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Beethoven the Soviet Revolutionary

For more than a century-and-a-half, the character Ludwig van Beethoven has been inextricably linked with revolution. “Character” is the key word here, because Beethoven the complicated human being has, over time, been flattened and distorted by musicians, philosophers, and politicians into Beethoven the character. This Beethoven is portrayed as a hero or role model for a number of ideologically varied causes. Beethoven is a popular figure due, in part, to the ambiguity and pathos of his work, but the portrayal of Beethoven as a revolutionary is equally influential. He is the composer who brought down the archaic Classical style and brought forth the new and unexpected Romanticism. The Soviet Union was one of the countries that took Beethoven the Revolutionary to the extreme. As exemplified by the musical celebrations of 1927 (the centennial of Beethoven’s death and the ten-year anniversary of the October Revolution) this Beethoven was raised to heights of insurmountable heroism and used in an attempt to create a musical cultural revolution that would obliterate the ‘dangerous’ modern music trends of the time. This portrayal of Beethoven’s revolution, a complete destruction of the old and birth of a new dimension is, however, an oversimplification of the entire body of his work. The Soviet glorification of Ludwig van Beethoven as the musical apotheosis of revolution instead shows us the limitations of such a view on his work. By approaching his compositions from a different direction, with a focus on cyclical evolution and the works of his Late Period, one can draw a parallel between the flaws in the Soviet portrayal of Beethoven’s work and the failures of the Soviet musical revolution at large.

The Mythos of Beethoven the Revolutionary

Before discussing the portrayal of Beethoven in the Soviet Union, it is important to
establish the mechanism through which Beethoven the man had metamorphosed into Beethoven the myth. The Soviet Union was not the only country to make use of Beethoven as a political symbol.

The exaggerated image of “Beethoven the Revolutionary,” like many character traits we associate with the composer today, only began to flourish after his death. Starting with the efforts of his compatriots to ride to fame on his coat-tails, the portrayal of Beethoven became increasingly exaggerated as he was propelled past the category of genius and into the echelon of the musical gods. Although his works were popular and certainly considered unconventional while he was alive, the reasoning behind their reception was different. Ulrich Schmitt argues that Beethoven's famous works were not originally “considered radical because they contained passages and forms borrowed from French revolutionary song.” They did do this, but the typical “German listener” instead associated these new sounds with the innovations of the Industrial era. The “more impulsive works” were loved by the modernists and rejected by the traditionalists for the same reasons—they were the auditory version of the leaps of progress that led to changes like “steam engines, train travel, and social upheaval.”

A direct connection between Beethoven and revolutionary ideology was made later through the writings of Richard Wagner, who introduced the idea of Beethoven as a “rebel” and champion of political and social goals (which always aligned Wagner's own). “In [Wagner's] Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft from 1849,” for example, “Beethoven is portrayed as the composer who brings absolute music to its end in his Ninth Symphony by introducing words and voices.” Beethoven is characterized here, as in many of Wagner's other works, as the executioner of the archaic concepts of the past who brings them “to [their] end” by bringing in newer, better ideas.

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1 Dennis, 11.
2 Dennis, 15.
3 Pederson, 243.
This image of Beethoven as an ideological soldier grew in popularity as others tried their hand at interpretation, leading to an influx of “partisans [that] ignored the complexity of the real man and tried to force 'their' Beethoven onto the rest of Germany and the world.” Their glorification soon became stuck in a cycle of positive feedback. Much of that interpretation of Beethoven's work was ensconced in the ideology of the Enlightenment period, where they lauded him for freeing music from the “cult” of the Classical style. However, through their obsession with this idea they made his “demythologization” of music “myth” and simply “displaced” the old cult with a new one—that of Beethoven. By the time of the October Revolution in 1917, Beethoven had already taken his seat amongst the untouchable gods.

