

WILLIAM H. OWEN



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THE GROWTH, DEVELOPMENT AND
SIGNIFICANCE OF
BEETHOVEN'S NINTH
SYMPHONY

William H. Owen

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THESIS

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FOREWORD

The purpose of this thesis is to give a detailed consideration of the Ninth Symphony in its relation and meaning as regards previous symphonic development; its significance as implied by Beethoven and the interpretations of its meaning which have been expressed in a later period.

However, it is first necessary to give a background of the development of the symphonic form in order to comprehend fully the underlying conditions at the time when Beethoven began writing and to realize fully the significance of Beethoven's epochal work.

The development of the symphony was an outgrowth of the Florentine reform of 1600. It was due to a revolt of the intelligentsia against the rigid style of the church music. Musically, it was the result of two lines of development, that of instrumental practises and instrumental forms. A definite and vital instrumental music began at the end of the 16th Century and as has been noted it was a reaction against the vocal polyphonic style of the church which had for so long held sway. The reaction was for a freer style, a rhythmical quality which had been lacking, a better defined harmonic structure and more emotional expression. The strong urge for rhythmical vitality suddenly brought instrumental music into the foreground.

The great number of paths through which the symphony evolved can only be briefly mentioned here but it will prove adequate for a general background.

Some of the new instrumental forms were the direct outgrowth of the older vocal forms. The earliest of these the canzoni being, for example, instrumental versions of the madrigals, while others as the toccata were new and originally conceived. The canzona da soavar occupied an important place in the development of orchestral forms. It was the chief vehicle of a great many experiments and gradually developed with the more extended sonata da chiesa. Then followed the in-

fusion of the dance, forms and growth of the sonata da camera or suite, which was an important step towards the cyclic form, which in turn attained its full maturity in the symphony.

The distinguishing feature of the sonata form over all other forms is the peculiar pattern of at least one of its movements, usually the first, the outcome of a long evolution, which, in its finally settled form, with later Mozart and Beethoven, became the most flexible and the most convincing medium for the elaboration of musical ideas. The first-movement form appears in the 18th Century in either of two primary forms: the binary, two sections, and the ternary, three sections. The binary form as introduced by Pergolesi, is simply a broadening of the song-form in two sections, each of which is repeated, and having one single theme or subject. Thus the second section simply reproduces the thematic material of the first, but in the reverse order of keys or tonality. Gradually, however, German suite writers displayed tendencies toward expansion and modulation of harmony especially in the restatement of the first theme. This development reached the point of obliterating from the mind of the hearer the original key and thus came into being the ternary song-form, that is, the first theme, free development of it, second theme

and restatement or recapitulation. The second theme as time went on became more individualized, with distinct melodic and rhythmic characteristics.

With Stamitz and the Mannheim school, one essentially new musical idea was brought to instrumental music, the idea of contrast, the contrast of key and dynamics. Contrast of key had been assiduously employed for two hundred years but dynamic contrast did not appear until the advent of Stamitz. While fiercely opposed by the pedants among German musicians the practise of contrast of dynamics found quick acceptance in the large centers.

The inception of the opera was also a large factor in instrumental development. Not only did it offer a field of wide instrumental practice but it was also the abstract through which instrumental forms absorbed some of the dramatic significance that proved to be a vitalizing influence. One of the first uses of the word symphony was in description of the operatic prelude in certain incidental bits of music. It was only with the creation of the French overture by Lully that the operatic prelude assumed significance as an orchestral form. This French overture as used by Lully consisted of three movements, a brief introduction of a slow and pathetic character, a fast movement and a final repetition of the opening slow movement. At about the same time Scarlatti in Italy was

setting the form of the 'Italian overture'. This consisted of two fast movements separated by a slow movement. In general, the opera overture served as a laboratory for experiments in orchestral form and it had a considerable influence on the orchestral music of the period.

