

PERSPECTIVES OF BEETHOVEN

IN THE JANUARY BEETHOVEN FESTIVAL, THE GREAT COMPOSER IS
VIEWED FROM DIFFERENT TIMES AND PLACES.

BY EDDIE SILVA



“Beethoven is a cornerstone of classical music culture,” says St. Louis Symphony Music Director David Robertson. “In our Beethoven Festival, we are presenting him as a monument you can see from different vantage points.”

As viewed through time and across national borders, through history, through contrasting political ideologies, through changing aesthetic tastes, from a wide range of perspectives, in Powell Hall over the month of January,

we may find best why Beethoven matters. We may gain greater appreciation of the omnipresence of Beethoven, and how he has effected, and continues to effect, music-making from the 19th century to today.

For example, the opening program (January 10-11) begins with a recent composition by Missouri-native Stephanie Berg. Would Beethoven have had a faint notion of Missouri when he was writing his Seventh Symphony (1811–1812)? But in looking back toward the Viennese master, Robertson hears in Berg's *Ravish and Mayhem* "a tremendous energy like the finale of the Seventh Symphony." Berg is a graduate of the University of Missouri, and was selected as one of eight composers for the Mizzou International Composers Festival, where *Ravish and Mayhem* was premiered by the ensemble Alarm Will Sound in 2012. The Mizzou New Music Initiative, on the Columbia campus, is supported by the Sinquefeld Foundation, modern-day patronage that Beethoven would have welcomed.

Combine Berg with Carl Nielsen, writing in the 20th century, and the scope of Beethoven's influence is evident. Although writing more than 100 years after the creation of Beethoven's fierce Violin Concerto (1806), Nielsen, a Dane, considered the German master's work a model for his own. "It is big, romantic, with the violin and orchestra arguing over the material," says Robertson.

The following week (January 17-19) reveals how Beethoven re-imagined the relationship between solo instrument and orchestra, and then in turn shows how later composers re-imagined the orchestra itself. "In the 'Emperor' Concerto [1811]," Robertson observes, "the piano is much more integrated with the orchestra. There is a lot that is delicate, to the point that the piano morphs into the larger whole."

The Hungarian composer Béla Bartók would reconsider the solo instrument/orchestra dynamic in 1943, with his Concerto for Orchestra, also on the weekend-two program of the Beethoven Festival. Rather than writing a traditional concerto, in which the orchestra plays in relation to a solo instrument, Bartók writes as if each section of the orchestra has a solo part. As Beethoven had opened new territory for symphonic form, so too does Bartók by creating his Concerto for Orchestra.

Beethoven inspires artists to be bold, to re-make, to re-imagine, to evolve from traditions, to break the rules of those traditions. In his Symphony No. 3, "Eroica," (1805) he enlarged the scale of the symphony, made it assume



PAWEŁ KOPSYNSKIIT

Brett Dean

powers that were unimaginable to his contemporaries. Performed on weekend three of the Beethoven Festival (January 24-25), the “Eroica” Symphony, Robertson observes, “changed the world of music with just two chords.” The effect the “Eroica” had on classical music, and on culture as a whole, is akin to moments such as Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*, which announced a modern new century, or Marlon Brando howling in his T-shirt, which expressed a new artistic style and a new style of being in the middle of that same century. The “Eroica” is of such bold proportions, 21st-century audiences are still awestruck by its confident power.

Beethoven took imaginative leaps. So does contemporary Australian composer Brett Dean (notice how global Beethoven’s influences are: Denmark, Hungary, Australia, Russia, Missouri). Before devoting more time to composing, Dean was a viola player with the Berlin Philharmonic. Robertson figures, “Beethoven would play his own piano concertos with his symphonies; Dean will play his viola concerto with a Beethoven Symphony.”

Preceding Dean’s concerto is the most intentioned evocation of the spirit of Beethoven during the course of the festival. *Testament* was inspired by Dean’s viewing of the actual “Heiligenstadt Testament.” This is Beethoven’s letter of despair, written at a retreat in the Vienna woods, where the com-

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poser had been sent by his doctor to restore his well-being. Beethoven recognized that he was losing his hearing, and wrote a letter to his brothers to voice his torment. [see “A Hero’s Tale” p. 10]

Robertson describes the logic of Dean’s inspiration for *Testament*: “Dean looked at the actual parchment, and thought of the sounds of quill on the coarse paper. And he thought of Beethoven not being able to hear those sounds as he was writing.”

Testament begins with a semi-circle of 12 violists playing with unrosined bows. “Without rosin you hear almost nothing,” Robertson explains. “So the audience sees the activity of the violists, but hear almost no sound. Thus we connect with Beethoven’s deafness. When they play again with rosined bows, we hear fragments from Beethoven’s ‘Razumovsky’ Quartets, which he also penned, remarkably, at the time he was writing the ‘Heiligenstadt Testa-

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The Beethoven Festival concludes with two Fives, Beethoven’s and Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphonies (January 31, February 1–2). If the famed first four notes of Beethoven’s Fifth (1808) are indeed emblematic of “fate knocking at the door,” Shostakovich’s alarming knock at the door is not so abstract, and more menacing. It would not have been a stretch for Dmitry Shostakovich to have imagined that knock at the dead of night being Stalin himself. The composer had been warned of “nonsensical sounds” in his music, in a *Pravda* article written in 1937. This was no mere aesthetic criticism from government censors. Stalin’s reign of terror had been unleashed, and Shostakovich was aware of comrades disappearing into the Soviet Gulag. Due to these threats, he chose to cancel a performance of his Fourth Symphony. For his Fifth, he would need to create music that would not only rehabilitate his career, but would save his skin.

“Shostakovich wrote his Fifth to be compared to Beethoven,” Robertson observes. “Both represent a passage from darkness into light. Beethoven’s is a full-throated finale of triumph and celebration. With Shostakovich, it’s not so easy to label.”

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