**Music without a Message in Revolutionary Russia**

Classical music was still considered valuable in revolutionary-era Russia, even as other bourgeois activities were denounced. In the eyes of musicians, the power of an instrumental piece was in the ambiguity of its message. This power was transcendental, and compared to it, the struggles of everyday life were irrelevant.

Orchestral performances in Petrograd continued throughout the Bolshevik siege, even as the sound of cannon-fire seeped through the walls. Years later these performances were still viewed with pride, a signal of “musicians' perception of the transcendent nature of art, and their insistence that art is above, if not divorced from, political struggles, even revolutionary ones.” Although many of the most talented musicians in Soviet Union, composers and performers alike, left within the first few years of the revolution, those that stayed seemed to build a wall between their ideals and reality. Unlike other leaders in the arts and culture, musicians stayed relatively

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4 Dennis, 31.
5 Chua.
6 Nelson, 14.
7 Nelson, 14.
quiet during the political upheaval of the first few months of Soviet rule, staging no strikes and offering no condemnations, severing the idea of music from any sort of ideological ground.\footnote{Nelson, 17.}

**The Conflict between Modernists and the Left: Creating a New Revolutionary Music**

It is important to note that during the 1917 revolutions and the civil war that followed, the Communist Party was too caught up in restructuring society politically and economically to busy itself with the cultural front, especially with something as ambiguous as music. A government cannot censor a work when its message may or may not exist. Literature and art, which had a concrete message that could be interpreted, were controlled more rigorously, whereas classical musicians were given extraordinary space to breathe—just not for long.

During the New Economic Policy, as the country tried to restabilize its economy by allowing a slightly free market, music was allowed freedom in multiple dimensions. The questions: “What is revolutionary music?” and “What is the music of the new society?” were posed and musicians were allotted the freedom to answer them, because the party still needed the support of professionals in building a new society.

The confusion regarding revolutionary music is particularly evident when looking at the writings of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, who was outspoken on what both literature and art meant to the new society. It was he who stated that:

Art belongs to the people. It should put it deepest roots into the thickest part of the wide, working masses. It should be understood by these masses and loved by them. It should unite the feelings, thoughts, and wills of these masses, thereby raising them. It should awaken and develop the artists in them.

\[\text{Искусство принадлежит народу. Оно должно уходить своими глубочайшими корнями в самую толщу широких трудящихся масс. Оно} \]
должно быть понятно этим массам и любимо ими. Оно должно обединять чувство, мысль и волю этих масс, подымать их. Оно должно пробуждать в них художников и развивать их.]

At the same time, however, Lenin allows room for a special type of art to exist in the transitory period: the spectacle [зрелище], not a real work of art, but more or less a beautiful distraction [красивое развлечение].\textsuperscript{9} Beethoven and Tchaikovsky, according to Lenin, created real works of art.\textsuperscript{10} The trouble that the country had was discerning between what would be the future of works of art, what would be allowable spectacle, and what would be in bad taste.

During the early Revolution, the musical world split into two categories: the Modernists and the Left. The modernists were more appreciative of classical music and the works of great artists. To them belonged the Association of Contemporary Music [ASM].\textsuperscript{11} The Modernists believed that the works of the future would be developed from the elements of earlier works, and for this reason, they were also frequently accused of being bourgeois. However, under the quasi-capitalist NEP, the ASM had no choice but to cater to the interests of the historical consumers of classical music. There was no other plausible way to compete financially.\textsuperscript{12}

The Left, on the other hand, consisted of multiple groups with varied views of what new music was. What they had in common was their desire to drastically revolutionize music.\textsuperscript{13} They included the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians [RAPM]. It is from their ranks, for example, that the symphony of factory whistles originated—a city-wide symphonic presentation that included factory whistles, cannon fire, and a specially-tuned steam-powered whistle-organ

\textsuperscript{9} Quoted in Al’shvang and Tsukerman, 236.
\textsuperscript{10} Quoted in Al’shvang and Tsukerman, 236.\textsuperscript{11} Al’shvang and Tsukerman, 237.\textsuperscript{12} Nelson, 50.\textsuperscript{13} Nelson, 50.\textsuperscript{14} Nelson, 43.
contraption.15

Ideological differences aside, the parties also built different types of social networks among themselves, society, and the party. These networks would later affect the outcome of the Cultural Revolution.

