

Heroic Individualism

An individual is someone who finds and assumes responsibility for his own destiny. Liberty is the capacity to be an individual. This has been the basic theme in western heroic art. Even in the first masterwork of Western Civilization, *The Iliad*, we see Achilles affirm his individuality at any price. A hero can never abdicate his individuality and his liberty. However, Greek heroes paid a high price for that individuality, which fearful men called *hubris*. Greek tragedy tells of the vengeance of the gods, who, representing the common man, struck down the heroes one by one. The death of Achilles was necessary to maintain the status quo of civilization since he was supposed to replace Zeus. Only some Greeks were able to understand that the gods would have to be killed in order to make liberty possible.

This mission had to wait more than a millennium to begin to take shape, since the gods had been given renewed strength through Christianity's concentration of many gods into one. Towards the end of the Middle Ages, the art of the troubadours again brought individualism to the forefront in the form of courtly love. The Arthurian Legends rediscovered heroic art, while the translation of ancient texts started a renaissance of the individual. Man, and not the gods, could again be "the measure of all things". However, the Christian god continued to condemn the hero to a tragic end. Arthur would have to die fighting the armed mobs led by Mordred. Only Michelangelo, in his *David* and his extraordinary Sistine ceiling offered a possibility of liberation, although it is sad that both had to be "camouflaged" in Biblical themes,

Art did not seem capable of defeating the gods on its own. Then science, its sister product of Greek Civilization, came to the rescue. Undermining religious dogma with one blow after another, science has continually reduced the power of god, cutting its "territory" every day. And in this space, liberty grows. By the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries, a time of revolutions in politics and economics, art was again able to reaffirm the values of the individual and liberty through a new generation of artist-heroes: Goethe, Blake, Shelley and, above all, Beethoven.

Maybe the love I feel for the music of Beethoven makes me lose some objectivity, but I believe that, in his heroic period, he triumphed over Greek tragedy, perhaps for the first time in history, and more convincingly than ever. The theme of liberation is present, in some way, in almost all his works, but it is in the Third, Fifth and Seventh symphonies in which the result is clearest. No doubt it is a problem that they are musical works with no text. How are we to be sure of what they say? But security is not a concern of the free man. Therefore, at my own risk, I will proceed to give my own interpretation of the content of these works.

Without going into great detail, the Third symphony, the "Eroica", presents the whole "story" of the heroic epic. It starts with the process of discovery of the hero's destiny, through the sacrifices he must make to become a true individual, and culminating in his "work": the creation of a new man. This should not be understood in a programmatic sense such as one finds in the music of Richard Strauss, but rather in a conceptual sense.

Beethoven finished the “Eroica” when he was 35 years old. This is an age when great artists often express their vision of life. In the period from 35 to 40 years of age is when Dante wrote the Divine Comedy, Michelangelo painted the Sistine ceiling and Wagner wrote the text of the Ring of the Nibelung.

In this same way, before going into more detail, we can say that in the Fifth Symphony Beethoven concentrates in the heart of the problem: the process of liberation. In the seventh, Beethoven celebrates this liberation with great nobility and the self-confidence allowed to those that know how something is accomplished.

The Fifth Symphony: Liberation

The first movement grows out of a theme that is as simple as it is well known. Perhaps this familiarity obscures how unusual a theme it is: three repeated notes and a lower one sustained for a long time, breaking the rhythmic flow. Is this a symphonic theme? Even more surprising is that Beethoven creates almost the whole movement, indeed much of the symphony, out of only this. But, in his hands, this theme has an extraordinary power of transformation. And transformation, or rather development, is the whole idea behind heroic art.

In its initial form, with the four note cell repeated a tone lower and the last note sustained in time, it appears four times in the first movement: at the beginning of the Exposition (which is repeated), at the beginning of the Development section, at the beginning of the Recapitulation, and at the climax of the Coda. This clarifies the structure of the movement, while the note sustained in time separates the theme from what follows. I believe this justifies a different phrasing: slower to allow greater articulation and dramatic sense. Also, the theme becomes “heavier” in orchestration when it returns for the Recapitulation and the climax of the Coda. This “heavier” sound seems to ask for stronger, more affirmative, phrasing. These changes in the theme acquire even more support if one understands the movement as a process of transformation. One possible interpretation of this transformation could be to turn around this theme from its ominous, problematic beginning, to a theme of affirmation. This affirmation of our individuality, not easily conquered, will serve as a platform for our development. It has been said that the theme of the first movement represents destiny. If such is the case, it is a destiny that comes from inside, representing what we are and what we should become.

