

MUSIC AND PHILOSOPHY

BY FREDERICK N. SARD

MUSIC, as form, yields only music as logic yields only propositions. Yet the space of acoustics is likewise the space of mind and musical form is a part of the life of concepts and of imagery. In the domain of thought music is privileged to stand with other types of discourse. The last quartettes of Beethoven, for example, begin as sound but end at the farthest reach of thought.

Between the exact descriptions of science and the merging of distinctions by mystics we have not to choose. Nor do we require the buttress of Croce's theory that esthetic experience is a form of knowledge. We do not ask of Beethoven's music that it give us knowledge. What province is claimed for it beyond the limits of sound?

The major works of Beethoven sharpen the sensibility to the transcendental questions raised in the Old Testament and in the Upanishads (and by derivation in the Gospels); in western literature from the Greeks to Shakespeare, Goethe, Kant. Such questions as the place of mind in nature, the meaning of suffering, the nature of time or death, Beethoven knew and was concerned with. These questions are not futile when approached from the attitude of searching rather than solving. The reach of mind grows with aspiration, even if, like an asymptotic curve, it can never reach infinity.

This essay aims to present the philosophy or philosophical urge underlying Beethoven's music at the point of maturity, sometimes called "the third period" or "the third style." The attempt is predicated on the theory that music has a context derived from the ruling or central ideology of a given time. This is not the place to present the thesis that western music is a commentary on Christianity—its root-themes an expansion of the great leit-motifs of the

Gospels: the dignity of humanity and the conquest of death. But it may be noted here that the individual genius of the composer, up to the twentieth century, has worked within these leit-motifs, modified by cross-currents such as the French Revolution, the romantic movement in literature and the philosophies of idealism. The present disintegrated state of the art of music is a reflex of disintegration in other fields; and is evidence that the humanistic ideologies are no longer operative; that no new ideology has taken their place.

Often a musician builds a work to a poetic text; we beg to reverse the process by using musical works as a path to the content of the musician's mind. In choosing the meditation-form we wish to indicate that no claim is made for a one-to-one correspondence between Beethoven's music and the context proposed.

BEETHOVEN'S INNER LIFE

And there appeared to Beethoven the desire to take an inventory of his life; but his meditation merged with musical images, thematic fragments of works abandoned—like the Macbeth and the Faust. Memories rose to the surface and were carried away in the movement of revery. He was not at peace; questionings intruded, unsolved in his favorite books—Job, Plutarch, The Tempest—which may be compared to regions of clarity surrounded by dark spaces.

He compared his development to that of a tree, foliage potential in the roots and growing inwardly, silently, incorporating influences of light and atmosphere and the whole realm of nature, of which it is unaware. The feeling of novelty, of having added something not prepared for, vanished in a calm survey of his works. There, in the very beginnings, were the roots of his later modes of expression.

As musician, he had not coveted other domains. This centralization gave to his music a completeness new in the art. When he speculated on problems of destiny it was from the same feeling "for play" which animated his music. As his deafness increased he withdrew deeper into himself, pursuing ideas as he did musical images, into weighty digressions and hidden relationships. If, as musician, he was restless in a given key, as thinker he had even wider range for exploration.

The problem of his place in the scheme of things fascinated him. Convenient solutions were at hand, sanctified solutions, but he was intellectually honest and wished to break marble from his own

quarries. From his earliest works, this determination to think for himself was given free rein in the long sustained adagios.

In reaching out for some sign from nature, he never succumbed to mysticism. The tree-simile pleased him as adequate for musical form, but where has mind its roots? Nature presented to him a possible synthesis provided that mind was not left outside it. At one time, he leaned towards pantheism but now he realized that the addition of minds does not make a universe. If the world be intelligent at the core, it was necessary to tunnel through to reach it. Pantheism was too easy.

It was at the period of his Fifth Symphony (1805-1807) that his reverence for nature, as a spectacle, left unsatisfied his metaphysical hunger, sharpened by reading and a distaste for organized religion. The mood was assertive rather than analytical and reached the Greek-Christian antithesis in the opening theme of the C minor symphony, alleged to indicate "Fate knocking on the door," when, it seems to us, it was Beethoven who issued the summons. In the last movement of that symphony, the vitality of the artist sweeps the problem into an ocean of rhythm. The conflict, however, was not ended; only an armistice had been declared.

There followed a mood of Pascalian resignation before the immensity of the problem. What might have happened had the Upanishads come into his hands is an intriguing speculation, but the deeper resignation of oriental genius would not have been without profound influence on his mind. (Years later he copied out in his note-books many passages from the Upanishads). He was not as susceptible as Wagner to exotic philosophies but the eagle imagination of Beethoven would have felt at home on Himalayan heights.

In the seventh symphony (1812) he found a form in which the creator, by a tour-de-force, might conquer fate; a veritable "will-to-power" which earned for this symphony the title "Dionysian." It required, however, a crescendo of health beyond his powers to carry forward this thrust. The reaction was inevitable. The eighth symphony was a respite; he returned to the attack in 1817, the beginning of his "third period" during which he produced the greatest of his works: The Ninth Symphony, The Missa Solemnis, and the last quartettes.

