

The contemporary relevance of Ludwig van Beethoven on the 250th anniversary of his birth

Verena Nees, Peter Schwarz
17 December 2020

Millions of people around the world continue to enjoy and enthuse over the work of Ludwig van Beethoven on the 250th anniversary of his birth, December 17, 1770. His music long ago broke through the narrow limits of European culture within which he lived and worked. It has emerged as a universal voice of humanity and has struck a chord among the younger generation thanks to the efforts of dedicated musicians.

What explains the contemporary character of Beethoven's music? Why does it fascinate people of all ages, far beyond the confines of the classical music community?

Answering this question requires that one consider the period in which Beethoven lived and struggled. Although one cannot be separated from each other, Beethoven the artist went far beyond Beethoven the person. He was the most profound musical voice during a period in which humanity progressed in quantum leaps, a period in which misanthropic cultural conceptions, according to which human beings were capable only of violence and barbarism, were refuted. His work is ineradicably connected with the striving for human liberation.

Beethoven was five years of age when the United States declared its independence, and 16 when it drafted a Constitution promoting "the general Welfare" and securing "the Blessings of Liberty." He was 18 when the Parisian masses stormed the Bastille, setting into motion a chain of events that shook every European throne to its foundation. And he was 44 when the political restoration took hold with Napoleon Bonaparte's defeat at Waterloo.

But Beethoven did not adapt. During the last 12 years of his life (1815–1827), he composed works that both in content and form were far ahead of their time, which broke with the conventions of the day and connected the deepest humanity with a radical desire for social change.

Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, who was born in the same year as Beethoven and heard many performances of his work, wrote of the French Revolution: "Never since the sun had stood in its firmament and the planets revolved around him had it been perceived that man's existence centres in his head, i.e., in thought... This was accordingly a glorious mental dawn. All thinking beings shared in the jubilation of this epoch. Emotions of a lofty character stirred men's minds at that time; a spiritual enthusiasm thrilled through the world, as if the reconciliation between the divine and the secular was now first accomplished."

One could characterise these lines as the motto of Beethoven's work. He appealed to the idealism of humanity and its hope for a better world. He still inspires waging a struggle against all forms of oppression and for the realisation of freedom, to which he dedicated many of his works, such as the opera *Fidelio* with its "Florestan's Aria" and "Prisoners' Chorus" (1) and the monumental "Ode to Joy" that concludes his Ninth Symphony. (2) Today, when the capitalist system has only social inequality, dictatorship, war and destruction to offer, Beethoven's music

is enormously attractive and contemporary.

A life in a revolutionary era

Ludwig van Beethoven was baptised in Bonn on December 17, 1770. His forebears were Belgian-Flemish farmers and small traders. His grandfather and father were musicians in the Bonn Court Orchestra. His father's attempt to transform him into a child prodigy [*wunderkind*] at the age of four with piano and violin lessons in the manner of Mozart was scrapped due to his rebelliousness. As a result, Beethoven did not receive a high school education, which he later regretted and sought to overcome as an autodidact.

The early death of his mother and the deterioration of his father, who became increasingly dependent on alcohol and was extremely unstable, produced difficult family relations and financial hardship.

Beethoven's most important piano teacher was Christian Gottlob Neefe, who introduced him to the works of Johann Sebastian and Karl Philipp Emanuel Bach, and influenced him with Enlightenment thought. During his first period of study in Vienna in 1787, which was made possible by Neefe and Beethoven's first benefactor, Graf Waldstein, Beethoven met Mozart. The latter is alleged to have said, "That youth will make a name for himself in the world yet."

Back in Bonn, Beethoven threw himself into debates over philosophy and politics. In the "Zehrgarten" wine house of Mrs. Wittib Koch, he met regularly with young intellectuals and artists from Bonn to discuss the French Revolution and the writings and poems of Kant, Herder, Schiller, Klopstock, Wieland and Goethe.

Already at this time, the young Beethoven attracted considerable attention as an organist and pianist, though less as a composer. His independent and new style of playing with sudden improvisations enthralled his listeners.

