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Music

Beethoven: The first rocker

- Features -

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Why Beethoven? The event cult around the first modern composer has, thanks to COVID-19, fallen pretty much into the water. [1] In any case, it would have more obscured than to have brought Beethoven to a wider audience. But as a truly great composer, Beethoven finds his way to people today, and not just to a small circle of specialists. What makes him “modern” for us today is something I want to pursue here.

The year 1770 brought forth three great minds in the German-speaking world, which are still present in the country today: Hegel, Hölderlin and Beethoven. It was a time of social and political ferment: the rule of the church and the nobility was increasingly put into question, to which the latter reacted in different ways: the Tübingen monastery, where Hegel and Hölderlin were studying together, was a “school” that produced learned servants, where the spirit was “suffocated in the densest school dust”, whereas a more liberal wind blew in Bonn in the 1780s, following the Austrian reform policy under Joseph II. Either way, it all came down to an end of the feudal system.

The atmosphere of social upheaval shaped Ludwig, and not only in his youth. For 45 years he was accompanied by awakening, revolution, export of the revolution, war, restoration. The young Ludwig stood on the side of the French Revolution, sharing with Hegel, Hölderlin, Georg Forster, the Jacobins of Mainz and Vienna the hunger for freedom. Eventually he experienced and suffered the restorative turn of this revolution.

Beethoven always took an active part in political events and he knew how to move within the contradictions of the times. “He reacted flexibly to political developments,” writes his biographer Jan Caeyers. In Napoleon he admired the sharp intellect, unprecedented self-discipline and iron will; also how he promoted music in France, introduced new copyright laws and improved the pension system for orchestra musicians. Disillusionment came when Napoleon concluded a concordat with the Vatican in 1801, and the 1804 seizure of the imperial crown did the rest: “Is he nothing more than an ordinary human being?”

But for all his disappointment, he also held his ground. Three years before his death he is supposed to have said: “Napoleon... I did not like him in the past. Now I think differently.”

Obstinacy

In everyday life he had to make compromises, in his music he was – with one exception – uncompromising. He was a perfectionist, driving the nearly 40 publishers with whom he signed contracts to madness when he repeatedly failed to meet deadlines because he thought he still had to improve a work; when he did not limit himself to correcting transcription errors in the proofs, but instead composed entire passages anew – like Marx, he had a handwriting that was difficult to decipher, and it took a very skilled copyist, very familiar with his music, to write his notes so neatly that they could be typeset. His publishers were scattered all over Germany, and with the transport routes of the time, one can imagine what delays and loss of income that meant.

It was the same with the performances. One can probably count on ten fingers the number of performance dates he kept on time. This was also due to his illnesses, which more often tied him to bed and made him unable to work. When he was commissioned by Archduke Rudolf – a brother of the Emperor, who idolized and generously supported him – to compose a mass for Rudolf’s appointment as Archbishop of Olomouc he immediately began to work, but being urged to write the mass in a way that met his inner compositional requirements and suffering from persistent

headaches he was once again unable to complete it – that was just bad luck for the newly appointed archbishop. He had to look for a new composer at the last minute, and when Beethoven's mass was eventually finished, it took not three-quarters of an hour, but twice as long. Thus it could not be performed during one mass. The music bore the imprint of a deep religious belief, yet it was not a faith in the church.

Beethoven accepted that he would lose out on income, although he could otherwise be petty and impertinent in matters of money. He liked to offer his compositions to several patrons simultaneously and tried to trick them.

At the end of the Ancien Régime and in a city like Vienna, to which he moved at the age of 21 after his home town of Bonn had been occupied by French troops, a musician and composer could only live if he was employed by the church or supported by a nobleman. A bourgeois music business did not yet exist. In the case of Beethoven, the result was a contradiction in terms: For the music he improvised or wrote did not suit noble ears. It broke with all conventional listening habits, broke – the older he became, the more radical – with all forms of the courtly style with its regular rhythms and timbres, influenced by Haydn and Mozart, and was simply an imposition. A wild lad burrowing into the intestines of pianos in noble palaces. He did not mince his words, but carried his heart on his tongue and into the notes. Beethoven was notorious for his sudden outbursts of rage, for which he often felt sorry afterwards.

