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The French Enlightenment and Two Men: Napoleon Bonaparte and Beethoven

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Abstract

Many of the philosophies developed during the French Enlightenment circulated around nature and human emotions. These philosophies were written by men, such as Diderot, in the *Encyclopedia*. Both Napoleon Bonaparte and Ludwig van Beethoven were able to exemplify the French Enlightenment through their representations of self-determination and expertise at their crafts; however, both men experienced pitfalls that greatly affected their careers. Napoleon's was so detrimental to his career that he was exiled to a small island; whereas, Beethoven took the negativity surrounding the Heiligenstadt Testament and used these feelings to write the *Eroica*. This symphony was able to exemplify the French Enlightenment and set new precedents for symphonies to come.

The relationship between Napoleon and Beethoven may not seem obvious, but when looking at the similarities between their backgrounds and careers, it is clear that the two share a likeness that is unparalleled when comparing and contrasting a musical genius to a corrupt political leader. The ideals of the French Enlightenment were extremely important to these two men, but how they chose to portray these ideals ended up being truly different. Beethoven chose to portray the ideals through heroic works, such as the *Eroica*, whereas Napoleon began as a talented militant who turned corrupt over power and lost sight of his once true French Enlightenment ideals.

The French Enlightenment was characterized by a movement with an emphasis on nature, individuality, and human emotions. Many of these ideals were brought together in the *Encyclopedia (1751)*, which was a culmination of writings from the Enlightenment's best minds, such as Diderot, Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau. Both Diderot and Voltaire wrote extensively about nature and the sciences behind it. One of Diderot's main philosophies was the concept of natural law. He explained natural law as the philosophy that God has put forth certain rules among mankind, and it is up to mankind to discover and understand these rules. Once these rules are in place, this leads to an ideal and better society.¹ Another characteristic of the Enlightenment was the notion that every human had the divine right to individuality and self-determination.² This meant that all humans had the right to make their own choices and believe what they wanted to believe. This was an influential idea when it came to the Enlightenment, because people now believed that they were able to create their own fate. Additionally, the French Enlightenment also underwent a movement towards the pursuit of happiness and expression of one's emotions. The pursuit of happiness can be seen widely across documents from the Enlightenment era. For example, the Declaration of Independence quotes this idea directly. Society also began to respect the right to self-expression, in the sense that every man was allowed to be himself.³ With these principles set in place, the Enlightenment served as a starting point for conversations about who they were as a society and how each individual could benefit and contribute to it.

A fundamental philosophy of the French Enlightenment was the idea of "humanistic thinking". Derived from this are the early ideas of the self-made man. Since men, not God, were able to discover things about the world, man himself was also able to make himself out of nothing.⁴ Both Napoleon and Beethoven exemplified this French Enlightenment ideal. Napoleon grew up in a poor family from Corsica. When Napoleon's home was overtaken by

¹ Henry Vyverberg, *Human Nature, Cultural Diversity, and the French Enlightenment*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 9 & 20-25.

² Georges Duby and Robert Mandrou, *A History of French Civilization*, (New York: Random House, 1964), 400.

³ Vyverberg, *French Enlightenment*, 28-30.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28-30.

the French, Napoleon's father, Carlo Bonaparte, sent him to a military academy at Brienne.⁵ While at Brienne, Napoleon was surrounded by sons of the nobility who flaunted their riches; regardless, Napoleon still thrived. In October of 1784, Napoleon transferred to the *Ecole Militaire* in Paris. Here he graduated and was selected as second lieutenant of the artillery in a regiment stationed at Valence. At sixteen years old and out of fifty-eight pupils, acquiring this position was an impressive feat for Napoleon. From that point on, Napoleon slowly worked up the ranks until the age of twenty-six when he became the General-in-Chief of the Army of the Interior.⁶ Clearly, Napoleon was able to succeed quickly in his career despite his poor upbringing; likewise, Beethoven shared a similar story.

While Beethoven did not grow up poor, from a young age he began to make a career for himself. By the age of 11, he was working at the court in Bonn as an assistant to the court organist. Beethoven continued to work for various aristocracy, and at one point petitioned to receive half of his father's wages in order to support his young brothers.⁷ As a young composer, Beethoven was constantly looking for ways improve his composing techniques. Consequently, Beethoven began taking piano lessons with Haydn in 1792. According to an account by Johann Schnek, Haydn had Beethoven play the same exercise for six months. For Beethoven, this appeared to be frustrating because he wanted to advance his piano skills. Also, the more exposure he had to music through lessons with Haydn, the more he could learn different/better compositional techniques. Due to his eagerness to learn, Beethoven met secretly with Schnek in 1793 in order to further his skills. In their first encounters, Schnek noted that Beethoven found multiple mistakes within the exercises that Haydn gave him. Regardless of the outcome of both encounters with these men, Beethoven continued to grasp and soak in every bit of information he could.⁸ In addition to having extremely successful careers, both Napoleon and Beethoven were naturally expertise at their crafts.

