

EDITORIAL: WHY WE STILL NEED TO LISTEN TO BEETHOVEN

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Since it is a satisfactorily round 250 years since Ludwig van Beethoven drew his first breath in Bonn and a rather more untidy 193 years since his last in Vienna it is the first anniversary that is being celebrated this year. Yet, as quite a few commentators have observed, Beethoven's music hardly lacks for performances and it is difficult to see how the big round birthday this year will be significantly different from the untidy ones on either side. Orchestras will play the symphonies, the famous ones more often than the others; pianists will play the sonatas; quartets, concertos, overtures, and so on, all will continue to be at the core of classical concert programming.

What's more interesting perhaps is to think about how composers today regard Beethoven and how their response to his work differs from that of previous generations. In 1956 that arch provocateur Chuck Berry threw down the challenge to 'Roll over Beethoven', but it was a fundamentally playful challenge: Berry's music lay on one side of a cultural divide defined by race, class, social status, instrumentation and critical reception, Beethoven's on the other; neither was likely to displace the other any time soon.

For composers in the classical tradition the relationship to Beethoven is more difficult, something that became evident around the time of his 200th birthday in 1970, perhaps especially so for composers based in Germany. Probably the most complex response to the Beethoven legacy was Mauricio Kagel's *Ludwig van*, a set of three interconnected but separate works. First came a 90-minute-long film in which Kagel offers an extended critique of the mythology that had grown up around Beethoven, as man and musician. The film includes scenes in a re-imagined 'Beethovenhaus', not the tourist shrine in Bonn where people visit the composer's birthplace but a room in which everything – walls, ceilings, chairs, music-stands, piano – is covered in Beethoven manuscripts.

Photographs of details of this decorated room then became a 45-page score to be freely interpreted by an unspecified number of performers. Finally, Kagel made a recording, based on Beethoven's music (although not that in the film or the score), in which two singers, two pianists and a string quartet 'interpret Beethoven as "new music" . . . fragmentarily in any chosen sequence'. Kagel explained his Beethoven project as a 'meta-collage' and as an attempt to acknowledge Beethoven's 'fundamental modernity'¹ and, as in all Kagel's best work, each of the three elements of *Ludwig van* manages to evoke this aspect of Beethoven's music and yet retain a distinctly surreal discontinuity, by turns comic and macabre.

¹ Mauricio Kagel (interviewed by Karl Faust), 'Ludwig van', in *Ludwig van Beethoven, 1770–1970* (Bonn: Inter Nationes, 1970), p. 66–67. It is a reflection of the way that the 200th anniversary of Beethoven's birth had become part of a concept of national political identity that Inter Nationes, initially created as a sort of PR operation for the Federal Republic of Germany and distributed through the Goethe-Institut, should publish this Beethoven Festschrift.

Kurzwellen mit Beethoven – Opus 1970 was Stockhausen's contribution to the Beethoven bicentenary. In *Kurzwellen* (1968) the performers are required to improvise transformations of shortwave radio signals; in *Opus 1970* these are replaced by moments from Beethoven's music, as if the airwaves were suddenly jammed with Beethoven. In his 1975 book on Stockhausen Jonathan Harvey described *Opus 1970* as an 'unmitigated disaster', but he was writing soon after the release of the work on LP and judging it as if it had the same significance as *Telemusik*, *Hymnen* or the original version of *Kurzwellen*. *Opus 1970* is not without hubris but, if nothing else, it demonstrates how utterly different were Beethoven and Stockhausen as composers.

In 2020 there does not seem to be the same urgency for composers to test themselves against their great predecessor, to lock horns with him in a testosterone-fuelled contest. Linda Buckley's *Beethoven reflected* (2019) is a good example of music that offers a more modest and possibly more perceptive commentary. Commissioned by the ConTempo Quartet and premiered in February in Galway, it consists of three pieces, the first two based on the opening Adagio of Beethoven's String Quartet in C-sharp minor, op. 131, the third on its finale. Buckley quotes the fugal subject of Beethoven's first movement in both of the 'Adagio reflected' pieces: in the first it runs through the music like a stream, but no longer in a fugal landscape; in the second it appears as a head-motif that is then forgotten. Beethoven-inflected perhaps, rather than 'Beethoven reflected'?

Why is it worth discussing Beethoven in a journal of new music? Partly because it is instructive to think about how our relationship to music of the past has changed since 1970. The male hegemony within the classical canon is now something to be questioned, rather than taken as a given, and research into historically informed performance practice has changed the way that 'old' music sounds. Today we want to know about the music by women and by composers of colour that was contemporary with that of Beethoven. We also don't try to find the 'fundamental modernity' of Beethoven by playing it as if it was 'new music' but rather by trying to find out how his music sounded when it really was new.

Not that Kagel was wrong to suggest a 'fundamental modernity' in Beethoven's music, and that's another reason why we still need to listen to it. In 1956 Chuck Berry wanted Beethoven to 'roll over'. These days I think the challenge may be coming from Beethoven, because his approach to form, subject matter and tonal resources is a good deal more radical than most music being made now, in any genre. It's not just the way that the finale of the ninth symphony confronts our ideas about humanity, about musical structure, even our sense of good taste, it's also all those other extraordinary works. One example: the beginning of the op. 101 Piano Sonata which sounds as if we had just walked in on a conversation; no preamble, then just a sketching out of a form. Thank you, Herr Beethoven.