Inside Beethoven

I - Why Beethoven?

When I started listening to Beethoven's music, I was already imbued with the ideas and values of ancient Greece as well as the ideals of freedom and individual development that have driven our civilization. Immediately, I identified these ideas and values in his music, and a lifelong bond was created. During the last five years, I have been living more intimately than ever with Beethoven's music, especially his symphonies. I have conducted all of them more than once, which has given me better understanding of the music's inner processes. My objective has always been to understand what each work is about – what it "says" – rather than with a purely musical approach. I am interested in what one can learn from these works that can make us grow as human beings.

Beethoven composed principally instrumental music, through which he expressed not only emotions, but also ideas. It is easy to understand how emotions are expressed in instrumental music since we have all felt them. However, to express ideas without the aid of words may seem impossible at first. In the music of Bach, one can detect the idea that music, by itself, can express a cosmic harmony. However, Beethoven went much further than this, expressing concrete ideas about life, destiny, courage, defiance and freedom. After him, most composers felt a necessity to follow Beethoven and express ideas in their music as well. Alas, with few exceptions, the idea of Death became more and more dominant. Interestingly, this idea was not so important for Beethoven, who was much more concerned with life.

In understanding the ideas contained in Beethoven's music, a historical context is important. He was one of a group of artists that were inspired by, and at the same time made sense of, the most important political event of the last 500 years: the French Revolution. Other artists profoundly touched by the French Revolution were Goethe, Blake and Shelley. Many of the ideas developed in Beethoven's music can also be found in the works of these artists. The most important idea inspiring all of them was freedom.

Beethoven's music aims at liberation. He expresses in his music not only the "feeling" of liberation, but also the process through which it is achieved. And this is where we can find the values and ideas in his works. Beethoven was a revolutionary artist because he stood for freedom. He was also a revolutionary artist in the way he expressed it. In addition, by stressing individual development in the process of liberation, one can conclude that Beethoven associated freedom with the possibility of growth, and not simply the absence of external authority.

This leads us to a wonderful paradox: Beethoven the revolutionary artist *par excellence*, develops his art in imperial Vienna, not exactly an example of political freedom, and he is supported and appreciated principally by an aristocracy that the French Revolution would eventually destroy. To make sense of this it is important to understand that the values contained in Beethoven's art are based on the idea of individual freedom and creativity as the most productive drive in society. These are ideas that come to us from ancient Greece. Any Western aristocracy, even a very decadent one, wants to identify itself with these values, which give an ethical foundation to their position of authority.

In the next chapters we will explore what these values are, how they are expressed in Beethoven's art, and how they can affect our lives.

II - Let us create our story

The Mexican poet Octavio Paz wrote: *"… the past is a function of the future… the will of the future makes the dead rise and imposes order to their works. Thus, by turning our eyes to the past and questioning ourselves about the meaning of that mass of debris, we look for the signs of the future. We yearn to comprehend in order to do. That comprehension is, in its own way, poetry and invention."*

The best way to understand Beethoven's First Symphony is to analyze what he did in the following ones. Some say that this symphony is in the style of Haydn, his predecessor. I believe that it is in Beethoven's style from beginning to end. However, to make this affirmation we must first define what is "Beethoven style". We could say, succinctly, that Beethoven's symphonic structure begins with a conflict that is addressed by emphasizing his individuality (usually at the end of the first movement). After establishing this "verticality", he searches for harmony with the world around him, now moving more and more "horizontally". He works at this from inside himself in order to reach a union that is usually ecstatic and sometimes even orgasmic. This format was copied by most symphonists of the 19th century. However, what they could not copy was Beethoven's internal process, particularly his conviction of individual affirmation, without which, the rest is a lie.

The endings of Beethoven's symphonic first movements tend to be particularly strong and savage: a fist that comes down breaking any resistance. Where does that conviction and self-confidence come from? It seems to impose itself as if it were a force of nature. I believe we can find the origins of this in Homer. He was the first Western artist, even then establishing an individualistic and defiant attitude. In *The Iliad* we see how Diomedes detects the presence of an immortal in the middle of a battle before Troy, attacking him immediately and even succeeding in wounding the god. In *The Odyssey*, Ulysses is not content with narrowly escaping from being swallowed by the Cyclops Polyphemus, but proceeds to challenge Poseidon, the monster's father. As his ship sails away he shouts that it was Ulysses, "sacker of cities", that has blinded him. For this moment of hubris, Poseidon will take vengeance on Ulysses, causing him great harm before he returns home. Westerners are different from other people of the world in only one thing: some of us will not bow to the gods.

