

Understanding Ludwig van Beethoven and the  
First Movement of his “Eighth Symphony”

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Ludwig Van Beethoven (1770-1827) is recognized as one of the greatest composers who ever lived. His works were created to be timeless. He composed during a time of transition between the Classical and Romantic periods, and many of his compositions contain elements of each. The first movement of the “Eighth Symphony” is reflective of elements of both periods.

Beethoven began musical study while quite young. At the age of four, he started to learn the piano from his father, Johann, a professional singer. Johann was known to be exceedingly strict. Neighbors remember seeing the young boy crying through the window as he was forced to practice his instruments. There were few days when he was not punished, and his father often got him up in the middle of the night for additional practice (Solomon 16). Thus, young Ludwig adhered to a disciplined regimen as a child, and understandably grew up to be indifferent towards his father. He became very independent in nature and strong-willed, and applied those qualities to his compositions.

Besides his father, Beethoven’s greatest early influence was his teacher, Christian Neefe. It was under Neefe that Beethoven developed a strong foundation in both composition and theory. The two greatest composers who influenced him were Haydn and Mozart. According to The Billboard Encyclopedia of Classical Music, “Mozart’s influence is clearer in opera and concerto, Haydn’s in symphony and string quartet” (169).

Beethoven’s method of composing was quite different from many other musicians in that he usually made numerous rough drafts, or sketches. As many as 10,000 pages of sketches survive, providing insight into his approach to composition. On these sketches he would not only create the main movements, but he also edited, striving for perfection, and added notes and

phrases as possible additions. It is interesting to note, as can be observed from his sketches, that Beethoven considered adding a choral overture to his “Eighth Symphony” (Solomon 285), but it was never implemented.

From a very young age, Beethoven liked to improvise. His father didn’t like it when he strayed from his disciplined approach of reading the notation with precision. He was simply indulging his innate creativity. He eventually became “the greatest of all keyboard improvisers” (Morris 17). Beethoven’s inner development allowed him to be so creatively expressive. Introspection and contemplation are prominent during the Romantic period with regard to *inner* values.

Understanding not only the individual, but also the period of time around Beethoven’s lifetime will help put into context the events leading up to the time frame during which he composed his “Eighth Symphony.” There was much social and political turmoil in Europe during Beethoven’s life. Many events affected people throughout all of Europe. The eighteenth century in Europe is referred to as the Age of Enlightenment<sup>1</sup>, and it was an age that spawned new inquiries in all aspects of life. It was an innovative era for music, as well as for literature and art. Beethoven was in his early formative years at this time, but many great composers (e.g., Handel, J. S. Bach, Mozart, and Hayden) had realized their greatest compositional achievements during the Enlightenment, and Beethoven was able to witness this expansive creative period as he matured. It was an ideal time for a musician of his caliber to develop.

It is generally considered that the Classical period was from about 1750 to 1800, with the Romantic period following (Rowell 84). There was certainly an overlap of values, both socially and artistically, as the Classical period ended and the Romantic period began to blossom.

According to Rowell, many scholars argue that Classicism and Romanticism are two phases of

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<sup>1</sup> The Age of Enlightenment is considered to have ended with the French Revolution in 1789 (Mai 4).

the same period, differing only in matters of degree when comparing cultural values and harmonic styles. Nevertheless, there are commonly recognized distinctions between the two periods. For example, while a more chordal texture was valued in music during the Classical period, a more passionate individual expression was valued during the Romantic period.

Classical composers creating multimovement compositions often used a sonata<sup>2</sup> form as the form of the first movement, and a sonata is consistent with the structure of the first movement of the “Eighth Symphony.” The first movement also has a relatively simpler melodic structure than would have been seen in much earlier Baroque<sup>3</sup> compositions. It is easy for the listener to follow the dominant melodic line in the first movement of the “Eighth.” But the Romantic view of valuing the simple over the complex would also be generally consistent with the melodic structure of the first movement, and it is easy to see why some scholars think that the Romantic period was an extension of the Classical period.

In the eighteenth century, there were at least 300 sections of central Europe with German-speaking individuals, and these sections were acknowledged as semi-autonomous principalities. Most were “ruled by an autocratic and hereditary prince, king or archbishop” (Mai 5). It is interesting to note that Vienna became the dominant music city in Europe, rather than substantially larger cities such as London, Paris, or Rome. This was because King Ferdinand II of Vienna eagerly encouraged associations between the royal courts and musicians of nearby regions. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, those at court, along with wealthy aristocrats, supported the musical arts. Haydn and Mozart were thus attracted to Vienna and made it their home. It was this very environment that attracted Beethoven. It was a dynamic period of time, and *the dynamic* was another value of the Romantic period that was recognized

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<sup>2</sup> A sonata is a structure where the dominant theme is introduced in an *exposition*, then expanded and contrasted in a conflict or *development* phase, then finally resolved or restored in a *recapitulation*.