Consequently, another caveat of the French Enlightenment was the movement towards increased knowledge and expertise at one's craft.⁹ Napoleon was a military genius of his generation. As a student, Napoleon was extremely dutiful. Even from a young age, Napoleon's superiors noticed his adept work and study habits despite his narcissistic attitude. One of Napoleon's earliest successes was during the uprising in Marseilles during the

⁵ J.M. Thompson, *Napoleon Bonaparte*, (New York: Oxford University, 1952).

⁶ Ida M. Tarbell, *A Short Life of Napoleon Bonaparte*, (New York: S.S. McClure, 1896), 2-9.

⁷ Joseph Kerman, et al., "Beethoven, Ludwig van", *Groves Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed December 14, 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40026pg14>.

⁸ Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven*, (New York: Schirmer Books, 1998), 89-93.

⁹ Vyverberg, *Human*, 36-40.

1790's. Here Napoleon wrote the *le souper de Beaucaire*, and this document came into the hands of the army's leader. With Napoleon's plans in hand, the French army was able to repel the rebel forces from Toulon. Additionally, after Napoleon declared himself as Emperor in 1799, he created a series of civil codes and for a while, they were well regarded throughout most of Europe.¹⁰ Napoleon was able to take what he learned in his military training and was able to implement influential change throughout his career.

While Beethoven was not a spearhead political figure, he was a revolutionary in regards to being a composer and musician. For one, there are many works of Beethoven that are considered to be part of modern day repertoire. Continuing, as Beethoven's career went on, he began to realize the seriousness and swiftness of his deafness. In a letter to a friend, he described how miserable he was, and how his deafness was a burden being a musician; however, Beethoven was still able to compose some of his greatest works.¹¹ For example, in 1802, Beethoven finished his Second Symphony and composed up to 3 violin sonatas (Op. 30) and 2 piano sonatas (Op. 31). Additionally, Beethoven had gone completely deaf by 1818, and it was then that he was able to complete the Hammerklavier Sonata for piano.¹² It is clear that Napoleon and Beethoven exemplified their superiority of political and musical knowledge and craft. Napoleon was able to implement and demand change throughout his lifetime. Aside from being deaf, Beethoven was still able to compose some of the world's best and well known works. Despite their greatness, both men had their failure: Napoleon's worse than Beethoven's.

Napoleon and Beethoven both tried to exemplify the ideals of the French Enlightenment, although one was much more successful than the other. Napoleon began his career with pure thoughts and a clear view of the bigger picture. However, his views changed as he rose to power and gained control over more territories. In Napoleon's early life, he was very devoted to his family. The first use he made of his wealth and power after being appointed general-in-chief¹³ of the Army of the Interior, was for his family¹³. He also was more concerned about the well-being of society as a whole, which also began to change with corruption. In July of 1788, in his diary, Napoleon mentioned how little respect he had for the current leaders of the army because they were only focused on themselves and were only capable of pursuing their own interests; furthermore, he comments on the current leaders' miserable attempts at winning over the people was enough to destroy all ambition.¹⁴ As Napoleon's reign went on,

¹⁰ Tarbell, *Short*, 9-16.

¹¹ Kerman, "Beethoven".

¹² Solomon, *Beethoven*, 140 & 322.

¹³ Tarbell, *Short*, 20-21.

¹⁴ Napoleon, and R. M. Johnston, *The Corsican; a diary of Napoleon's life in his own words* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1910), 9.

the country's state of affairs deteriorated. The country's legislature began to quickly shift from elected officials to court appointments. This in turn created more unrest from the public, and eventually, due to a variety of reasons Napoleon stepped down as Emperor and was exiled.¹⁵ Initially, Napoleon's rule as Emperor was successful and well received; however, as time went on Napoleon took his ideals from the French Enlightenment and used them for corruption.