Undoubtedly we feel some uneasiness when we read how these heroes were proud to be called "sacker of cities". However, we should try to understand this attitude, which differentiates them from the Trojans who hide behind defensive walls. The city represents civilization, order and law. But a truly free man will not tolerate walls, and will heed no law that does not come from inside him.

In the West we understand that all creation implies destruction, and we are willing to go forward even if it requires defying the gods that represent order and the status quo. This defiance can lead to the solitude of the individual: an individual who will not accept to live surrounded by walls and to kneel before an imaginary god or gods. Three hundred years after Homer, another Greek said that "man is the measure of all things", but it is in Homer that one can feel it and live it. And so can we feel it and live it in the music of his heir Beethoven.

III - Ode to the masses
Impotent entertainment

"Friends, no more of these sounds!" These are the first words to be heard in a symphony. What an excellent idea to open this musical form to the human voice! This was a great innovation in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. But these are strange words. What are these sounds that Beethoven doesn't want to hear anymore? It seems obvious that he is referring to the first three movements of the symphony. But these are maybe the best three movements he ever wrote. In the first movement, Beethoven seems to question the very existence of the universe, and it is overpowering as an expression of the implacable force of nature. But at the end of the movement he seems to defy it with another implacable force, this one coming from within himself. He continues in the second movement with a diabolical dance: Beethoven knows, as do all great artists, that strength is only found in hell. The third movement is, typically, a search for fluidity, of the horizontality that puts us in tune with the cosmos. But here he does it perhaps better than ever before. The form is Theme and Variations, but instead of the usual presentation of one theme that is developed, he presents us with two themes: one is static (in 4/4 time) and the other is fluid (in 3/4 time). With each variation, the first theme acquires more and more fluidity, as if it "learned" from the second theme, reaching a climax where the two principles are fused (in 12/8 time).

But the fourth movement begins tragically rejecting the themes of the first three. It is as if Beethoven were rejecting all of his life and work. We know that the process of composition was unusual. At the time, Beethoven was writing two symphonies: a purely instrumental one (for London), and a choral one. It would appear that, not finding a suitable way to finish the instrumental symphony, he "attached" a movement from the choral symphony. But in "Beethoven style", the finale must be an organic development of what has happened before. How odd that Beethoven would thus finish the symphony with an external "attachment", and how ironic that this would become the most popular music he ever wrote!

For more than ten years, Beethoven had lost the capacity to end his works with an ecstatic finale, something that had been his specialty. We find that his finales first become labored and willful, such as the ones in the Eighth Symphony and the Hammerklavier Sonata, which end with hammer blows rather than fluidity. Later, the works don't seem to end at all. In the last piano sonatas it is difficult to know when the work has ended. The old style finales that were so convincing because of their coherence with the rest of the work seem now to be out of his reach. Thus it would seem that he could not finish his instrumental symphony in the previous symphonic style he had developed and taken to a climax. What had happened?

The world had changed in those years. Napoleon had destroyed the old and decadent structures of Europe. When the French army occupied Vienna, not only had it defeated militarily the aristocracy that had been both financial support and intelligent audience to Beethoven, it had also defeated it morally. An aristocracy that cannot defend its people from external enemies has no reason for being.

In a previous chapter we mentioned the implicit paradox of the relationship between Beethoven, the artist of the French Revolution, and his decadent, aristocratic audience. Beethoven paid for this with profound disillusion, so strong that it made him impotent. Even while the old structures were reinstated after Napoleon's defeat, the world was never the same again. Power was beginning to be transferred from the elites to the masses. But, what do the masses know about defying the gods and the creative imperative? The masses only want to be entertained.

I believe that Beethoven understood this. No more of these sounds: no more of these heroic struggles. Now, instead of making love, we masturbate. Now we want to have fun. With his "Ode to Joy", Beethoven gave the masses the best popular music they were ever going to have: an exquisite drug that always works, even when one is conscious of what it is. I say this from personal experience.