It is important to note, however, that both parties considered Beethoven’s music to be great. Moreover, both parties actively participated in the 1927 celebration of Beethoven’s centennial and the ten-year anniversary of the revolution.

**Building Beethoven**

The Soviet cultural relationship with the character, Beethoven the Revolutionary, provides us with a useful looking-glass through which to examine the validity of the trope in and of itself. The Soviets’ affection for him was overwhelming, especially considering the trepidation the country felt regarding Germans after World War I. Due his music's applicability to almost any moment of struggle, Soviet musicologists would have to perform a feat of extreme character-pruning, with the ultimate goal of creating the perfect mentor, for the newly-developing Soviet culture of music, one built almost from the ground up.

Several “fan clubs” were established for the composer, one of which, the *Narkompros* Beethoven committee, viewed Beethoven as the apotheosis of musical genius and revolution, who “gave musical voice to the aspirations of the masses.” *Narkompros’s* leaders, Anatoly Lunacharsky and Pavel Novitskii, in fact “proclaimed” that the messages behind Beethoven's work coincided with “brotherly unity” and “linked closely to the aspirations of Soviet socialist culture.”16

The messages' link to the “aspirations of Soviet Culture” came from the efforts of the

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15 Nelson, 28.
16 Nelson, 187.
musicologists, who saw Beethoven's music as referring to the French revolution, with “the restless striving of a new consciousness and confidence in the triumph of reason.”\textsuperscript{17} They painted portraits of a suffering artist who they insisted, despite lack of adequate evidence, was a “warrior' whose belief in creativity, freedom, and social equality was inseparable from the revolutionary ideas brewing in France.”\textsuperscript{18}

The result of this pruning was the creation of an even more concentrated, and false, form of the Revolutionary Beethoven character. Activists of the time even found the themes of Beethoven's work to be more applicable to socialism than the work of contemporary artists.\textsuperscript{19} Novistskii, for example, so believed in the timelessness of Beethoven's work that he claimed that “the historical boundaries of the bourgeois revolution did not limit Beethoven's connection with the future because Beethoven's individualism never turned into the dead end of subjectivity and pessimism” and in the face of seemingly insurmountable physical disabilities, he “never lost courage or succumbed to despair.”\textsuperscript{20} Not only were these extreme exaggerations, but they were often inaccurate upon inspection of all of the facts. Just the idea that Beethoven “never succumbed to despair” can be discredited by a simple reading of the Heiligenstadt Testament. But this extreme, one-dimensional image of Beethoven became the foundation on which the Soviet Union attempted to build a completely new culture of music.

**Beethoven and the Centennial**

Now that Beethoven had been established as an ideologically fitting model for the future of Soviet music, the next step in establishing Beethoven as a musical forefather was the cleansing of the masses’ palate through frequent exposure to classical music. There was an effort

\textsuperscript{17} Nelson, 187.
\textsuperscript{18} Nelson, 188.
\textsuperscript{19} Nelson, 188.
\textsuperscript{20} Nelson, 187.
to bring music appreciation to the common people, and in the realm of classical music that
included providing “concert-lectures,” like one titled “Beethoven and French Music,” where
“spoken introductions . . . allowed the speaker to tell audiences how they should listen and
respond to the music they were about to hear.”