Beethoven also portrayed Enlightenment ideals throughout his life, although his path differed from Napoleon's. While Napoleon portrayed more ideals in the early part of his life, Beethoven held a greater importance for the Enlightenment in his later life in his "Heroic" phase. The epitome of Beethoven's "Heroic" phase was his Third Symphony, which will be discussed below. In every hero's story, there is always a pitfall before the hero is able to conquer evil. For Beethoven, this came in the Heiligenstadt Testament in 1802. In this testament, Beethoven writes to his brothers about his current state of despair and apparent desire for an imminent death. However, Beethoven quickly turned to writing numerous successful compositions, such as the Sonata in A for Violin and Piano (Op. 47).¹⁶ Napoleon lost sight of the Enlightenment values, and how important they were to society as a whole at that time. This aided in his fall from power. At the end of Napoleon's life, his corruption and illness was a primary reason for his demise; thus, the French Enlightenment ideals were not positively exemplified through Napoleon's later life. Though Beethoven had faltered with the Heiligenstadt Testament, he was still able to exemplify the evolution of the French Enlightenment throughout his music. This portrayal of French Enlightenment ideals is most clearly exemplified through the *Eroica*.¹⁷

It is possible that Beethoven composed the *Eroica* symphony with Napoleon as inspiration. Beethoven's friend Ferdinand Ries noted the process in which Napoleon's name became associated with the symphony, and also the process by which the name was removed. According to Ries, the top of the *Eroica* score, before it was even named the *Eroica*, simply read "Buonaparte" with Beethoven's name at the bottom of the score.¹⁸ This implies that the original title of the symphony was most likely in honor of Napoleon Bonaparte. It also becomes clear that Beethoven experienced some indecision in removing Napoleon's name from the score. In 1804, Beethoven had an encounter with Ries during which he learned that Napoleon declared himself as emperor. This news upset

¹⁵ Howard G. Brown, "Napoleon Bonaparte, Political Prodigy", *History Compass* 5 (2007).

¹⁶ Solomon, *Beethoven*, 151 & 248-251.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 250-251.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

Beethoven, and he has been quoted as saying, “Is he too, then, nothing more than an ordinary human being?”¹⁹ Beethoven then ripped the first page of the score apart in response to this news. In later discourse with his publisher, Gottfried Hartel, Beethoven wrote that the title of the symphony was really Bonaparte. There are also places within the score in which Beethoven erased the name Bonaparte and others in which he added it again. This includes a spot in which Beethoven wrote “Geschrieben auf Bonaparte” in pencil and he never erased it.²⁰

Regardless of all the evidence of Beethoven’s likely intentions of writing the *Eroica* Symphony for Napoleon, other information suggests that this inclination of Beethoven’s was very peculiar. Beethoven had in fact written two pieces during 1796 and 1797 that were patriotic for the Germans. However in the context of the conflicts with France and Napoleon, this would make any patriotic composition by Beethoven inherently against Napoleon. There was also an occasion in 1802 in which Beethoven was asked to write a sonata in dedication for Napoleon.²¹ In this instance, Beethoven very clearly stated that he would do no such thing because of Napoleon’s retraction of his concordat with the Pope. In 1806, after Napoleon won the battle of Jena, Beethoven allegedly said that if he himself were as accomplished at war as he was at music that he would conquer Napoleon.²² Beethoven, a revolutionary thinker, would have thought of Napoleon’s actions as tyrannical.

It is clear that there are discrepancies as to whether Beethoven respected Napoleon or not. The answer to why Beethoven had the desire to add Napoleon’s name to the symphony may have to do with a planned trip to France that never happened.²³ Napoleon’s name was added to the score shortly before the trip was supposed to take place, but was removed again after the trip was cancelled. Taking this into account, it would seem that Beethoven only felt the need to add Napoleon’s name into the score for political purposes. However, Beethoven’s statements in reaction to Napoleon’s self-assumed emperorship along with his claim that the real name of the symphony was really Buonaparte make Beethoven’s real intentions and opinions unclear. In contrast to the inspiration of the symphony, the characteristics of the symphony itself and the ideals embedded within it are fairly evident.

While the possible dedication of the *Eroica* symphony raises questions, the overarching formal characteristics of the symphony itself are much more straightforward. The first movement is marked *allegro con brio*, the second as *adagio assai*, the third as *allegro vivace*, and the fourth as *allegro molto* transformed into *poco*

¹⁹ Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven* (New York: Schirmer Books), 2009.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 175.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 175-176.

²² Antony Hopkins, *The Nine Symphonies Of Beethoven*, (London : Heinemann ; 1981), 64.