In Vienna, where he returned in 1792, one year after Mozart's early death, he triggered a furore as a pianist. There are reports indicating Beethoven went beyond the conventional, elegant style of playing, improvised on suggested themes or fantasised freely. A new sound was already becoming clear that would be present in his mature compositions.

Carl Czerny, Beethoven's pupil, referred in his autobiography to a concert attended by his father in 1799 where a well known pianist named Gelinek competed with the "foreign pianist." Gelinek subsequently answered the question as to how the competition ended by saying forlornly, "Oh! I will think on yesterday in the years to come! Satan is hiding in that young person. Never have I heard such playing! He

fantasised on a theme given by me as I never even heard Mozart fantasise. Then he played his own compositions, which are wonderful and tremendous in the highest degree, and he produces intricacies and effects from the piano of which we never dreamt.”

Beethoven was almost 30 when he began to suffer from hearing problems, which were later linked to typhus contracted from a rat flea bite. He gradually gave up his career as a pianist to focus on composition. His personal crisis is captured in the so-called Heiligenstadt Testament [Heiligenstadt is a municipality, now part of Vienna] of 1802, a letter written to his brothers, in which he refers to suicidal thoughts. He is said to have been completely deaf as of 1818, although this was called into question by the American music scientist Theodore Albrecht in early 2020. A new evaluation of the “conversation notebooks” in which Beethoven communicated with his friends revealed that the composer could hear things in his left ear until shortly before his death.

The middle period

Beethoven was incredibly productive between 1803 and 1812, and his popularity grew in spite of initial opposition to his “new style.” At the same time, his misfortunes in his search for a wife caused him suffering. His famed “Letter to the Immortal Beloved,” written in 1812, was probably intended for the widow Josephine Countess von Brunsvik, who was unable to accept his marriage proposal due to prevailing social conventions (Beethoven was a “commoner”).

Beethoven’s works between 1802 and 1814 are often described as belonging to the “heroic period,” in contrast to his later works after 1815. The description is a reference to the Third Symphony, the “Eroica” [the “Heroic”] from 1803. Beethoven initially dedicated the work to Napoleon, before revising the dedication to read “In memory of a great man,” allegedly because he was angered by Napoleon’s self-initiated crowning as Emperor.

But the concept “heroic” can be easily misinterpreted. Beethoven was not primarily concerned with the glorification of individual heroes. The works of this period, in fact, reveal an emotional complexity embracing the full spectrum of human experience. While his early works formally drew on the two great musicians of the classical period, Mozart and Haydn, he was now traversing new ground. In 1820, he noted in a conversation notebook, “True art is obstinate... [and] does not allow itself to be forced into flattering forms” (cited by musicologist and historian Dieter Rexroth). He was thus able to express universal experiences, sentiments and emotions in music.

Beethoven is among the most intellectually demanding and reflective composers. The structural complexity and the “logical” development of his thematic material—from the initial simple impulses to monumental statements—confirm him as the greatest contemporary of the dialectician Hegel, who completed German idealist philosophy.

Beethoven’s manuscripts, with their numerous corrections and crossing out of material, speak to the composer’s striving to discover the dynamic potential or universal truth concealed within even the shortest succession of musical notes. His compositions are driven forward by an internal logic and powerfully convey a feeling of thematic inevitability. The composer, who is often said to have introduced subjectivity into music, not only gives expression to the sentiments and feelings of an individual, but the strivings and passions of humanity—objective truth.

This is where the relationship to Hegel also becomes clear. This citation from the latter’s *Science of Logic* points toward the principle of dialectical movement in Beethoven’s music: “The continuation of that which made the beginning is merely to be considered as a further determination of the

same thing, so that the beginning is the basis for all that succeeds, remains, and loses nothing.”