<sup>3</sup> The Baroque period is acknowledged to be the period from 1600 to 1750.

during the time frame comprising the end of the eighteenth century. The first movement of his “Eighth Symphony” does have elements of the dynamic, what Rowell referred to as “a tendency towards restless motion” (117). So societies, as well as compositions, reflect this particular dynamic value of the Romantic period. Thus, his natural gift of genius, coupled with the dynamic musical environment of Vienna allowed for Beethoven to reach his unsurpassed compositional heights.

The central period of Beethoven’s compositional life, from 1802 and 1812, was known as his heroic period<sup>4</sup>. It was during this period that he composed the “Eighth Symphony,” and it was completed by October 8, 1812 (Solomon 276). Much of the work of his “Eighth Symphony” was done during a Bohemian sojourn. He usually tried to get away from Vienna in the summers because of poor sanitary conditions that were made worse by the summer heat. He would customarily try to go somewhere in or close to a natural setting. In the summer of 1812 he had gone to the Bohemian spas (Gibbs 2). It was during this summer of 1812 that he not only met Goethe<sup>5</sup>, but he also wrote his famous letter to the “Immortal Beloved,” a still unnamed and mysterious romantic interest. *Emotion* as a value of the Romantic period may then have colored his own emotional state during the period when he wrote his “Eighth Symphony.”

Some of Beethoven’s symphonies are so powerful that they seem almost suitable for battle marches. But the “Eighth” is more playful, festive, and exuberant, reminiscent of the joy experienced at a festival. Annual festivals around the world have always been popular in allowing the mass public a time to revel and take a break from their sundry ordinary tasks. Nineteenth-century critics noted a similar festal quality in both the “Seventh” and “Eighth”

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<sup>4</sup> Many works during this heroic period have a powerful thematic quality, and often symbolically portray darkness being overpowered by light and by the good.

<sup>5</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was a prominent German writer, playwright, and poet. Perhaps his best-known work is the play *Faust*.

symphonies (Solomon 275). Neither seems to possess a traditional slow movement, one of sadness, thoughtfulness, or mourning, like all of Beethoven's other symphonies have. This festive attitude would be consistent with the Romantic value of the *organic*, where music reflects life itself. The first movement of Beethoven's "Eighth Symphony" represents just such an organic composition as it displays ebbs and flows just as do ordinary organic processes.

In the key of F major, the first movement of Beethoven's "Eighth Symphony" is a quick tempo in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time identified as *allegro vivace e con brio*. *Allegro* represents a fast and bright tempo<sup>6</sup>, typically between 120 and 168 beats per minute (bpm). *Vivace* qualifies the allegro tempo, indicating a tempo of around 140 bpm. As a relatively fast tempo, *vivace* also indicates the mood as vivacious, or lively. *Brio* also describes the mood, and means "with spirit," or "with brilliance." Since *e con* is translated literally from Italian as "and with," the entire phrase *allegro vivace e con brio* essentially means "lively and with spirit." There are moments within the first movement that are quite intense, and *the intense* is one of the Romantic values described by Rowell (117). An example of intensity is an explosive fortississimo (fff) towards the end that contrasts with other very quiet portions of the piece, including a very calm ending to the first movement.

The "Eighth Symphony" was first performed at Beethoven's academy on February 27, 1814 (Solomon 276). Beethoven also included the performance of the "Seventh Symphony" and his successful "Wellington's Victory" at the same gathering. Despite Beethoven considering the "Eighth Symphony" superior to his "Seventh," the "Seventh" overshadowed the "Eighth" with much more favorable attention. A journalist for the leading periodical of the time in Leipzig commented that the "Eighth" wasn't any weaker in any way to the "Seventh," but that perhaps if

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<sup>6</sup> Tempo speeds typically range from Larghissimo (very slow, at around 20 bpm) to Prestissimo (extremely fast, at 200 bpm and above).

the “Eighth” (in F major) had been played before the “Seventh” (in A major), there would have been a different and more favorable aural experience for the listeners (Gibbs 2).