²³ W.J. Miller, “Beethoven and Napoleon: Two Revolutionaries,” *Proceedings* 17, (1987): 450

andante resolving to presto.²⁴ This progression of movements follows a standard fast, slow, fast, fast pattern that was present in many symphonies preceding and following the *Eroica*. Further gratifying the listener's expectation of symphonic form, the third movement is in the form of a dance. However, Beethoven substitutes the usual minuet and trio for a scherzo and trio. Aside from the substitution of the minuet for the scherzo, Beethoven did add another unique feature that gave additional character to the symphony as a whole. Instead of merely giving a tempo marking for the second movement, Beethoven makes it clear that this movement is also intended to be a funeral march.²⁵

While the most superficial formal characteristics of the *Eroica* appear to be very conventional, Beethoven did add some ideals of the Enlightenment to it. For example, the emphasis of humanity instead of God is present in the symphony. The exposition of the first movement does not stray away from the home key of E flat major by very much, but it does place a large emphasis on the dominant in many areas instead of the tonic.²⁶ An exposition of a symphony that asserts the tonic was the standard norm for symphonies that came before the *Eroica*. The emphasis on the tonic gives tonal stability and firmly grounds the listener in the key. If stability represents God, this tonally unrested exposition would depict humanity. The impact of alternating between tonic and dominant tonal centers would give the listener a sense of tonal instability, possibly representing the unpredictability and imperfection of human life. The idea of humanity is also implied through the presence of the second movement funeral march. Death is a concept directly related to humanity and life on earth, very disconnected from the image of God. Even though its title, the funeral march recognizes the weakness of man.

Individuality is another ideal of the Enlightenment that pervades the *Eroica*. In the first movement, the original theme appears through harmonic instability that is simultaneously taking place in m. 147.²⁷ This resurgence of the melody in the midst of harmonic unrest narrows the listener's ear from a sound that is broad and unstable to a singular recognizable melody. This gives an emphasis on the individual theme instead of the whole. Beethoven also placed focus on individuality by featuring solo instruments in several areas. A clear example would be the oboe solo in the funeral march movement, in which all the strings serve as an accompaniment.²⁸ This and many other solo sections throughout the symphony could be construed as aural depictions of the individual over the whole.

²⁴ Hopkins, *Nine*, 65.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

Finally, a huge component of the French Enlightenment dealt with human emotions, and Beethoven's music often personified or elicited these emotions. One of the clearest depictions of this ideal can be seen in the *Eroica's* second movement, the funeral march.²⁹ This movement is almost a literal representation of its title. The movement is indicated as an *adagio* in a duple meter; as well as a drum-like motive initially heard in the double basses.³⁰ It is possible that Beethoven composed this movement in mourning of a close friend, family member, or patron, or, could Beethoven have composed this movement as a foreshadow of Napoleon's downfall years later? The *Eroica* was written during Beethoven's "Heroic" stage. It was during this time period, that Beethoven was recovering from the Heiligenstadt Testament, and his composing style was influenced by the idea of the "hero's journey". Beethoven had previously written *The Creatures of Prometheus* in 1801, and he was influenced by this composition when composing the *Eroica*. Looking at the entirety of the *Eroica*, audiences can hear Beethoven's journey into his illness, his isolation from society, his conquering of the notions of the Heiligenstadt Testament, and finding the joy in life that he once had.³¹

Beethoven and Napoleon were both greatly influenced by the French Enlightenment. Their musical and political contributions have continued to resonate throughout the world long after their times. In different ways, they both portrayed ideals of the French Enlightenment during their lives. Napoleon portrayed more Enlightenment ideals in the beginning of his life before he became corrupted by power. He began his military career with a clear outlook on the kind of leader he wanted to be, and tried to create good within society. Throughout the course of his career, the morals he had earlier in his life began to vanish as he gained power and had more and more military successes. He soon became obsessed with obtaining land and power, and this led to his eventual downfall. Beethoven however, began to portray more Enlightenment ideals later in life once he began to lose his hearing. This led him to the development of his "Heroic" phase, which was when he wrote the *Eroica*. In the early stage of Beethoven's composing, his style was more tentative and did not stray very far from what was normal or stylistically safe at the time. This changed as his hearing loss increased and he started to question his ability to continue pursuing music without the necessary aspect of hearing. This led him to try more unconventional things and insert more of his views of the Enlightenment into his composing and this is what spurred the birth of the *Eroica*. Overall, while both men

²⁹Jan Larue, et al. "Symphony," *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed February 9, 2017, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/27254pg2>.

³⁰ Hopkins, *Nine*, 82.

³¹ Solomon, *Beethoven*, 129 & 157-158.

were able to embody the ideals of the French Enlightenment, Beethoven was able to better portray these ideals, and the embodiment of these beliefs was synthesized in the *Eroica* Symphony.

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Brown, Howard G. "Napoleon Bonaparte, Political Prodigy". *History Compass* 5 (2007).

This article discusses in detail the various viewpoints on Napoleon's military career and the Napoleonic wars. Napoleon's pitfalls are also discussed. The author gives the viewpoint that Napoleon's pitfalls were not due to Napoleon alone, but due to shaky relationship between newly unified France, Napoleon's Empire, and its people. It was through the relationship of these three factors that led Napoleon down the road towards corruptness, and why he fell as fast as he rose.