Beethoven possessed the ability to develop a multilayered symphonic movement from the simplest of motifs—the fateful motif of the Fifth Symphony consisting of three eighth notes on G and a long, drawn out E flat—which became one of the best known movements in a symphony in musical history. (3) As a result, he has often been accused, unlike Mozart, of not being one of the great melodic composers. But that is not the case. He composed pieces of unsurpassed beauty, such as the *Moonlight Sonata*, the third movement of the “Archduke Trio,” the aforementioned “Prisoners’ Chorus” in *Fidelio* and the expressive sections of his late piano sonatas, to mention only a few examples.

The piano sonatas

Beethoven left behind a vast body of work. One hundred and thirty-eight of his compositions bear an opus number, but he wrote a far greater number of pieces. His works include nine symphonies, five piano concertos, a violin concerto, *Fidelio* with four different overtures, two masses, 32 piano sonatas, 16 string quartets, 10 violin sonatas, five cello sonatas and numerous works of chamber music with a variety of instrumentation. In addition, there are 228 catalogued compositions without an opus number.

It is beyond the scope of this article to even begin to deal with this vast body of work, which consists of innumerable masterpieces. However, a good indication is provided by Beethoven’s 32 piano sonatas, which he wrote for his “own” instrument—the first portion in his youth, and the latter in the years prior to his death. One could say that they represent Beethoven’s musical laboratory, where he experimented with musical forms he built upon in his orchestral and chamber music. Each of these sonatas is unique, having its own individual structures and soundscapes.

To this day, Beethoven’s sonatas pose an artistic and technical challenge to each and every pianist. Almost every great pianist has recorded them—from Busoni, Paderewski, Backhaus, Rubinstein, Richter, Gilels, Brendel, Gould, Argerich and Barenboim to a new global generation of extraordinary pianists. Although Beethoven provides precise instructions for embellishments, tempi and dynamics, each performance and recording differs from every other. There is no “authoritative” interpretation of Beethoven’s work. It testifies to their depth and universality that only the interpreter who allows his or her own time-specific experiences and impulses to flow into them lends them their full meaning.

The first sonata in F minor, Op. 2, No. 1, dedicated to Beethoven’s tutor Franz Joseph Haydn, already sets new standards. Short, interrupted successions of notes, trills and melodic motives are suddenly replaced by quiet moments. The central motifs are repeated three times and produce tremendous urgency and tension. (4)

Later, Beethoven began varying the number of sonata movements, shifting from four to two in his last works. He resorts to the contrast of piano or forte, pianissimo or fortissimo, which often follow each other starkly and suddenly. There is also a shift in the rhythm and tempi from a calm singsong to rousing dances and sometimes violent, hammering passages.

The most well-known sonatas of the middle period are *The Tempest* (1801–1802) and the *Appassionata* (“passionate” in Italian, 1804–1805). Asked for the reason behind the reference to the “Tempest,” Beethoven allegedly referred to Shakespeare’s late romance *The Tempest* (c. 1610–1611). Although Beethoven did not write any programme music or symphonic poems in the style of the late romantic composers, one can

well imagine the persecuted Milanese duke Prospero sitting on a deserted island as a wild storm erupts. The sea rolls with dark, three-tone waves in the bass and sprays the peaks with glittering, light flat arpeggios and trills played by the right hand. (5)

Just how different and eclectic Beethoven's sonatas can be is shown by the two other works of Opus 31 (1802–1804) between which the engaging, breathtaking *The Tempest* is included. Piano Sonata No. 16 in G major, Op. 31, No. 1, is full of humour and charm, while Piano Sonata No. 18 in E-flat major ("The Hunt"), Op. 31, No. 3, is particularly melodic and tender. Beethoven had a sense of humour and theatrics and knew how to grab the listener's attention.

The *Appassionata* marks the peak of revolutionary drama and dark passion. It is much more orchestral than *The Tempest* and almost grows beyond the bounds of the piano. At the beginning, the light tones of the first motif arise like the notes on an oboe or clarinet out of a quiet, pallid background akin to the tremolo on a string instrument. In the concluding part, the upper and lower extremes of the piano are heard, as if the composer wished to point to the existing tumultuous world. (6)

The notion that the genius Beethoven wrote the final movement directly after a walk in the forest, which was advanced by some romantic music critics, is probably far from the truth. In reality, the "passionate," the *Appassionata*, is based on a carefully elaborated conception, like his other compositions. The incredible tension in the last movement is produced artistically. By means of insistent emphasis, repetition and short breaks for air before it races on at a breathtaking forward pace, a feeling of unavailability is produced, which is relaxed only in the last bars as a cacophony of sound rises rapidly upwards and concludes abruptly with a few short, penetrating chords.