The portrayal of Beethoven as a composer of insurmountable might had made its way
into the very fabric of Soviet ideology. In the struggle of the Bolshevik regime to “define what
was suitable for a socialist society,” classical music had made its way to the top of the list, with
Beethoven sitting at its pinnacle. According to Richard Stites, “The official position was one of
reverence for the high art of the past heard in classical music—Beethoven for his revolutionary
spirit and Tchaikovsky for his Russian soul.” Even before 1927, his work appeared frequently
in “musical celebrations and popular concerts” in the Soviet Union, especially the Third, Fifth,
and Ninth Symphonies. Beethoven was even further linked to the guiding ideal of communism:
absolute equality, through a grand experiment in the realm of performance: the Moscow Soviet's
Persimfans, a “conductorless orchestra,” whose “debut concert… featured an all-Beethoven
program.” But the glorification of Beethoven did not simply result in the frequent performance
of his art. The Soviet people drew all possible connections between their culture and Beethoven,
pointing to Hungarian themes and hints of Russian folk songs in his work. According to Amy
Nelson, the obsession grew to the point of near-cultural adoption:

For those eager to embrace Beethoven as the musical patron saint of the Soviet
proletariat's revolution, even the composer's nationality was subject to
reinterpretation. Braudo confidently asserted that Beethoven preferred the

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22 Stites, 21–22.
23 Nelson, 33.
24 Nelson, 186.
25 Nelson, 189.
“Russian pronunciation” of his last name, i.e., with the accent on the second syllable. The Narkompros committee called for making the Soviet Union Beethoven's “second motherland,” even while its representatives mocked spokesmen from bourgeois countries who claimed Beethoven as “theirs.” The preeminent Beethoven scholar at GAKhN insisted that, after Germany, no other country besides the Soviet Union had embraced Beethoven with more passion and so completely made him “their own.”

The extreme adoration for the composer in the Soviet Union would not have been possible if they had not viewed him as the “musical patron saint of the Soviet proletariat's revolution,” an image that, while somewhat artificially created by the work of Soviet propaganda, was still dependent on the old idea of a revolutionary Beethoven.

With the arrival of 1927, these efforts only grew more momentous. “The coincidence of the tenth anniversary of the revolution and the Beethoven centennial strengthened an already-established resonance between the composer's life and work and the Soviet revolutionary agenda.” In March of 1927, a variety of events, performances and publications, and “even a biographical play” relating to Beethoven were coordinated. The fifth anniversary of the Persimfans orchestra was also in 1927, so they dedicated their concert series to the entire set of Beethoven’s symphonies. Moreover, the government provided free tickets for “factory committees, Komsomol cells, and musical technicums” during the “official Beethoven Week,” as well as presentations on the “evolution of the piano sonata from Beethoven to contemporary Russian composers,” and the publication of musicologists’ recent work about Beethoven.

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26 Nelson, 189.
27 Nelson, 186.
28 Nelson, 191.
29 Nelson, 190.
With the exception of Persimfans, who refused to simplify their music for the masses, many classical works performed during this palate cleansing were selected because they were easy to understand.\(^{30}\) Despite claims that all of Beethoven's work was “for the masses,” performances of his work were limited to those of the Heroic Period. The value of the later works was acknowledged by academics, but avoided in the public sphere.\(^{31}\) This incomplete “Heroic Period” image of Beethoven can easily be applied to the revolutionary character trope, but also foreshadows the failure of the approach when contextualized. The work of Beethoven is more than just his Heroic Era, and some of the most fascinating lessons can be gleaned from works omitted from Soviet programs.

**The Cultural Revolution**

No discussion of the influence of Beethoven on Soviet Music is complete without mentioning Vladimir Ilyich Lenin’s affection for Beethoven’s work. One of Lenin’s most famous statements regarding the German was recorded by Maxim Gorkii, who remembered an evening in a Moscow apartment, where, listening to the sonatas of Beethoven, Lenin said:

“I know nothing which is greater than the “Appassionata,” I would be willing to listen to it every day. It is marvelous, superhuman music. I always think with pride—perhaps naively—what wondrous things human beings can do!”