After the “Eighth Symphony,” Beethoven completed no new symphonies until the “Ninth” was completed in 1824. He did not complete another concerto after 1809 or another piano trio after 1811 (Solomon 293). He seemed to compose in one style to a level that he considered his maximum potential, and then he’d drop focus on that style and move on to something else.

Critics of Beethoven suggest that his orchestration doesn’t always align with his intentions. Perhaps this is due to his prodigious editing (suggesting indecision), or perhaps due to mounting reliance on the inner ear rather than his physical ears due to his increasing deafness. Or perhaps they just can’t accept that he pushed the envelope of creativity beyond the bounds of generally accepted theory and harmonic structure. Richard Wagner, for example, wrote,

“There is, on the contrary, a disturbing ornament, added as though by accident, which we should like to obliterate for its damaging effect. I cannot remember ever having listened to the opening of the “Eighth Symphony” (in F) without being disturbed in my perception of the theme at bars 6-8 by the non-thematic additions of oboe and flute above the melodic line of the clarinet; whereas the preceding collaboration of the flutes in the first four bars never interfered with my comprehension of the melody, although it does not exactly follow the theme either, because the tune is here insistently made clear by massed violins playing *forte*.” (Oswald 179) (Fig. 1).



Fig.1: Bars 5-8, showing entry for clarinet, oboe, and flute, from First Movement of Beethoven's "Eighth Symphony."

Wagner's comments of the passage in question are consistent with the Romantic value of *the disordered*, which often was manifested in non-traditional phrasing. It would also be consistent with the Romantic value of *the ambiguous or ambivalent* because of the unfamiliar tonality, suggesting a problem with clarity.

Beethoven *did* care for clarity. On his sketches, the horns and flutes had originally entered a bar earlier, but Beethoven later changed this to its published form. He was concerned about the interplay with the positions of the instruments. For example, at the opening of the recapitulation<sup>7</sup> all of the woodwinds were to play with the bassoons in unison. But he altered it by removing the primary theme from the upper woodwinds and instead wrote sustained notes for them (Oswald 179). These corrections show that he really did give thoughtful consideration to making each instrument fit precisely where he wanted it.

Beethoven was so interested in creativity that he pushed rules to their limits. He didn't overly concern himself with rules of harmony and musical theory, except for what they could do to assist him in exploring new creative horizons. A friend once pointed out a series of parallel fifths in one of his compositions, a "sin" in Classical harmony (Schonberg 113). He immediately

<sup>7</sup> Recapitulation is the final section of a musical sonata form where the exposition is repeated in an altered form and the development is thereby concluded harmonically and thematically.



rejected the notion that there should be a “rule” on this matter. Beethoven was not a servant of rules; rather, they were *his* servants.

Beethoven thought that a great composition should have a good ending and a sense of narrative continuity (The Billboard Encyclopedia of Classical Music 168). Rhythm figures prominently in his pieces, and different movements of a symphony, for example, were divided by different dominant rhythmic patterns. Beethoven was always mindful of trying to make the transitions from one section to another section smoother. He thereby used similar or complimentary thematic devices in each section to smooth those transitions, and *the continuous* is a value of the Romantic period. The result was a greater sense of continuity and dynamic outpouring within the piece. The “Eighth Symphony” is a good example of this approach. Each movement is like a chapter of a book, with subsequent movements building on or fulfilling a dominant theme.

Beethoven acknowledged two periods of psychological depression, at least one of which was after his completion of the Eighth Symphony. He had lingering anxiety about money, and his fears became worse as he got older (Mai 71). Perhaps this was because he became increasingly dependent on income from compositions as his deafness became prohibitive for teaching, performing, and conducting. Also, around 1811, the time of the Eight Symphony, there was a marked diminution in his productivity. As he became increasingly deaf, he was more likely to retreat to his own inner world (Schonberg 117). His deafness had effectively completely overtaken him by 1817.

The difference between Beethoven and all other musicians who preceded him was that he considered himself more than a musician and a composer. He considered himself an artist, and letters he had written to others included also the words “art” and “artistry” when describing

himself and his ambitions. He had a sense that he was writing for eternity. Beethoven thought that an artist had a responsibility. That responsibility was to operate from the domain of the mind. He acknowledged God for his gift (Solomon 93), felt he was a worthy recipient of that gift, and wanted to fulfill his creative partnership with God. His works, including his beloved “little symphony in F<sup>8</sup>,” will surely resonate for humanity in eternity.

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<sup>8</sup> Beethoven referred to his “Eighth Symphony” as “my little symphony in F,” distinguishing it from the “Sixth” and “Seventh” symphonies, both of which generated greater praise.

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