Utopia

Beethoven had been fascinated by Schiller's "Ode to Joy" text many years before he finally put it to music in the most famous and popular finale of his Ninth Symphony. When I read the text I find it hard to understand how Beethoven, heroic warrior and free man, could be seduced by this romantic nonsense. Faced with this fact, we are forced to realize how difficult it is to be a free individual, and how easy it is to bow to society's norms and be comfortably embraced in its bosom.

Maybe it is Nature's sense of balance that has driven the West, from the Greeks through our modern world, to compensate for its individualist essence with the most absurd collectivist Utopias. We had Plato's *Republic* with its apparent rigorous logic, and we had Thomas More's satire that coined the name "Utopia". We had what was probably the most successful of the "solutions" to the Greek problem of individualism: Christianity, with its accent on justice in an afterlife. But our impatience made us invent the most absurd of all utopias: Communism, with its promise of immediate justice for all. Of course, we must understand that in a democracy, where power is conquered through the support of the masses, utopias become a political necessity, while reality is an accident to be corrected or hidden.

We are convinced that there must be justice in this world, although we cannot see any evidence of its existence in the natural world. This indicates that utopias are a product of abstraction and belong to the world of rational thought. Great art, however, is based in the reality of life. The difference between great art and popular art is in the raw materials that go in to its creation, reality being the raw material of great art, and fantasy the raw material of popular art. This doesn't mean that rational thought has no place in great art. Here rational thought is at the service of the visceral life force, helping to give it form so that it can be understood.

We must then conclude that Beethoven was on a rational and whimsical plane in his admiration for Schiller's text. This is more convincing when we realize that Beethoven never wrote anything memorable or poetic. His verbal descriptions of the movements of the "Pastoral" Symphony are not only mediocre; they can also lead us astray in understanding this extraordinary music. Definitely, Beethoven was a man of ideas, but not of words.

So, at the end of the Ninth Symphony we have a choral movement that everyone likes. It is impossible for a concert performance of the Ninth not to be hugely successful. It will surely finish with mad applause and even shouting and screaming. Everyone wants brotherhood. Everyone wants peace and joy. Everyone wants a god who loves us. Rationally, it is impossible to be in disagreement. It doesn't matter that it is all a lie: we don't love each other as brothers, we don't live in peace and joy, and there is no god that loves us. The important thing is that we "want" this to be true. And Beethoven, like everyone else, wanted this as well. But Beethoven is not the only great artist that falls into the trap of the utopian finale. In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, it is hell that is the interesting part. Paradise is almost impossible to read. The same holds for Goethe's Faust. The First Part, with Mephistopheles as the central character is so much better than the intolerable nonsense of the Second Part. There is no doubt that utopias may win elections, but they make terrible works of art.

IV - Humor

There is a curious symmetry between the second and the next to last symphonies of Beethoven. Both works are transitional: the Second is an important step in the transition from what is called the First Period of Beethoven to the Second Period, while the Eighth is part of the transition from the Second to the Third. Both symphonies can be called "humorous" although they have very different types of humor. Neither is understood. Part of the problem is the humorous element, which is usually not associated with Beethoven. In addition, the attitude in each is inconsistent with what was happening in Beethoven's life at the time of its composition. This should serve as a warning to those who try to understand the works of great artists by reading their biographies.

Let us look first at the Eighth. Its humor is closer to what we are accustomed to today: a weapon of destruction. This is the humor of wisdom and decadence. It is surprising that most musicologists consider this symphony a step backwards to the classicism of the 18th Century. They point to the third movement Minuet, a classical custom that Beethoven had abandoned. I don't know if Beethoven ever made a step backwards. I cannot think of any example. In any case, if Beethoven was looking backwards in the Eighth, then how does one explain the second movement? Instead of the typical Andante of Haydn or Mozart, we have a short, sarcastic "Allegretto scherzando". And how does one explain the strange ending of the first movement, or the monstrously overblown Coda of the fourth? None of this had been heard in the Classical Period.