[Ничего не знаю лучше «Appassionata», готов слушать ее каждый день. Изумительная, нечеловеческая музыка. Я всегда с гордостью, может быть, наивной, думаю: вот какие чудеса могут делать люди!]\(^{32}\)

Anyone who has come across this quote in a popular setting usually thinks that the quote ends there. However, what Lenin continued to say after that ominously portrays the complicated

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\(^{30}\) Nelson, 191.  
\(^{31}\) Nelson, 189.  
\(^{32}\) Quoted in Al' shvang and Tsukerman, 240.
future of the state and music:

“… But I can't listen to music too often. It affects your nerves, makes you want to say stupid nice things, and stroke the heads of people who could create such beauty while living in this vile hell. And now you mustn't stroke anyone's head – you might get your hand bitten off. You have to hit them on the head, without any mercy, although our ideal is not to use force against anyone. H'm, h'm, our duty is infernally hard!”

Hidden behind the glitter and grandeur of the celebrations of 1927 was the beginning of an ominous trend. The nationalization of cultural art forms had worked its way through visual and written media and finally began to focus on auditory material. During this process, Beethoven the Revolutionary was brought forward in order to create a foundation for the new Soviet culture of music, and these intentions were admirable. The leaders had hoped that as a result of this Cultural Revolution, the people would become intelligent and civilized and new Soviet composers would take up the reins of the German master. However, the interest of the government was a double-edged sword.

The new Soviet works that had premiered in honor of the ten-year anniversary of the revolution had floundered, garnering attention but not sustained interest among the musical crowd. There was something impeding the further progress of musical success.

The state concluded that it was folk and modern music holding the people back. These old styles would have to be destroyed to allow progress—in other words, they would have to be “hit on the head, without any mercy.” The Bolshevik Cultural Revolution, which started soon after 1927, was an “attack [from above] on Russian 'backwardness' and tradition.” Unfortunately,

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33 Quoted in Nelson, 1.
34 Nelson, 191.
it also destroyed the significant progress that the Soviet Union had made in music. For example, *Persimfans* was dismantled due to “the xenophobia and anti-commercialism of the period as well as the state's ever-stronger penchant for control.” Throughout all of this, “portraits of the famous composers of the past were removed from the recital hall of the Moscow Conservatory,” but Beethoven and Mussorgskii were left “as the officially recognized forefathers of proletarian music.”

Hope in a Beethovenian revolution had not died, but it would not materialize. The serpent had begun to consume itself and the rich musical traditions of the peoples of the Soviet Union were destroyed in the effort to raise them all to one level—that of the Russians. It also should be noted that Russian music had itself already been “subverted by European culture” and classical music in particular.

The Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians [RAPM] played a large part in the destruction of popular culture and silencing of composers. They hoped to create a musical revolution that developed in parallel with the Cultural Revolution, but they failed. The party offered “nothing appealing to replace what it condemned.”

The Soviet Union’s incomplete understanding of musical revolution parallels its failure to grasp the true nature of Beethoven’s music. Beethoven the Revolutionary had failed the Soviet Union.

**Two Different Revolutions**

The Soviet Union’s portrayal of Beethoven was based on an understanding of his work as revolutionary. In this sense, revolution is a force that creates new matter unrelated to what came before. For example, Beethoven seems, in the work of his Heroic Period, to trample over the

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36 Zemtosovsky, 96–97
37 Nelson, 240.
rules and regulations of the Classical style. If we only look at this period of his life, then yes, Beethoven does seem to be creating “revolutionary” music. However, under closer inspection, “revolutionary” is not the best way to describe the entire body of his work. By interpreting his work as revolutionary, we make the same mistake the cultural advisers of the Soviet Union did—we create a caricature of Beethoven and avoid seeing him as a multifaceted person. But if one cannot look at Beethoven's work as revolutionary, then how does one approach it?

I suggest that we begin where the Soviet Union failed—we focus our attention on the compositions of his Late Period. The works are more complicated and contemplative: they are the product of a wiser Beethoven, who is looking back at the efforts of his youth with an experienced eye. He reaches towards the past for inspiration, “realiz[ing] that there remain unexplored avenues in earlier stages of musical development that have been bypassed by the composers of the post-Baroque generations.”  

