

Beethoven Rolls Over 250

The year 2020 marks the 250th birthday of the great composer, and he remains as influential yet elusive as ever.

By Stuart Isacoff
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The manuscript for Ludwig van Beethoven's first edition of the Ninth Symphony

The year 2020 marks the 250th birthday of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827), and celebrations are planned around the globe. In New York alone, Carnegie Hall, the New York Philharmonic and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center will be presenting Beethoven series. He is perhaps the most influential musician in Western history, casting so great a shadow that many subsequent composers were reluctant to produce more than nine symphonies (Beethoven's total), for fear of retribution from heaven.

Yet that godlike assessment of his gifts was far from unanimous. One of his contemporary critics, for example, called his Second Symphony "a crass monster, a hideously writhing wounded dragon, that refuses to expire." To this day, there are listeners who find some works of this long-suffering, irascible, deaf, most brilliant composer unfathomable.

There are reasons. We associate our favorite composers with specific, cherished musical moments— Tchaikovsky’s love theme from “Romeo and Juliet, ” say, or Brahms’s lyrical “Cradle Song.” At times Beethoven similarly woos us, offering the valentine of an unforgettable, beautiful flower of a song: the regal strain from the slow movement of his “Pathétique” Sonata; the extraordinarily hummable “Ode to Joy” of his Ninth Symphony; the enchanted atmosphere at the beginning of the “Moonlight Sonata” (Berlioz called this opening “one of those poems that human language does not know how to qualify”).

But with Beethoven that is only part of the story. In discussing the “Moonlight Sonata,” Charles Rosen pointed to the “astonishing ferocity” of the work’s third movement—an example of how this composer went to extremes (a close observer of his music during his lifetime described him as harboring together “doves and crocodiles”). Radical shifts of mood are one of his core qualities. And the result could seem violent. When Mendelssohn played the opening of the Fifth Symphony on piano for Goethe, the poet called it “absolutely mad. It makes me almost fear that the house will collapse. And supposing the whole of mankind played it at once!”

Beethoven learned how to shock as a student of Haydn, who was a master of surprise. Consider the second movement of Beethoven’s final String Quartet, Op. 135, where insistent, repeated figures tumble on in a kind of unending freefall. As their gripping, galloping energy builds into organized commotion, like the roar of a whitewater rapid, he suddenly shifts into an odd, lopsided rhythm that leaves the listener feeling startled and off balance. In so willfully upending our expectations Beethoven, it turns out, has been playing us for laughs. And throughout his catalog of works he demonstrated over and over that he was quite the jokester. Yet sometimes it takes a skilled listener to catch the punchline.

Rhythmic inventiveness was a mainstay of Beethoven’s art, and examples abound, some foreshadowing modern innovations. There is the surprising “Tico Tico”-like rhythm in the Rondo of his First Piano Concerto, for instance, and the “Charleston”-sounding section of the last Piano Sonata, Op. 111. But what the composer harnessed in his last String Quartet was less a matter of rhythmic vitality than the

expressive potential of structure—the drama that emerges from the collision of the musical architecture’s tectonic plates. And this creates another challenge: The ability to apprehend his grand designs can take substantial effort. With Beethoven, even amid the charm of a particular moment, there is always a larger game afoot. While other composers may play a good game of checkers, he is consistently a master of chess. (Even in his very first Piano Sonata, the musical germ on which the piece is built contracts in stages until it implodes, like a balloon that has been punctured.)

There is also the issue of his expansive constructions, like the second movement of his last Piano Sonata, where the music becomes, in the words of legendary musicologist Donald Tovey, “an infinite variety of quivering ornament.” Nobel Prize winner Romain Rolland found sacredness in this moment of “white on white, this immobile lake”: a time-suspending stretch that brought to his mind the “almost impassive smile of Buddha.”

If such broad conceptions, as well as Beethoven’s many disparate sides, become at times difficult to digest for listeners, they can prove a test for performers as well. The great pianist Louis Kentner, in his book, “Piano,” suggested that there are only two kinds of pianists: those who can play the first movement of the last Piano Sonata—“somber, chaotic, passionate”—and those who can play the second movement, characterized by “tranquility...with a crystalline ending of trills suggesting the starry firmament.” Few, he implies, can handle both.

The sense of eternal mystery captured by Beethoven greatly influenced composers who followed, spurring longer and longer works by the likes of Liszt, Wagner, Bruckner and Mahler. Thus, this master of agitation gave rise to a rich musical legacy, encompassing both explosive emotion and sublime repose. This, today, is his birthday gift—to us.

—Mr. Isacoff’s latest book is *“When the World Stopped to Listen: Van Cliburn’s Cold War Triumph and Its Aftermath”* (Knopf).