To understand what is happening here we need to explain all these peculiarities, and not just the Minuet. Lets look at the first movement. It seems typical Beethoven, with the usual affirmation of the principal theme in the Coda. However, in the last measures it loses its strength: turning all the way around, it now scorns the theme it had previously affirmed. He seems to be telling us that he will not continue the way we anticipated. A movement full of irony and sarcasm worthy of decadent Mahler follows this. Now we know which way he wants to go: not the heroic route but that of destructive comedy. When the Minuet appears in the third movement, we cannot take it seriously since we now know it is satire.

The last movement requires a longer explanation. Symphonic movements such as this one in "Sonata Form" have a section called "Coda", which means "tail". In the Classical Period this section was very short: just a few measures to close out the movement. Beethoven expanded this section considerably, making it a kind of summary of the movement and allowing a process that could take the music to a climax. Sometimes it was a quarter of the movement, sometimes less. However, in the Eighth it is half of the movement. In addition, it fails to reach a true climax even after many attempts that only end in a sort of "coitus interruptus". Curiously, this impotence appears in a relatively successful period for Beethoven. The Seventh Symphony was a great success, maybe the most perfect of his symphonies. But the world was changing and his values were becoming irrelevant. As a result, he was increasingly alone. In the previous seven years, Beethoven had published six symphonies. In the fifteen years left of his life, he would publish only one: the problematic Ninth. With the Eighth begins the last period of Beethoven: a period we could classify as comedy. Even in very serious works such as the last piano sonata (Opus 111) or the "Missa Solemnis" we can detect the attitude of a "wise" man who has become a "philosopher". Is there anything more humorous than this?

It is easy to use humor as a destructive weapon. We do it all the time. However, this way of using humor can only destroy, leading us to a "nihilist" or "intellectual" vision of life. In other words: "The world is stupid, and life is bitter". Most art of the last two hundred years expresses this, either seriously or ironically. But what if we use humor not to criticize, but rather to cast away those things that are not important? This would allow us to participate in life more effectively, without wasting our time in worthless pursuits.

A good example of humor as creative drive is Beethoven's Second Symphony, which, as stated in the previous chapter, has a curious symmetry with the Eighth, a typical example of destructive humor. However, just like the Eighth, the Second is also rarely understood. Undoubtedly it is puzzling to us that the Second Symphony is contemporary with the Heiligenstadt Testament, where Beethoven contemplates suicide as a desperate way out of the deafness that is beginning to manifest itself. In contrast to this, the Second is not at all tragic, but rather seems highly "detached" from everyday life, an attitude I associate with that famous smile in the art of the Greek Archaic Period. Many interpreters are disconcerted by this, and try to give the work an artificial weightiness rather than communicate that heroic smile.

Here is something difficult for our modern world to accept: heroic humor. We are used to associating humor with the anti-hero. But there is also epic humor. It is a humor that allows the hero to separate himself from the fog of everyday life, and to see clearly those values that drive him to action. It is interesting to compare the endings of the Second and Eighth Symphonies. In the Eighth, the ironic and destructive humor that has developed throughout the work interferes with the fluidity of the music, even with a fast tempo, and it does not allow Beethoven to reach a real climax. In contrast, the last movement of the Second is perhaps the wildest of all of Beethoven's symphonic finales, reaching an orgasm that ranks among the composer's best.

This is all clearer if we recognize that the main "character" in the Second Symphony is Prometheus at his most mocking and defiant, typical of fire gods in many mythologies. In fact, the work is full of musical flashes of flame, especially in the first and last movements. We know that the mythical figure of Prometheus was of the highest importance to Beethoven, particularly during the transition from his First Period to the Second. We can almost say that Prometheus was Beethoven's guide in this transition. There are many characteristics in the Prometheus myth that captured the imagination of many artists during the period of liberation after the French Revolution. A good example of this is Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. In Prometheus we have a character that helps humanity (in some versions he is the creator of man), while he defies the Olympic gods. He even knows who will overthrow the power of Zeus, and thus the status quo. For this, Prometheus was chained, the same way that the laws of civilization chained western individualism. At the beginning of the 19th Century, it seemed that the time had arrived to unchain him. In the second Symphony, Beethoven explores an aspect of this mythical figure that will drive him forward towards the climax of his greatest work, the *Eroica* Symphony