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach the most eminent of Johann Sebastian's sons contributed a most important part to the development of the symphony. He has been given the title of the father of the piano sonata and it is he who definitely fixed the pattern of the sonata and determined its order of movements - Allegro, Adagio and Presto. His great importance lies in his instrumental works, which while they were characteristic of the time, held balance to the side of greater harmonic richness and artistic propriety. They played an important part in the further development of the prevailing forms to a point where they could become free enough and practical enough to deal with the deep emotions. Thus Bach became the leader of this new form and exercised a wide influence over his contemporaries and immediate followers.

When Joseph Haydn came on the scene the term "sinfonia" was still being used to designate orchestral compositions. Haydn's contribution to the symphonic form was to bring about a greater clearness of outline, variety of treatment, and enlargement of ideas. His first symphonies contained many crudities but he steadily improved. In

the very important first movement he gradually gave the second theme its rights, found new ways of developing themes, and elaborated the working-out section. He was responsible for the inserting of the minuet between the slow movement and the finale, thus setting the example for later practice. His string and wind sections became more independent, his musical ideas more cultivated and his orchestration clearer and more buoyant. His work cheerful and gay showed solid workmanship, and under his hands the symphonic form gained stability, strength and a technical perfection which in a literal sense make him the founder of the modern symphony.

The next most influential personage in the development of the symphony is Mozart. He brought nothing essentially new, but, by the virtue of his great genius, he endowed the symphonic forms as he found them with a hitherto unequalled depth and force of expression, and individuality so strong that it can truly be called "Mozartian! Mozart was not a reformer and his absolute independence and self-sufficiency of style enabled him to use with equal success the vocal and instrumental idioms. And in his work is actually found an assimilation of the two styles and an interchange of their individual elements. The outstanding feature of all his instrumental music is its peculiarly melodic quality, the constant sensuous grace of melody regardless of rhythm or speed. Mozart is the final result of the strong influence which operatic song had

exerted upon instrumental music since the beginning of the 18th Century.

Through Haydn and Mozart orchestral music emerged strong and well defined from a long period of dim growth. Their symphonies are the confluence of many streams of musical development most of which had their source in Italy. The building up of the body of orchestral music was synthetical, it had to await the perfection of the various materials which were combined to make it. But once the constituents had fallen into place, the perfected combination made clear, new and peculiar possibilities, to the cultivation which Haydn and Mozart contributed enormously. These new possibilities were in the field of sonority and tone color. In search of these Haydn and Mozart originated the orchestral style and pointed the way for all subsequent composers. Thus we approach the figure who stands like a colossus, bridging the gulf between the 18th Century Classicisms and the 19th Century romanticism.

We come, then to the period where Beethoven took up the reins. He had as a background [?]centuries of justifiable reverence for the traditional symphonic-form, and because of this very fact, his daring disruption of this form looms with the greater significance as a historic turning point of music.

BEETHOVEN'S THREE CREATIVE PERIODS.

Beethoven's creative life is divided into three distinct periods.

The first creative period ends with the year 1802 but includes the writing of the 2nd Symphony. The works of Beethoven's first period were written in the style of Haydn and Mozart. Melodies and passages having a striking similarity to the two Masters works and yet parts of works which undeniably revealed the future Beethoven. To quote Schauffler, "Beethoven had one foot on the formal 18th and the other on the Romantic 19th. In spite of the great power which Beethoven possessed and was fully conscious of, he was never an iconoclast or radical. He was rather a builder whose architectural traditions came from well-accredited sources, in kinship probably somewhat closer to Haydn than Mozart. However, his topics were different, he had a far greater use of rhythmic gesture, a more nervous and full-blooded eloquence, his was 18th Century music raised to a higher power.

(The second period begins in 1803 with the writing of the Kreutzer Sonata and marks a distinct change of style. This period was characterized by maturity, wealth of imagination, humor, power and individuality to a marvelous degree. If Beethoven had done nothing after 1814 he would still be one of the very greatest composers in the field of pure instrumental music. His ideas increase in

breadth and variety, the work becomes more harmonious and significant, touching many sides of thought and emotion.