But the (mainly Bohemian-Moravian) aristocracy was delighted, adorned themselves with the *enfant terrible*, and Beethoven celebrated triumphs in Vienna that soon radiated to London, Paris and St. Petersburg, although he never set foot in a non-German country. At the end of his career he found patrons among rich merchants and bankers as well.

He was very familiar with the music of his precursors. He took lessons in composition from Haydn, among others, and studied meticulously counterpoint and the art of the fugue. J.S. Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel was the guiding star for his musical conception.

His music is personal, immediate in its emotional expression, dramatic, rich in contrast and full of exuberant imagination. To bring his unbridled temperament into a musical form bordered on squaring the circle, its music is demanding and sophisticated to listen to – “architectural music” was the name given to it. Mozart's tunes could sometimes be whistled in the streets as a popular song, Beethoven's could not. His music is a constant inner struggle.

Mozart and Beethoven

This has a lot to do with his living conditions.

From his childhood, high demands were made on the young Ludwig, the contrast with Mozart could hardly be greater. Papa Leopold Mozart was the perfect coach for his talented youngest, both musically and pedagogically. He had a permanent position at the Hofkapelle in Salzburg, ran a successful violin school, wrote instructions for learning to play the violin, which became a standard work, as well as numerous compositions.

Papa Jean Beethoven, from a Flemish family, was tenor at the court orchestra in Bonn. He was only able to teach his eldest son elementary skills on the piano and violin, and the aforementioned biographer Caeyers gives him credit for soon entrusting his son's musical education to more qualified musicians. Who he met there was left to chance, of course, as there were no bourgeois music lessons at that time.

While Mozart went through a regular school and his skills were focused on composing early on – he wrote his first symphony at the age of nine – the young Ludwig was to become a professional pianist. His father did not think much of his pleasure in improvisation, he tried to stop it, the slightest attempt to do so resulted in slaps in the face or the little boy being locked up in the cellar. The atmosphere in the parental home is described as being characterized by the violent outbursts of a drunken and mentally unstable father and the silent suffering of an introverted mother. Since Ludwig was placed in the care of other teachers at an early age, he was soon able to escape from his domestic plight and enjoyed a liberty that was unthinkable for the young Wolfgang Amadeus. He soon became famous for his improvisation on the piano, which for a long time supported him in composing.

As a child Mozart was passed around at European royal courts for years, whereas Beethoven learned to work at an early age. At the age of 11 he replaced his teacher, the court organist Neefe, and at 14 he became second court organist with his own annual salary, thus considerably increasing the family income. When his father was forced into early retirement due to drunkenness, half of his pension was paid out to Ludwig to provide for his younger brothers, which he did. By then he was 18, had a job as a chamber musician at the newly founded National Theatre in Bonn and found himself in the role of head of the family.

As a rather shy boy he could certainly gain self-confidence from these tasks. Beethoven was ambitious and a workhorse, work gave him the most stable foothold in life, and he was able to take refuge in it when his other plans failed once again.

Mozart was only 14 years older than Beethoven, but there is a world between the two. Mozart grew into the courtly world and thought that he belonged to it, even if he was (literally!) kicked by it. Beethoven had no problem being promoted by the nobility, but he was always eager to keep his independence. Mozart grew up with the musical rules that Haydn had brought to completion and filled it with his own ideas. Beethoven still had to find the form for the music that came out of him – a life's work.

The man who shook hands with the tsar and the emperor did not live in an ivory tower but in simple circumstances. The creative disorder of a 1970s student dormitory often prevailed in his flats, which he constantly changed. He was thrifty with himself and careless with his dress. Once he was arrested as a beggar because of his slovenly looks – he was 50 then. His assertion that he was Beethoven enraged the gendarmes: "You are a scoundrel. Beethoven doesn't look like that!" His friends had to get him out of his cell the next morning.

Although loved and revered, he did not belong to the society that kept him. Like Handel he would have liked to go to London: great music, great orchestra, great audience, great income. His state of health did not permit it. His attempts to find a safe haven in marriage failed miserably because of his low social status.