V - The heroic vision

Mythos

Some artists always remain within the normal structures of the art of their lifetime. Others change those structures in order to be "different", to stand out. In both cases they have subordinated themselves to external conditions, i.e. to what other people think, be it with a passive or aggressive attitude. Great artists are never subject to this. Their structures or forms are only determined by what they want to express, by the content. Sometimes, the content that they want to express cannot be contained in the normal structures of the time, and then we have real innovation. Such is the case of Beethoven's Third Symphony, the *Eroica*. The size of the symphony is without precedent. The harmonic innovations must have sounded, to the first audiences, like mistakes made by the orchestra. It is even said that the first publisher of the work "corrected" some of these "mistakes", requiring violent protests from the composer in order to save his ideas. For the last movement he chose the form of Theme and Variations, unusual in a symphonic finale that still creates difficulties in making sense of this movement.

Any valid interpretation of the work must explain these innovations, and I believe we must move into the mythological realm in order to reach some understanding. Generally, most people do not associate mythology and music, but in Beethoven, music is mythology. In the *Eroica* Symphony, Beethoven developed a myth of such magnitude that he had to expand the normal symphonic dimensions. A comparison that may help to explain the dimensions of this vision is Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling. From the "Ancestors of Christ" to the climax of the "Creation", the *Eroica* Symphony traces the same steps but with an advantage: not having to use biblical images that can obscure the human sense of the work.

This vision, of the *Eroica* Symphony as well as the Sistine ceiling, is no less than the fundamental myth of our civilization: the individual adventure that elevates the hero to a higher plane of consciousness, where he acquires the capacity to be a creator. It is an individual adventure because it will not accept any higher authority outside him, not even a god. We know this myth from *The Odyssey* of Homer, the different versions of the Grail story, in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, etc. It is this mythological platform that makes the West terribly creative and aggressive. And the complexity of this adventure imposed on Beethoven's work dimensions never before seen in a symphony.

The adventure develops as follows: In the first movement our hero struggles with the world around him until he suffers what we may call a catastrophic defeat in the middle of the movement. At that point a new and seductive theme appears, a formal innovation that not even Beethoven used again in any subsequent symphony. However, this temptation will not separate him from his mission. Eventually he will regain his path and the movement will end with Beethoven's typical affirmation of being. But now he knows he must abandon this level of consciousness in order to become a free man, a creator. The next movement, a Funeral March, acquires more sense if we see it not as if we were burying someone (with this interpretation the work could end here), but rather as the process through which our hero accepts the necessity to "die" to the normal everyday level of consciousness. By pushing away his duties, his possessions and his relations, he will be able to be reborn at another level, awakened by the "winds" of the third movement, the same way that Prophets are animated as painted by Michelangelo. Now, in the fourth movement, we can create a new man, step-by-step, variation-by-variation. At the end of the work, strengthened by a vision at the same time grand and realistic, we can throw ourselves into a new and full life, with action always a priority.

Ethos

The internal coherence of Beethoven's works is evident to most people. The works are consistent at different levels. Certainly it is evident at the musical level, with each new section being an organic development of its predecessors. Often this consistency can be heard at the thematic level as well. Surely this explains why Beethoven struggled so much in forging his symphonies. But the coherence that is most important, although also the most difficult to see, is the one that gives the work its direction and meaning. In Beethoven's music, it seems that every note is there to serve the overall scheme: nothing is missing and nothing is redundant. At times, however, everything is so well integrated, and everything sounds so natural, that we miss important signs on the road. This happens in the *Eroica* Symphony, which contains a motif that goes unrecognized. We shall see how its very integration has, in itself, an ethical value.

It turns out that at important points in the symphony, a motif appears: three repeated notes where the third one has a different character from the first two, sometimes being shorter, sometimes longer and sometimes with an accent. Let us call this a "Destiny" motif, and explore the nature of this destiny. In the first movement it appears at the end of the great central battle, a battle that does not appear to end well for our hero. Here the third note is shorter, in effect cutting the flow. In the second movement it appears at the moment of greatest revelation, after the fugue. This time the third note is stronger, with an accent, and it pushes us forward, accepting the flow of destiny. In the third movement it is part of the main theme and it has an airy character that reanimates us. In the last movement it has two forms. Most obviously it appears just before the final Presto, which drives us towards a full life. In this case the third note is longer, giving the theme a rhythm associated with ancient Greek tragedy. It reminds us of the tragic essence in life: something we cannot elude, but neither can we allow it to paralyze us. This is realism without fear. The three notes also appear in the middle of the main theme of the movement, which by the way is the origin of the symphony as a whole. Here, the character of the three notes, with an accent on the third, is affirmative.