Some music critics interpret this sonata as the rebellion of a despairing individual against his fate before plunging to his death at the end, and point to Beethoven's mounting desperation over his hearing problems. But this subjective interpretation separates the work from the convulsive period in which it was written. In the *Appassionata*, one hears how the world spirals out of control. Here it is clear how far Beethoven had advanced beyond Mozart's final works, which began to show the dissonance of the crumbling old order.

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin described the *Appassionata* as his favourite sonata, writing, "I know nothing that would equal the *Appassionata*. I could hear it played every day. Marvellous, supernatural music. When I hear it, I always think, maybe with naive, childish pride: What wonders human beings are capable of accomplishing!"

The late works

In Vienna, Beethoven was supported by aristocratic patrons such as Archduke Rudolph, Prince Lobkowitz and Prince Kinsky. However, his financial affairs deteriorated after Napoleon's troops occupied Vienna in 1809. Several friends from the nobility left Vienna—others, like Kinsky, Lobkowitz and Prince Lichnowsky, died soon afterward. The French officers who attended his concerts and the first versions of the opera *Fidelio* were not impressed by his music.

With Napoleon's defeat and the beginning of the reactionary Metternich era, a contradictory situation for Beethoven emerged in 1814–1815. A onetime admirer of Napoleon, who was a year his senior, as the continuator of the French Revolution, he was now receiving requests for patriotic compositions from the French emperor's opponents, like the battle symphony *Wellington's Victory* (marking the Duke of Wellington's victory over Joseph Bonaparte in Spain in June 1813), which was performed alongside his Seventh Symphony amid frenetic victory

celebrations in 1814.

Europe's restoration was initiated at the Congress of Vienna in 1814–1815. Austrian Foreign Minister Prince von Metternich, who dominated the congress, emerged as the leader of European reaction and introduced a system of censorship and spying.

Beethoven was increasingly isolated. He could not accommodate himself to the tastes of the upper echelons of Vienna society, who were more interested in Biedermeier period art, romantic opera and the comic operas of Rossini, and virtuosic works by Niccolò Paganini. Alongside compositions for specific events, which he could not afford to turn down, he worked intensively on his late compositions.

Imperishable works appeared during this period, like the *Missa Solemnis* (Solemn Mass), the *Diabelli Variations*, the Bagatelles Op. 119 and Op 126, the Eighth and Ninth symphonies, the late piano sonatas and five string quartets. They entered into entirely new artistic and formal dimensions, which provoked incredulity on the part of many of his contemporaries.

The final sonatas conquered their position in the piano repertoire only later in the 19th century. Piano Sonata No. 29 in B-flat major ("Hammerklavier"), Op. 106 (1818), according to one of its finest interpreters, Alfred Brendel, went "beyond everything in terms of scope and arrangement that was dared and accomplished in the field of sonata composition." The sonata was long considered unplayable and first performed only several decades after Beethoven's death by Franz Liszt. The musical significance of the late string quartets was not fully appreciated until the 20th century.

Other works were successful during Beethoven's lifetime. The Ninth Symphony, on which he laboured for six years, was performed on May 7, 1824, after 30 Vienna musicians and music enthusiasts appealed to Beethoven in writing to keep his latest compositions under lock and key no longer. It was the last concert attended by the composer, who reportedly sat with his back to the audience in front of the orchestra. Beethoven died aged 56 on March 26, 1827. His funeral procession in Vienna three days later was attended by an estimated crowd of from 10,000 to 20,000 people.

Biographers and musical scholars usually interpret Beethoven's later work as a turn to subjectivity and away from the world, a retreat into the internal regions of the soul that is to be explained by his growing deafness. This interpretation does not hold water, because it separates Beethoven's work from the development of society to which he had given such powerful expression in an earlier period.