Afflictions

He made early acquaintance with diseases. When he was 13 years old, he fell ill with smallpox, like many in his time, and from then on scars marked his face. At the age of 16 he suffered a first outbreak of bronchial asthma, accompanied by depression. Beethoven wrote about this in a letter: "Since my return to Bonn [from Vienna, where he had stayed for three months to meet Mozart, A.K.] I have experienced only a few happy hours. I am plagued by narrow-chestedness and I fear that this illness will end in consumption. I also suffer from melancholy, which in my case is almost as great an ordeal as the disease itself." The narrow-chestedness turned into a chronic bronchitis, which always let him fear that it could develop into tuberculosis, from which his mother had died in 1797, and that it would "cut the thread of his life".

His easily irritable temperament early on resulted in an irritable bowel, with alternating diarrhoea, constipation,

cramps, weakness, depression. He countered this with his absolute will not to let it get him down. In 1795 he noted in his diary: "Courage. For all the susceptibilities of my body my spirit will prevail."

From 1796 on – when he was 25 – there is hardly a year in his life in which there is not a serious illness recorded?. The list of diseases listed in the autopsy performed by the renowned pathologist Dr Wagner the morning after Beethoven's death was long: inflammation of the internal auditory canal (the labyrinth) caused by nerves, obstruction of the external auditory canal, cirrhosis of the liver, gallstones, chronic pancreatitis, diabetes, peritonitis... He certainly was provided with great stamina to endure all this. Some of his diseases were caused by excessive alcohol consumption; four successive generations of drinkers have been identified in Beethoven's family.

Deafness and first turning point

He was most depressed by his gradually increasing deafness. According to new research it was the late consequence of typhoid fever, which he caught on his way back from Berlin to Vienna in 1796. At that time murine typhus (rat flea fever) was an endemic disease in Germany. Hearing loss was first noticed in 1798. First he complained of tinnitus, then his right ear deteriorated, then his left ear; he could no longer perceive overtones, and he reacted oversensitively to street noises. No treatment worked. Three years later, in 1801, the doctors diagnosed the illness as "incurable". He was 30 years old.

This triggered a real existential crisis for him. Until then, Beethoven had mainly performed as a pianist, his career as a composer lay still in the future. Being a sociable person with a desire for communication, he had to learn to avoid the company of people from his late twenties on. Then the courage he had conjured up in his diary six years earlier left him, and he wanted to kill himself. From the spa town of Heiligenstadt, where his doctor had sent him, he wrote a letter to his two brothers, appointing them to be his heirs to his belongings. In this so-called Heiligenstadt Testament he writes:

"My misfortune is doubly painful to me because I am bound to be misunderstood ... If I approach near to people a hot terror seizes upon me, a fear that I may be subjected to the danger of letting my condition be observed – thus it has been during the last half year which I spent in the country, commanded by my intelligent physician to spare my hearing as much as possible, in this almost meeting my present natural disposition, although I sometimes ran counter to it yielding to my inclination for society, but what a humiliation when one stood beside me and heard a flute in the distance and I heard nothing, or someone heard the shepherd singing and again I heard nothing, such incidents brought me to the verge of despair, but little more and I would have put an end to my life – only Art it was that withheld me, ah, it seemed impossible to leave the world until I had produced all that I felt called upon me to produce, and so I endured this wretched existence ... Patience – it is said that I must now choose for my guide, and I have done so ... With joy I hasten towards death ... Come when thou wilt, I shall meet thee bravely."

The letter was never sent.

Five years later, he annotated on the margin of a string quartet: "Just as you dive into the whirlpool of society, so it is possible to compose works despite social adversity. Your deafness should no longer remain a secret – not even in art."

He took up the fight – and rose above himself. He still had something to give to the world. When he returned to Vienna, he was no longer satisfied with what he had written so far, he wanted to "take a new path".

In the following months and years he wrote his most famous piano sonatas, a first oratorio and his 3rd symphony, called Eroica – the first in which he found his own style. By the end of the decade, he had composed a large part of

the works that are mostly performed today.