It is interesting to note that perhaps the reason the motif is so difficult to detect is that, in each appearance it is perfectly integrated in the context of the music, and it seems to be a musical development of previous themes. This contrasts with the way "Destiny" appears in many works of art. In music we have an example in Mahler's Sixth Symphony. Here, "Destiny" comes from outside, from far away. It bursts into our lives, smashing us to pieces. We cannot control it; we are simply its victims. In Beethoven, it is an internal development. In other words, our destiny is inside each one of us, not the world outside. It is something we must find within ourselves, and learn to handle. Also, it will present itself to us under different guises, depending on our state of consciousness. We make our own destiny! This is very different from what happens in Oriental religions. Even in the West, most people live with an external vision of their destiny, maybe because it is very difficult to assume responsibility for it. An internal vision of it is a heroic quality, perhaps the foundation of the heroic ethic. For the hero it is worthless to pray or to cry. Only action has any value.

VI - Exuberant creativity

Beethoven's Third Symphony is an example of form adapting itself to content. His Fourth is an example of the opposite: content overflows the form. Beethoven was composing the symphony we know as the Fifth when he received a commission for a symphony that had to be ready in only three months. Fortunately, after the struggle of giving birth to the immense *Eroica*, Beethoven was in a state of creative euphoria. This was a very productive period for him: the Triple Concerto, the Fourth Piano Concerto, the Violin Concerto, the Rasumovsky Quartets and many other works. With all this music flowing from within him, he was not going to let this opportunity to earn new money get away, and he accepted the commission to write a symphony in what, for him, was very little time.

When one thinks about the process of creating a work of art it is clear that it requires more work to create the form as well as the content. It is much easier to take a pre-established format and fill it with creative ideas. Of course, by this method we would never have had an *Eroica* Symphony or a Sistine Ceiling. The result would surely have been attractive, but not the breakthroughs we admire. However, one can imagine how this method helped the output of a genius such as Mozart, who was able to write his last three symphonies in six weeks. But the objective of Beethoven's creativity is action, not merely an emotional and esthetic enjoyment. Beethoven's ideas break with the past in order to look to the future. That is why he had to work so hard in order to develop a form where these ideas can turn towards action.

The Fourth Symphony is a fascinating example of form not adequate to the explosive creative material it contains. The music seems to be in a straightjacket. It wants to spill out but the form will not allow it. In the first movement, one theme after another is presented, but the format is so "correct" that a full development of the material cannot take place. The second movement is developed more fully, with extraordinarily long melodic lines which must share the movement with an obstinate and implacable rhythmic motif. It is said that Beethoven was not essentially a "melodic" composer, but here we have an example of his ability to create inspired melody. If many of his themes are not particularly melodious, it is because he did not want them that way. Contrasting melody with a rhythmic pulse is often found in Beethoven's slow movements. It usually represents, as it does here, the expression of personal emotions and desires that must be harmonized with the internal pulse of your own destiny. The third movement seems to elbow its way forward, pushing right and left as if it feels curiously constrained. The fourth movement is an explosion of kinetic energy. The problem is that it doesn't seem to have any direction. Towards the end, the climax comes almost by surprise, a kind of premature ejaculation that leaves us at the same time exhausted and disconcerted. This requires that the movement end with an addendum, with which the composer is as puzzled as we are.

The Fourth is marvelously spontaneous and uninhibited within that straightjacket. It is like a caged lion, one can admire its beauty, but it is difficult to imagine it running freely in the African plain. The best one can do when interpreting such a work is to try to express as much as possible its raw energy through an aggressive attitude towards the suffocating format: break down the classic structure, bend the bars of the cage. To see the liberated lion we will have to wait until the Seventh Symphony.