As an artistic genius, Beethoven responded to the reaction surrounding him by deepening his prior work, expanding the limits of music and preparing the future. He thereby not only expressed humane emotions and sentiments in a more universal way than any music had previously done. He also resorted to musical forms like fugue, counterpoint and variation that the most "objective" of the great composers, Johann Sebastian Bach, had fully developed. The fugue in the fourth movement of the "Hammerklavier" sonata and the *Grand Fugue* for string quartet, Op. 133, are outstanding examples of this. (7) Alongside Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* is considered the greatest composition in this genre to this day.

In a recently published book, *Ludwig van Beethoven: Music for a new era* [Ludwig Van Beethoven: musik für eine neue zeit], music scholar Hans-Joachim Hinrichsen stressed that Beethoven's music "never lost the connection with the conceptual world of his youth through all phases of its development." His music was not simply the expression of individual subjectivity, but "a raging conflict with the ideological world of his era," a complex engagement especially with the Enlightenment thought of Immanuel Kant, the poetry of Goethe and Schiller's aesthetics and drama. This also applies to his later works, which still contain traces of youthful optimism alongside reflective, tragic and sometimes despairing tones.

To get a sense of the universality and contradictoriness of Beethoven's late works, we recommend that the reader compare two renditions of his final piano sonata, Piano Sonata No. 32 in C minor, Op. 111. The first is part of a live recording of his three last sonatas played by Sviatoslav Richter in Leipzig in 1963. It brings to light the tortuous restlessness of the sonatas, alongside their tender intimacy better than any other pianist ever could and pushes this to almost unbearable limits. The second was recorded by Brendel, who places more emphasis on the classical aspects of the composition. (8)

Controversies surrounding Beethoven

An opus with the complexity and comprehensiveness—and popularity—of Beethoven's could not avoid being subjected to abuse and misinterpretation.

Representatives of Bismarck's repressive regime, the Wilhelminian military and the Nazis all sought to misuse Beethoven's deeply humane compositions as the background music to their inhumane crimes. Bismarck boasted that the *Appassionata* had strengthened his military boldness, and the conductor Hans von Bülow even wanted to dedicate the *Eroica* symphony (Symphony No. 3) to "Beethoven's brother, the Beethoven of German politics, the Prince Bismarck." Richard Wagner, himself a participant in the battles of the 1848 revolution, declared after the founding of the German Empire in 1871 that Beethoven's music was the basis for the daring of the German army.

Novelist Thomas Mann wrote angrily from exile about a performance of *Fidelio* in Nazi Germany under the musical direction of Wilhelm Furtwängler: "What dull-wittedness does it require in [Heinrich] Himmler's Germany to listen to 'Fidelio' without putting one's head in one's hands and stumbling out of the hall?"

The demoralised representatives of the Frankfurt School sought to use Beethoven to justify their cultural pessimism. After Hitler came to power in 1933, Theodor Adorno criticised the "high feeling" produced by the *Eroica* symphony as a "prefiguration of mass culture celebrating its own triumphs" (*Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*). One can detect in this claim a central theme of the Frankfurt School's philosophy, which declared the Enlightenment to be a failure because the masses' alleged receptivity toward authoritarianism made fascist barbarism possible. Therefore, Adorno and others claimed that any art that addressed emotions was dangerous.

Adorno sought to interpret Beethoven's late compositions in existential terms. His views on Beethoven are documented in Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus*. One of the scenes describes a real-life experience. Adorno (Wendell Kretzschmar in the novel) visited Mann in exile in California, played the sonata Op. 111 on the piano for him, and exclaimed, "Where greatness and death come together... there emerges a kind of convention-loving objectivity that leaves behind to sovereignty the most imperious subjectivism" and "enters grandly and ghost-like into the mythical, the collective."

Adrian Leverkühn, the novel's main protagonist, says later of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, "What the people fought for, why they stormed fortresses, and what was accomplished and proclaimed jubilantly, all of that is not to be. It is to be taken back. I want to take it back."