“The Eroica is different from everything that symphonic music hitherto had to offer – if only by its unusual duration of fifty minutes”, writes his biographer Jan Caeyers. To bridge this extension “he needed a new interplay of form and material”. In doing so, Caeyers explains, “he followed a seemingly paradoxical compositional law he had discovered himself: the longer the duration of the piece of music, the smaller the number of themes should be, but on the other hand, the closer the connection between these themes. While his predecessors were mainly looking for rich musical ideas with which to fill a more or less fixed model of form, Beethoven was looking for forms into which he could shape his ideas ... He himself laid down the rules of the game he wanted to play. He mastered his art and therefore became a ruler in this art. That is why the Eroica as such is a compositional feat. It heralded a new epoch, because in it the relationship between intention and means is new – as is the experience of time and space.”

He was the first composer to follow the principle “form follows function” or “expression” – that was the revolution in music.

An anarchist?...

Perhaps it is this rising above himself and the overwhelming power that emanates from his music that makes it possible for young people to get access to him. On German TV some of those people were introduced in a documentary, “Beethoven Today”.

Like Andrés Felipe González. He comes from a slum area of Medellín, Colombia, where the drug mafia once ruled. With the help of Beethoven, he was able to work his way out of these circumstances. He now practises breakdance to his music. The first Beethoven piece he had heard was the Fifth Symphony. Beethoven’s bleak past, his difficult life, his non-conformity, his never following rules and a music that reaches everyone emotionally – all this allows Andrés to identify with him. And because it reaches everyone, it connects people. “Every minute, somewhere in the world, a piece of Beethoven is played.”

Moguai, a DJ from Recklinghausen, Germany, tries to underlay the Ode to Joy, the final chorus from the Ninth Symphony, which has been turned into an anthem, with a beat. He finds this difficult – perhaps because Beethoven’s music is so often a beat itself. “He was the first rocker”, says a young guitarist, she captures the sound of the Fifth Symphony in a duo with a violin. The guitar is suitable for this, it gives the rhythm.

With the song “Roll over Beethoven”, a pioneer of rock ‘n’ roll, Chuck Berry, paid tribute to the old master in the 1950s. At the centre of rock music is the momentary, the physical, the authentic and the individual. “Come over, Beethoven,” he wants to say, “come to us, you’ll fit in better than in the turgid music business of the establishment.” Beethoven, with his immediacy and uncontrollability, is made for such a claim. He fits in well with an era in which a mass audience is whipped up with recurring, hammering, loud rhythms and a musician who works his guitar on stage in such a way that the strings jump, sends his listeners into ecstasy.

Beethoven could do that too. As his deafness grew, he hit the piano with such force that the strings broke. It was important to him to get a full orchestra sound out of the piano and a “world sound” out of an orchestra. His music needs to be played fast, with strong contrasts between loud and soft, rhythmic and abrupt: constantly one theme is interrupted by another, not only another tune, but also another rhythm, even another style; again and again it is taken up anew, looks for other ways, fails or wants to explore something new, starts all over again. There a desperate meandering suddenly leads to endless longing, lyrical passages are accompanied by threatening disaster in the bass – enormous contrasts, breathlessness, running against everything and anything and at the same time the highest

need for love.

Pa-pa-pa-pamm. "How great do you have to be to write something like this?" asks the guitarist.

Beethoven wrote at a time when the old order was disintegrating and the new one was still in its birth pangs. His personal tales of woe echo this. He suffered many defeats in his life. He did not let this get him down. Until the end he kept a sense of humour that helped him to keep his head above. After all, he was a Rhinelander. And in spite of all his fame, he was an approachable and vulnerable person. Hence Beethoven.

The musician Anselm Hüttenbrenner, who accompanied his death, tells us of Beethoven's last moments. It is 26 March, a quarter to six in the late afternoon: "For some time now, dense cloud fields have been darkening the city. A storm with snow flurries and hail breaks out, and suddenly a bright lightning bolt, accompanied by a mighty thunder, lights up the room. Beethoven's eyes open wide. He raises his right hand, clenches it in a fist and stares seriously and threateningly into the air. Then his hand sinks back onto the bed, his eyes half closing ... he no longer breathes."

If that's true, it was a farewell quite to Beethoven's taste.

...or state composer?

