

The Eighth Symphony

I believe that Beethoven's last period represents his decadence, in spite of the number of great works composed in this period. It should be noted that decadence has nothing to do with quality, but rather with attitude. With rare exceptions, such as the Ninth Symphony, Beethoven lost his capacity to reach an ecstatic climax in his last period, perhaps because he had lost confidence in his ideals.

What makes the Eighth Symphony such an interesting work is that the composer goes through the process of going into decadence as the work progresses. It is rare indeed to see an artistic expression of a profound change in the creator inside the work itself. The Eighth begins in the second period and ends in the third. The first movement, up to the last few bars, is second period Beethoven. The main theme is strong and heroic. The return to the recapitulation, always a Beethoven strong point, is one of his best. At the end of the movement there is a typically vertical, pounding, affirmation of the main theme. But then, in the last few bars, something odd happens, and the main theme is played at the very end pianissimo. I hear it as a mockery of this exuberant theme that was forcefully affirmed just 12 bars before. I feel that the whole movement has been "thrown away". Is Beethoven telling us that he doesn't believe in those heroic values any more?

What follows supports this thesis. The second movement is also a mockery. It is reminiscent of Mahler in the use of dark humor, by far the most common type of humor we see today. This kind of humor is highly destructive of values and beliefs. Contrast it with the positive humor one hears in the Second Symphony described above, or even in the first movement of this symphony before the last bars. Next comes a Minuet marked as "Tempo di Minuetto". And it is a real, old-fashioned Minuet! Beethoven had called the third movement of the Fourth a Menuetto, but it isn't that at all, but rather a Scherzo. Why would Beethoven write a true Minuet at this point in his life? It has been said that he is "looking back". But

what is he looking back to? I don't believe that Beethoven ever moved backward. I believe he is again mocking himself. Then, in the last movement, he creates a structural monstrosity. It is in Sonata Form, but where the Coda is almost half the movement. He had been the great expander of the Coda in Sonata Form. Where before it had been just a few bars to bring the movement to a close, Beethoven turned it into a summary of what had happened before. Is he again mocking himself by composing a Coda that is absurdly long?

Self-mockery is destructive of ideals and values. Beethoven seems to be telling us that he no longer believes in the ideas that he has expressed until now. One consequence of this is his inability to reach a climax, where in his second period he composed some of the greatest climaxes in all of music. In the Eighth, he ends pounding away without a release. The same happens in the Hammerklavier Sonata. In the last three sonatas, he doesn't even try. Only in the Ninth do we get a true climax.

Why would Beethoven undergo such a profound change at this point in his life? It is impossible to know what could have been on his mind, but we can speculate that something disappointed him and made him question his ideals. Could it had been his audience, who was the Viennese aristocracy at the highest level, and that presumed to understand the heroic values contained in his music? When it became necessary for them to actually act out those values in the defense of their country against Napoleon, they had simply run away. Not a particularly heroic reaction.