In the challenge of the seventh symphony, Beethoven left the

clue to a music of the future. In the bold lines of an Angelo cartoon, he sketched the music of yea-saying, bringing within human compass those gods of fate, of closed-in-omniscience who are credited with condemning mankind to inescapable suffering—the god of Sophocles and the god of Job. Now they are made to dance to transcendental irony. Beethoven announces man's capacity for joy; with mockery he serenades the images of stone, then, suddenly, hurls the whole orchestra at them. In the first and second movements of this symphony he contemplates and addresses these gods with measured dignity. In the allegretto he had even placed wreaths around them; but in the last movement (with what cunning had he prepared this!) he tears off the mask of humility and crushes them with sledge-hammer force; you hear the thud of the fall of the leaden verities. With mind enfranchised, he asserts that suffering is not the core of existence; that a deaf, ill and harried man could say "Yea"; and in that assertion the emotional scope of music advanced centuries.

Again, in the last movement of the ninth symphony, he renewed the struggle, but this time with the support of the humanitarian Schiller, ending with a lyrical-religious setting supplied by "The Ode to Joy." In this music he succeeded in depicting joy but he was not so successful in depicting brotherhood. Occasionally, as in the piano sonata opus 111 and in the last quartettes, he was to recapture the militancy, but in these works as a whole, it is renunciation that is ennobled and deepened.

For these last works he must develop inner walls, proof against clamorings, bickerings, intruders great and small. He will select the ripest fruits of his melos; reach a greater internal coherency; wrest a new inwardness from contemplation, so that his discourse will satisfy the mind first before taking secondary substance through instruments. And this depth will give forth its own light. Wondrous, it seemed to him, that his deafness has opened hidden doors for his music; that an art which requires so many intermediaries—notation, instrument, performer—had in him reached the point remotest from outer things; and his whole being rejoiced in that memory and imagination had become peculiarly his instruments, giving him ideal conditions for concentration, for canceling the irrelevant, for control over the form of music.

To hold, without strain, the many phases of his life in an internal

frame: to contain, as in a gigantic bracket, the human and the transcendental, was now the essence of his creative activity. In the retreat of the ensemble-form, he sought to forge his own ideology, fusing eastern and western thought, to reach an outlook wider than the ethos of Christianity. So these last quartettes became his spiritual testament; the summit of his musical pilgrimage. From them we venture to draw the affirmations implicit in these works.

BEETHOVEN'S AFFIRMATIONS

Not by annexing dominion in time and space is mind realized; nor by prayer and ritual. No ethic, religion or philosophy can change the center of thought, transfer it to nature or give it a power beyond its power.

By diverse routes, in changing keys and rhythms, Mind ever returns on itself, enriched without concessions, ever enlarging its capacity, knower of Brahm, Absolute, of the genius-line across which nature walks with greater majesty.

So are creeds like the well-meaning friends of Job who, in conciliation and casuistry, simulate the spirit. The thunder of the whirl-wind must be answered by the thunder of Mind creative, else we be as Lears babbling in the storm.

Seek not to compel the elements to answer your questions; but take joy in the very motions of thought.

The silence of stars is not an impeachment of mind. One day Mind will address the universe in a language to which it can respond.

I sought essence only to find form; I explored form only to discover meta-forms.

Whether and how parts are related to a whole or if the whole inheres in every part—are themes of the one universal dialectic of spirit, of which the great minds of east and west are forms.

Order is the ground of higher orders; their transforms are a perpetual music of spirit.

Spirit, the Melos; the ground of reality; the voices of time, space, minds; here names end as sounds must end.

* * * * *

How satisfying are the ways of contemplation! It knows no hierarchy of matter-mind or mind-matter; requires no mediators; where prophets speak truth, they are its servants; dogmas cause

it to discover new hiding places; illusions cannot deceive it. It is not Reason, but it opposes all that is contrary to reason. It is not imagination, but imagination is its messenger. It is not wisdom, but wisdom is nourished by it. It is not coerced by discipline of logic but order is at its core, and all tangents of disorder, when carried too far, fall back into it. It requires neither number nor space but from it spring number and space. It is not form but is the matrix of forms.

The matrix of life, of light, of energy, works in manifold paths; where two paths join, there is mind; where three paths converge there is spirit. The one path of light and the one path of body, these make mind. The three enter the field of transforms where high aspiring meditation yields to music its precious fruits.

In the heart of this music dwells the secret of transformation—the white perfect of God.

Spirit of Spirits, through whom space is infinite and time is endless, who art raised high above all limits of upward struggling thought, Thou art mind's summit; form of forms; transform of forms. Our creations are but as the shadows of thy wings; our highest thoughts seek but cannot embody thee. Thy light is the source of suns as it is the source of mind. Thou art so that the heavens might be and all the systems that roll below and above us. Thy essence is certain and that which comes into being sings praises to thee. As thou art free of desire, no external force moved thee to create. Spirit of Spirits, to whom the human mind lifts its desire, in thee to be purified of desire.