How his works were performed was very important to Beethoven; he did not allow performing musicians the freedom he took for himself. This was especially true for the tempo in which the pieces were played. Beethoven's interest in musical tempos bordered on obsession. The conventional terms (*allegro*, *adagio*, *andante*, *presto*, etc.) were too imprecise for him, they could hardly describe the character of his pieces. But that was precisely what Beethoven was looking for.

When he could no longer conduct or perform his works himself, he wanted to dictate to the musicians how they should play. It was convenient for him that at the beginning of the 1800s an instrument had been invented that could measure the tempo – the metronome. It made it possible to render the tempi more individual and differentiated. Beethoven was so enthusiastic about it that he retroactively metronomized many of his works. But the metronome indications are sometimes so fast that musicians often think they are not playable – and so they simply ignore them.

There has been a long controversy about the tempo at which Beethoven should be played. In Austria it was played more slowly, in Germany the opposite initially happened. In the end, under French influence, the slower style of playing prevailed – with considerable consequences, including distorting the meaning. The increasingly greater deviations from the metronome numbers indicated necessitated interventions in the musical notation: articulations and even the time signature were changed. As late as 1977, a Beethoven colloquium took place in Vienna, when experts stated that the master's metronome must have been faulty and he just did not notice it.

However, the slowing down of the tempo distorts the character of the pieces. They then seem solemn; instead of struggle, there is now grandeur. This has helped to degrade him to the status of a state composer who was (and is) taken into the service of national identification. The bourgeois reception of Beethoven, influenced by late romanticism and handed down by conductors such as Wilhelm Furtwängler until the middle of the twentieth century, eliminated struggle and suffering from his work. What remained were pathos and greatness, and these came from an inexplicable somewhere, in case of doubt from his "genius".

Undoubtedly, Beethoven could also write bombastic pieces, those that proclaim dominance, as well as lyrical or radiant ones – he had countless facets. After the Battle of Leipzig 1813, in which the old feudal powers had won on

the wave of a national upheaval that was partly mobilized from above and partly carried from below, the disabled soldiers were honoured in Vienna with a huge benefit concert. Beethoven composed a piece for this occasion entitled "Wellington's Victory or the Battle of Vitoria" (Spain), in which he did not think it beneath him to include fragments of the English imperialist anthem *Rule Britannia*. For the Vienna Congress he wrote propaganda music to obtain the attention of the rulers who were present at the Congress. Thus he gave in to the need of his noble patrons to glorify the last triumph of feudalism over the approaching social upheaval. Financially this helped to stabilize him. But it was the bottom of his career as composer. Afterwards he had to find a new path again.

Historical performance practice, which developed after the end of the Second World War in response to the antiquated understanding of music up to that time, has put an end to the pathetic spook. Young musicians did not want to accept that classical music would be dumped on the dung heap by future generations. They set about digging out the old notations and instruments and recreating how the original versions might have sounded. They sounded so different from what we were used to hear that sometimes you could think you were dealing with different pieces. Pioneers in this field in the German-speaking world were the conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt and the pianist and composer Friedrich Gulda. Today, the faster tempos have prevailed.

The Ode to Joy

The showpiece of perversion of Beethoven's musical intentions is the Ode to Joy. By this I do not even primarily mean the fact that a two-minute piece was torn out of a 24-minute final movement of a symphony and cut to the needs of an act of state. (Herbert von Karajan was commissioned to do this by the Council of Europe in the early 1970s.) I rather think of its re-interpretation as a song of triumph.

An example of such a misinterpretation is the performance of the Ninth Symphony on Christmas Day 1989 in the East Berlin Schauspielhaus under the direction of Leonard Bernstein. Bernstein did not celebrate German unity, but the (political) triumph of the ideology of liberty. Accordingly, he changed the text, calling it an "Ode to Freedom". The Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra was complemented by musicians from Paris, London, New York, and Leningrad – an unmistakable message about what type of freedom was being thought of and simultaneously a parallelization of the Allies' victory over Nazi Germany and the West's victory over the Soviet Union. The piece itself is also changed, the chorus with the opening verse is loudly underlaid with timpani resulting in a stomping that sounds somewhat warlike, while the proper ending is lost.