It was in this period that Beethoven broke away from the idea of definite types of treatment for certain kinds of forms. As in the rondo and scherzo Beethoven made them express what he felt according to his conception of an idea. Likewise the number of movements were determined by the content of the work, and the conventional repetition of themes was made a matter of choice. The usual method of key succession used in a large number of sonatas of Haydn and Mozart, was used only if he thought it agreeable to his ideas. Beethoven also disregarded the convention of separating different sections from one another by well-defined breaks; instead, he subtly connected the different sections by phrases akin to the main theme, thus making the connecting link an inherent part of the piece. He also makes use of episodes in the working-out section, introduces even new themes and expands both the coda and the introduction. These changes are of the nature of enlargements[✓] of a plan already accepted and as Grove states it, seem "to have sprung from the fact of his regarding his music less as a piece of technical performance than his predecessors had perhaps done, and more as the expression of the ideas with which his mind was charged." These ideas were too wide and too various to be contained within the usual limits, and, therefore, the limits had to be en-

larged. Other musicians had allowed themselves liberties but not with the same high-handed individualistic confidence of Beethoven. He typified the general movement of freedom at the end of the 18th Century and what he felt he said both in society and music. However, the great differentiation was the fact that in society he was extremely abrupt and careless of his manners while in his music he was painstaking, laborious and never satisfied until he had conveyed his ideas in unmistakable language.

Thus, conventional rules and regulations of composition were made subservient to what he considered the essentials - consistency of mood and development of the poetic idea. He becomes the tone poet whose versality and beauty of expression increase with the increasing power of his thought.)

The transition to the third period is even more definitely marked than that to the second. To it belong the pianoforte sonatas opus 101 to 111, the marvelous quartets opus 127 to 135, the Ninth symphony and the mass in D, works built on a grander scale than those of the second epoch. It almost would seem as if the form enlarged and extended, ceased to exist as such and became a principle of growth, comparable only to the roots and fibers of a tree. The polyphony becomes free and varied and serves only to repeat, intensify by contrast the poetic idea. The orchestra becomes inadequate for expression of his ideas

and he adds the choral part, moreover, these later works are touched with a sort of mysticism, as if the musician had ceased to speak in order to give the prophet utterance. To quote Dannreuther, "He passes beyond the horizon of a mere singer and poet and touches upon the domain of the seer and the prophet; where, in unison with all genuine mystics and ethical teachers, he delivers a message of religious love and resignation, identification with the sufferings of all living creatures, depreciation of self, negation of personality, released from the world."

During this period Beethoven was plagued almost beyond endurance by the rapid approach of total deafness. He was plunged in the depths of despair and had contemplated at different times ending his life. All of these factors aided to put him in a pathetic mood. He wrote regardless of any traditional form and expressed the anguish and longings of his soul. His chief concern was the principle of germination and the evolution of a given theme through every manner of metamorphosis.

His most radical modifications, as regards the movements themselves, were the substitution of the scherzo for the minuet and the introduction of the chorus into the symphony. With the exception of the 8th Beethoven abandoned the minuet entirely. We find the 3rd movement of the 1st symphony entitled 'minuetto' but it is really a scherzo and serves as a miniature model for the scherzos of the 5th

and 9th.

The second outstanding innovation of the chorus in the finale of the 9th stands as a stupendous monument to the man and humanity of the world. It voices the last and best message of the master and is the crowning achievement of a remarkable career. Beethoven conceived the use of the chorus as an enlargement and enrichment of the forces of the orchestra.

The changes in technical features found in the 3rd period are of far less importance, comparatively, than the increase in aesthetic content, individuality and expression. Beethoven did not strive for new innovations for the sake of mere originality but undertook them only with extreme discretion and only as necessity required. Even to the last it is evident that his most extensive work was built on the sonata form, and when this is not always clearly apparent it is found upon study, that the details which seem to obscure the true basis, are organic and logical amplification of the structure itself, never mere additions. However, the last works, and especially those for piano are of such a mystic nature as to make it impossible for the average listener to appreciate them to the fullest extent.

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