To this day, music journalists and scholars draw on the demoralised foundation upon which Adorno's position was based. One example was provided recently by Alexander Cammann, literature editor for the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, in his article on the Beethoven anniversary, cynically headlined "O freedom!" ["O Freiheit!"]. Cammann attempted to discredit Beethoven as a supporter of the French Revolution, referred

contemptuously to his reliance on nobles for financial support and concluded with an approving citation of a poem about *Fidelio* written by Albrecht Haushofer, who was shot by the SS in Berlin's Moabit prison in April 1945. There are no tones of freedom in life, he wrote, "There, there is only a paralysing perseverance. After that a hanging, a sinking into the sand."

Two months ago, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and other leading German media outlets attacked Igor Levit—who has recorded all 32 Beethoven sonatas and performed them this year at the Salzburg Music Festival—with anti-Semitic smears. The 33-year-old pianist, who is actively engaged in opposing the revival of neo-Nazism in Germany and who enthused tens of thousands for Beethoven's works in a series of online concerts and podcasts on the composer's sonatas, is obviously a thorn in the side of the ruling elite.

The WSWS commented at the time, "The attack on Levit has a political and cultural significance that extends beyond Germany. The ruling class fears socially conscious and politically engaged artists who seek to raise the cultural level of the working class.

"Levit has become the target of the right not just because of his political stance. His efforts to make the works of Beethoven and other composers accessible to broad layers of the population and thereby increase interest in culture as a whole are viewed by the ruling class not just with suspicion, but considered a threat."

These attacks cannot tarnish Beethoven's greatness. Under conditions of the coronavirus pandemic, vast inequality and threats of war, anger is mounting against exploitation, repression and racist and anti-Semitic agitation. Beethoven's tones of freedom sound more contemporary than they have for a long time.

The socialist workers' movement, which carried the ideals of the French Revolution into a new epoch, is the true inheritor of the traditions Beethoven held dear. Friedrich Engels, deeply impressed by a performance of the Fifth Symphony, declared Beethoven to be a model for all of the oppressed. Kurt Eisner, who would later help found the People's State of Bavaria in November 1918, organised a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony for 3,000 workers in a Berlin beer hall. Subsequent concerts at which Beethoven's music was performed were attended by thousands of workers.

Already during Beethoven's lifetime, his music had an impact on the lower classes of society. Dieter Rexroth cites in his work on the composer a contemporary account of an organ recital in Godesberg (near Bonn) in 1791: "Beethoven now began to improvise on themes given to him by the audience so we were genuinely gripped by it; but what was much more, as the New Orpheus sounded: ordinary workers down in the church cleaning up the mess made by the farmers were passionately affected by it, put down their tools now and again, and listened in astonishment and visible approval."

Beethoven's music is still revolutionary today. Two hundred and fifty years after the composer's birth, young musicians and ensembles approach his music with fresh curiosity and enthusiasm. They speak to a new era during which the task of creating a humane society without class privileges can and must be resolved.

Musical examples

The following musical examples, all available on YouTube, provide a glimpse of Beethoven's comprehensive work. There are countless other recordings to be recommended.

(1) James Levine conducts the Prisoners' Chorus at the met in New York; Jonas Kaufmann sings Florestan's Aria

(2) Ninth Symphony, fourth movement with the “Ode to Joy,” Daniel Barenboim conducts the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra

(3) Fifth Symphony, conducted by Christian Thielemann

(4) Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 2, No. 1, played by Igor Levit at the Salzburg Music Festival 2020

(5) “Tempest Sonata,” Op. 31, No. 2, 1802, interpreted by Rudolf Buchbinder

(6) Piano sonata “Appassionata,” Op. 57, F minor, interpreted by Claudio Arrau

(7) “Grand Fugue” for string quartet, Op. 133, played by the Alban Berg Quartet

(8) Piano sonatas Op. 109–111, live recording by Sviatoslav Richter in Leipzig in 1963; Op. 111 played by Alfred Brendel



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact