A separate chapter details the aesthetic context within which characteristic symphonies were conceived, as well as their subsequent reception, and a series of appendixes summarizes bibliographic information for over 225 relevant examples.

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The Characteristic Symphony in the Age of Haydn and Beethoven

RICHARD WILL
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NOTE TO THE READER

The symphonies discussed in this book are referred to by their characterizing titles, such as *Eroica* Symphony or *Les Quatre Ages du monde*. Where there is no overall title, or the risk of confusing multiple works with the same title, an identifying number along with an author is cited from the most authoritative catalogue or index of the composer’s works or symphonies: e.g., Gossec, Symphony in D (Saceau 23). All references to catalogues and indexes as well as to manuscript locations, editions, movement or work orders, alternate titles, and other matters related to the musical sources are based on the information presented in Appendixes 1 and 2 (pp. 249–98 below).

Translations are mine unless otherwise indicated. Musical examples are provided for all works discussed in detail except the *Eroica* and *Pastoral* Symphonies of Beethoven and the *Military* Symphony of Haydn, for which scores are readily available. For pieces by lesser-known figures, the reader is also encouraged to consult the many excellent recordings being issued by, among others, Concerto Köln, the London Mozart Players, and the ensembles represented in the “18th-Century Symphony” series on the Naxos label. If historically informed performances have revolutionized our understanding of the symphonies of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven over the past two decades, these increasingly fine renderings of music by their contemporaries open our ears to the range of compositional voices in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The diversity, power, and depth of expression across the whole spectrum of European musical life represented in this period have been a continuing source of inspiration for this study.