Duby, Georges, and Robert Mandrou. *A History of French Civilization*. New York: Random House, 1964.

The authors of this book split the work up into two sections; the Middle Ages in the first half and Modern and Contemporary France in the second half. Focusing on important people and events during the Middle Ages and Modern and Contemporary France, the authors are able to describe the progression of details regarding the change in France throughout this time. From describing innovations during the sixteenth century, to romantic rebellions, Georges Duby and Robert Mandrou are able to put into words the great changes that France experienced in detail through *A History of French Civilization*.

Hopkins, Antony. *The Nine Symphonies Of Beethoven*. London : Heinemann, 1981.

The author of this source investigates and analyzes each of Beethoven's nine symphonies. Each symphony is allotted a chapter of its own, with biographical chapters occasionally added in. The chapters have musical examples from the symphonies written in staff notation to serve as visual examples amongst the prose. Aside from serving as a narrative for each symphony, the history surrounding each is discussed as well.

Kerman, Joseph, et al. "Beethoven, Ludwig van." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed November 21, 2016,

<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40026pg14>.

Beethoven experienced a range of international success, whether it was from his symphonic works or vocal compositions. *Eroica* premiered in the summer of 1803, and this symphony was dedicated to Napoleon Bonaparte due to Bonaparte's heroic efforts as a revolutionary in France. After Bonaparte declared himself Emperor, Beethoven immediately rededicated the piece "to celebrate the memory of a great man."

Larue, Jan, et al. "Symphony." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed February 9, 2017, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/27254pg2>.

This articles discusses the evolution of symphonic music from the 19th century through the present. The 19th century symphonies experienced an extreme growth in orchestra size, extremely difficult repertory, and the expansion of the symphonic form. The article then goes into specific details about composers of symphonies, such as Mahler and Beethoven. While Beethoven was known for many other works, some of his best and most well-known pieces are symphonies. Due to the contributions of Beethoven, symphonies began to become more elaborate and grandiose than ever before.

Miller, W.J. "Beethoven and Napoleon: Two Revolutionaries." *Proceedings* 17, (1987): 447-457.

The author of the article compares and contrasts both Beethoven and Napoleon in regard to the Enlightenment. Each of the individuals is initially discussed separately and are then later juxtaposed. A large focus is placed upon Beethoven and his method of coping with the acts of Napoleon. The phases through which Beethoven accepted and resented Napoleon is also covered.

Napoleon, and R. M. Johnston. *The Corsican; a diary of Napoleon's life in his own words*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1910.

Napoleon's character is illuminated through reading his letters. Through Napoleon's personal musings, we learn about his love of opera, his genius military tactics and his personal views of the Enlightenment. Napoleon's history is laid out by chronological order. Napoleon's letters and notes also discuss how he seized power as well as how he viewed his own successes.

Solomon, Maynard. *Beethoven*. New York: Schirmer Books, 2009.

The author presents a detailed synopsis of Beethoven's life and works. Beethoven's life is told through personal letters, accounts, and the author's opinion. The *Eroica* and the Napoleon dedication are discussed as well.

Tarbell, Ida M. *A Short Life of Napoleon Bonaparte*. New York: S.S. McClure, 1895.

This book delves into the complicated life of Napoleon Bonaparte. The author discusses Napoleon's great rise to power, his exile to Elba, and then to Saint Helen. The author also gives plenty support for his telling of Napoleon's life through letters from Napoleon's superiors, coworkers, and Napoleon himself. It is through these letters, that readers are able to better understand why and how Napoleon evolved throughout his life.

Thompson, J. M. *Napoleon Bonaparte*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1952.

The author uses different times and places during Napoleon's life to give a thorough summary of Napoleon's biography, and focuses on Napoleon's own correspondence in order to better understand the setting of his life. The book separates each chapter into the different countries in which Napoleon was in throughout his life and gives a detailed description of what went on in that place and time. It describes the laws and institutions in which Napoleon adapted the ideas of the monarchy, which enabled France to survive three invasions and over a century of political turmoil.

Vyverberg, Henry. *Human Nature, Cultural Diversity, and the French Enlightenment*. New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989.

The author goes into detail about the primary philosophies developed within the French Enlightenment. Each chapter goes in depth about the philosophies, definitions, who wrote about the philosophies, and opposing viewpoints. Through this, the author is able to show the progression of the French Enlightenment starting from the macro ideas down to the micro ideas. The French Enlightenment greatly impacted the course of the world's history.