VII - To be a man

In Beethoven's Fifth Symphony we can see how strong is the new man forged in the Eroica. Here we have a man capable of facing any problem and overcoming any obstacle that he encounters. How is this possible? There is one way: victory is always achievable if it is won inside oneself.

Everyone knows the theme that begins the work. It is the simplest musical motif imaginable: four notes, of which three repeat the same tone. With this simple theme we begin a drama that will take us to the depths of hell as well as the most sublime ecstasy. Beethoven knew that one couldn't reach the second without going through the first. Western mythology is eloquent on this point. There is no heroic deed, no victory, and no strength without first going through hell. Often in our mythology the journey is literally to hell. Hercules, Ulysses, Orpheus, Aeneas and more recently Dante all passed through there. Usually the journey involves much suffering. Of course, everyone knows suffering. But the difference with heroes is in their attitude as they face this suffering. What do the rest of us do? First we blame somebody else: the world is bad and unjust. Then we hope that someone will save us: God, Jesus, some saint, maybe a charismatic leader, or, more simply, a friend or loved one. The result is that we spend our whole lives going in and out of hell. But for heroes, hope is a capital sin, which is why he goes to hell only once.

In the Devine Comedy, when Dante reaches the last and deepest circle of hell, where Satan lives, he refuses to look at him. Virgil, his guide, tells him that the only way he can get out of hell is to look at Satan in the face. That is the moment of truth. Without excuses and without hope, our hero faces reality. At that moment he realizes that Satan cannot harm him. Satan can certainly destroy illusions, but without hope there are no illusions, so there is nothing to lose. There is only reality, and no one can destroy that. The hero is not afraid of anything now. If one goes into battle knowing that the important thing is the struggle and not the result, then one cannot lose.

Western heroes, different from those of other civilizations, achieve this through an unbreakable affirmation of their individuality. Beethoven always does this in the first movements of his symphonies. At the end of the first movement of the Fifth, the whole orchestra plays the famous principal theme *fortissimo*. If the conductor is not a dogmatic literalist, the tempo has broadened just enough so that each note comes down with the strength of Hercules' hammer. Then we know what it means to be a man.

From the depths of hell we can only go up, as long as we have looked at Satan in the face. The ascent is a process that implies putting our individuality in tune with the rest of the world. It seems contradictory that to get in tune with the cosmos one first has to develop one's individuality. But without that individuality, how do we get in tune? To play in an orchestra one needs an instrument. Beethoven goes through this tuning process in the second and third movements as he moves towards an extraordinary climax in the fourth. This climax is, at the same time, glorious, affirmative and explosive. At that moment we know that triumph is inevitable once we lose all hope and depend only on ourselves. For man, and for our hero, strength is always to be found in hell.

VIII - Relationships

One of the most basic existential problems is how the individual relates to the rest of the world. Our individuality is something we can experience; maybe it is our primary experience. At the same time, ever since we grope for our mother in order to feed, we know that we are in some way connected with what is outside of us. This duality is a problem that will be with us our whole lives and, at the same time, is prototypical of all the other "dualities" that will present themselves to us. For those who think this is a problem only in our modern and neurotic society I recommend that they visit the "Font de Gaume" cave in the French Dordogne, not far from "Lascaux", where they will find, painted on a wall more than 13,000 years ago, two bison, facing each other, one black and the other red.

There are societies that minimize the conflict between the individual and the world around them by imposing a structure where the individual is subordinated like a bee in a hive. Whether this is seen as desirable depends on whether one sees this as a solution or a repression of the original problem. In any case, in the West, with our accent on the individual, this refuge is not available to us. The heroic ethic actually increases the problem by placing the hero's interior as the only guide to action. Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, the *Pastoral*, is an attempt to solve this relationship problem. However, to really get into this symphony, it will be necessary to go well beyond the silly verbal descriptions of each movement, as well as the streams and birds which, as descriptive elements, inhabit the work.