"No other composer has ever spoken so directly to so many people of all classes, nationalities and ethnicities," says Bernstein. Yet this also means that everyone is trying to get him on his side. State leaders have repeatedly tried to underpin their claim to power ideologically with his music – the Austrian nobility no less than British imperialists and German Nazis. But even leftists satisfy their need for a heroic cult when they want to declare him, without much ado, a "hero of freedom", a "democrat" or even a Jacobin, or when they want to understand his music mainly in political terms. Thereby his diversity is always sacrificed – and he is falsified. Beethoven might be accused of having allowed himself to be appropriated – his music is not influenced by this and he is not responsible for the performances.

Beethoven was a master of ambiguity. Mozart places his hymn in praise of fraternity, the aria of Sarastro in the "Magic Flute", in the context of Freemasonry, from which this new secular religion originates. It places the human being at the centre, but it is an abstract one, a human being as it should be, not as it is with its common meanness. The aria has been moved to the bass, where it really emphasizes the sublimity of the idea. But it also underlines the fact that we are talking about a male association here – women were not admitted to Masonic lodges.

Schiller also wrote his Ode to Joy for a Masonic lodge, which oscillates between toast and grandeur. Beethoven

rearranges the lines, cancels the toasts and gradually develops the recurring opening verse into a radiant (not blaring!) song. But this is not all, at certain moment the singing takes on the sound of a church choir. The text then reads: "Brothers, above the starry canopy / There must dwell a loving father. / Do you fall in worship, you millions? / World, do you know your creator?" A human utopia becomes a song of praise to God – the hubris of man is put in its place. But it does not stop at the religious tone either; in the end the whole thing leads to childish exuberance.

At the end of his life, fate hit him hard once again. his nephew, son of his deceased favourite brother, whom he had brought under his wings against much resistance, tried to commit suicide (on 30 July 1826) – and Beethoven, with his brutal pedagogy, was not innocent. The suicide attempt failed – we can only guess at the upheavals this may have caused in Beethoven. Subsequently, Beethoven wrote a last string quartet (in F major). At the beginning of the final movement, death is entering, but it does not have the last word. It is followed by a subdued, resigned allegro that fades away... F major is regarded in classical music as a key that expresses serenity and resignation.

This turn to the positive is typical of Beethoven – there is something comforting about it.

Also therefore Beethoven.

Looking for harmony

To one of his earliest patrons, Prince Lichnowski, he once wrote: "Prince, what you are, you are by chance and birth, what I am, I am by myself. There are thousands of princes and always will be, but there is only one Beethoven."

Two things are expressed in it: the self-confidence of a person who owes his success to his work, i.e. who in a certain sense "creates himself" – a pride that the citizen shares with the worker. And a consciousness of his uniqueness – the basis for the bourgeois cult of genius.

The person who is at the centre of Beethoven's work is no longer an abstract, but a very concrete one. Joy and sorrow, struggle and devotion, the human and the divine often lie close together. He cannot be fixed to one timbre. His music is unique, precisely where it takes unexpected turns. This demands a lot from the audience and the interpreters who would like to have a simple timbre – whether romantic, heroic, anarchic or intimate – and the temptation is great to tilt to one side or the other. But the matter remains open, there is no final point to which his work would have headed – a point of view very close to today's feeling. Not even can Beethoven be pinned down to the moment of turmoil, because in the end the pieces find a conclusion and a unity.

Beethoven loved nature. Like Goethe and many contemporaries he considered it to be a revelation of God in its beauty and majesty, Wikipedia lists him as a pantheist. The ego is suspended in nature, subordinated to it. It was Marx who, in the wake of Rousseau, made the human being's alienation from nature the starting point of his world view and the subject of his life's work. To achieve this unity again is the greatest challenge of our time. Beethoven's music tells us that it can exist, in the world and with the world.

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Jan Caeyers is a Belgian conductor, musicologist and university lecturer. His biography of Ludwig van Beethoven was originally published in Amsterdam in 2009.

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Peter Davies was an Australian gastroenterologist.

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[1] Planned events for the 250th anniversary of the birth of Ludwig van Beethoven (baptised 17 December 1770, died 26 March 1827) have had to be cancelled or reduced because of the pandemic.