This search, unlike the superficial return of many German Romantics to the techniques of the past for their own sake, was instead a quest for “germinating influence... that could aid him in the symbolization of new spheres of psychic and social experience.” And yet, the teachings of his youth remained—“Beethoven never relinquished his reliance upon the Classic structures; rather he imbued them with greater freedom and fantasy, expanding their boundaries and maximizing their coherence.” In a sense, there was no revolution in Beethoven's music. The old was not completely overthrown to make room for the new. Instead, cyclical evolution is imbued into his work. He does not destroy the old; he returns to it and builds on it, using it as “germinating influence.” In this manner, Beethoven simultaneously moves art forward and full circle.

Beethoven's Late Period is a crucial part of an evolutionary conceptualization of

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38 Solomon, 385–386.
39 Solomon, 386–387.
40 Solomon, 385.
Beethoven’s creative process. The elements of cyclic evolution are evident in much of his work. It is during this time that he finally masters the art of the song, and successfully writes a Liederkreis, or song cycle. Similar elements are present in purely instrumental works as well, as “the cyclic form of the Liederkreis is the prototype of similar structures in the last works, such as the String Quartet in C-sharp minor, op 131, and the Grosse Fugue, op. 133 . . . [and] the Bagatelles, op. 126.”

Many of the later works of Beethoven are also unusually centered on fugues, including the Sonata in B-flat (“Hammerklavier”), where the finale is composed of a “fugue in three voices.” According to the Oxford Dictionary of Difficult Words, a fugue is “a musical contrapuntal composition in which a short melody or phrase (the subject) is introduced by one part and successively taken up by others and developed by interweaving the parts.” In other words, a fugue is an evolving cycle. There is cyclical repetition—in the form of the melody that is traded among the instruments, but this cycle grows as it is passed along. The melody gets more complicated and “interwoven” with the passage of time—it evolves. Cyclical evolution, then, becomes an apt depiction of the struggle of life and the acquisition of knowledge. The sun rises and sets, the earth rotates, history repeats itself, and yet, as the human figure moves through these cycles, it matures to a superior, wiser form. According to Solomon, “[in the “Hammerklavier” Sonata], as in the Grosse Fugue, the . . . closest analogue is the process of creation.” In addition to the fugue, variation becomes a “new vehicle for [Beethoven's] most imaginative thoughts” and appears frequently in the late period. Again, we see Beethoven relying on cycles (the recurring melody) that evolve (the variations) to get his message across.

In the Ninth Symphony, too, the culmination of his life's work goes full circle, as the

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41 Solomon, 390.
42 Solomon, 393.
43 Solomon, 395.
older Beethoven turns to ideas born in his youth and builds on them. The concept of setting Schiller's poem to music occurred to Beethoven “before [he] left Bonn for Vienna” and the precursors of “Ode to Joy” and scherzo melodies have been found in much earlier works. Some critics have found cycles more tangible that that: according to d'Indy, “All the typical themes of the symphony present the arpeggio of the chords of D or B flat, the two tonal bases of the work; one might, therefore consider this arpeggio as the real cyclic theme of the Ninth Symphony [emphasis author’s].” While the dialogue between the orchestra and the bases and cellos at start of the finale implies that the earlier movements (which correspond to his earlier works) have been dismissed in favor of the “Ode to Joy” melody, the melody itself would not have been formed without the discourse and the efforts of the movements that built up to it. The melody evolves from the earlier, less effective, movements. Thereby Beethoven's magnum opus, like the works of his late period, evolves from the culmination of the efforts of his entire life and cyclical returns to the past.

The failures of the Soviet Union to use the character of Beethoven the Revolutionary to create their own musical revolution through the destruction and suppression of modern music illustrates the flaws in the revolutionary model of Beethoven's contributions. He did not destroy the works of the past but instead returned and sampled from them, developing a new style.

Works Cited


44 Solomon, 405–406.
45 Quoted in Solomon, 407.