The *Pastoral* is the only Beethoven symphony in five rather than four movements. This structure makes more sense if we regard the first two movements as an alternating presentation of two perspectives, with the fifth then becoming a synthesis of the two points of view. These two perspectives are: the individual in the first and third movements, and nature, or the outside world, in the second and fourth. In the first movement we approach Nature and try to establish a relationship with her. This relationship becomes very comfortable when Nature presents herself as a mother in the second movement. It is interesting to note that in the first bar of this second movement, the second violins play a sequence of notes equivalent to the sequence of the French nursery rhyme "Ah, vous dirai-je, Maman". The relationship with the mother is the first one we experience, and it is the most comfortable and secure relationship we will ever know. The happiness we feel in this relationship is celebrated unthinkingly in the third movement. But life will not always be like this. To bring us back to reality, our "mother" Nature now becomes a monster, a Gorgon, in the fourth movement. Certainly a good mother should give us a smack when we go astray.

Having known the extremes, we can now enter the most productive relationship of all: the erotic one. We realize that Nature is also a woman. We desire her and move closer. We dance with her with more and more abandon. Finally, in the Coda of the fifth movement we unite in lovemaking and reach a climax unusually explicit musically. I don't know any other musical example where the physical aspect of orgasm is so clearly expressed. It even expresses quite eloquently how we feel afterwards. At the end of this movement we have no doubt that the word "hero" comes from Eros.

IX - Celebration

The last movements of the first six Beethoven symphonies are celebrations of the transformation achieved in each one. Transformation requires action, and action is the sense of Beethoven's music up to this time. The seventh symphony could be regarded as the last movement of the six previous ones: a celebration of a journey unequaled in the history of music for its noble and heroic consistency founded on the value of individual freedom. After the Seventh, Beethoven will enter his last period. He will not see as clearly the reality of here and now, perhaps gaining a clearer vision of the abstract. Today's action will become reflections on yesterday and speculation on tomorrow. But this is another problem. Now we celebrate.

The Seventh begins with radiant chords. As always we begin vertically, asserting our identity with a conviction that only a free man can have. We don't feel the tragic weight of the Third or Fifth. There is still struggle to be sure; that never ends. But now we know what is really important and the struggle develops at a different level. In the second movement we revisit the duality of the individual on the one hand, and the vital pulse of destiny on the other. But now they march together since the beginning, and harmonizing them will not be difficult. After a few hearty laughs in the third movement we are ready for the grand finale. Here Beethoven develops an incredibly simple idea: the conflict between the first and second beat of the measure. The last movement is all about rhythm, as, in fact, is the whole symphony. As Wagner said, the Seventh is the "apotheosis of the dance". In dance we find individual expression in harmony with the cosmos. Maybe that is why the dance has been associated with celebration since the most primitive rituals.

So in the end we dance, after much struggle, heroic deeds, death and tragedy, journeys to hell, and explosions of energy. But it isn't obvious that we were going to get anywhere at all. If we listen to the music that comes after Beethoven, we will find that, except for a few utopian simulations, it is rarely more than tears and lamentations. The capacity to overcome tragedy is very unusual. Few artists have achieved this, and fewer still with the consistency that Beethoven showed in his first two periods. I believe it is the result of an obstinate affirmation of his individuality, with which he illuminated the path to solving the Greek problem. By this I mean a vision centered on mankind, and very well expressed by Protagoras: *Man is the measure of all things*. It has been both a source of creativity and the origin of tragedy. Its defiant attitude is necessary for creativity, which requires the arrogance (*hubris*) to think that one can do something better than what has already been established. However, a creative individual will always have problems with the laws of civilization, and the gods that support them. We are left with a tragic contradiction.

A way out is faith, defined as the rational decision to believe in things of which one does not have a direct experience. The word should not be confused with "confidence", as priests of different kinds will have you do by using phrases such as "faith in yourself". Through the real faith we can postulate the existence of an abstract entity, superior to mankind. But it is uncomfortable for Western elites that have grown up reading and listening about individualistic heroes. The heroic ethic has our interior nature as the only vector in life. In this context, faith would have to be defined as a "cardinal sin", together with hope, equivalent to a passive waiting for someone else to solve our problems, and charity, with its inherent belief that one can get something for nothing. The religious solution and the analogous utopias, always subjugate the individual. On the other side we have the Beethoven of the first seven symphonies. They show us a possible way to overcome the Greek problem, by standing on our own basic life force, without fear and without hope, always moving and always looking for action. This way maybe we can also get to dance.