Conquering our individuality is only the beginning of the process. Now it must become something that can be projected to the outside world: something creative. We must begin to relate to that outside world. We must enter the flux of life. Musically, the first movement ends in extreme verticality, consistent with the objective of individual affirmation. Now we have to look for horizontality so that we can flow with life. The Theme and Variation form of the second movement is ideal for this process, and Beethoven uses it often for this in slow movements. After the statement of the theme, the first two variations clearly increase fluidity, and this process continues until we reach the climax with the return of the theme, now played by the violins, accompanied by the full orchestra, and ending in fast rising scales which give it a strong forward push. After this,

one feels how the music becomes unsettled as our demons awaken in anticipation of the third movement.

All Beethoven Scherzos have a diabolical element, but this one is particularly dark. However, it still involves dancing with our demons. Beethoven knew that these creatures should not be suppressed, but rather incorporated into the creative process of life. Instead of fighting against them the way composers as different as Mozart and Mahler do, he danced with them. But the great surprise in this movement comes with the return of the main section, now with a completely different orchestration and a macabre atmosphere. Undoubtedly, this change serves the need to arrive at one of the most important moments in the history of music and art in general: the transition from the third to the fourth movement.

In the Classic period preceding Beethoven, works in minor keys would often change suddenly to the major in the last movement in order to end the work more brilliantly (for example, Mozart's Piano Concerto in D minor). These changes did not result from an organic need in the works development, feeling more like a capricious change rather than a transformation. In the Fifth Symphony, this transition from minor to major is conceptually and structurally a consequence of all that has happened before. Thus, the triumph achieved by the arrival of C major is true and profound: a triumph not only for Beethoven and the music, but also for the hero who is now liberated and capable of fulfilling his destiny. In a few seconds Beethoven achieves, perhaps for the first time in history, a victory over Greek tragedy. This historic victory is possible because, in the Fifth Symphony, there is no god to be found that can suppress him. Man is now in control of his own destiny.

The last movement begins with an explosion of joy with the original theme duly transformed to express this. But Beethoven was not a man to be trapped by a simple emotion, attractive as it may be. For him, action was always the ultimate objective and transformation an ongoing process. That is why I believe that the recapitulation should be more propulsive than the exposition, pointing to the Coda, where the final transformation of the original theme appears, now combining affirmation with action.

The Seventh Symphony: Fulfillment

The Seventh Symphony crowns Beethoven's most fertile and heroic period, and represents, with the Archduke Trio, the rewards of this process. Wagner called this symphony "the apotheosis of the dance" and it is clear that the work has a strong rhythmic pulse present throughout, with obsessive and short rhythmic cells. Most interpretations emphasize the frenetic character of the work that this obsessive rhythm expresses. This is certainly a valid view of the symphony, particularly if it is done with flexibility and musicality. However, ever since I fell in love with this work when I was 14 years of age, I have felt that it contained more than this, especially in the first two movements. I am referring to the longer view: the noble and expressive elements that should always be present in heroic art. Without that, the hero's struggle is only wanton violence without sense or purpose. The hero is associated in Greek mythology with

Athena and not with Ares. If there is something Beethoven has plenty of is sense and nobility.

In this way, in the rising scales of the introduction of the first movement, usually sounding as if an engine had been turned on (a perfectly valid and effective interpretation), I feel the will to take on responsibility for our lives and our destiny. In this movement, maybe more than in any other in any Beethoven symphony, it is vital to sustain the sound of the notes. The rhythmic element will be communicated anyway. It is the noble element that runs the risk of being lost in the frenzy and thus requires particular attention. Almost all of Beethoven's first movements are basically affirmative, the emphasis here being on what has been conquered already. From the beginning we are an individual, and beyond the struggle of the first movement of the Fifth. We now need to develop that individual's character, thus the importance of the noble element. We also need to feel the tenacity and strength of purpose. To this end the bass line is particularly effective, as in the Codas of the first and last movements.

In the second movement, Beethoven presents, yet again, the conflict between the direction our own destiny imposes on us, and our personal desires, which we must overcome or align with that destiny in order to live a productive life. This conflict and its resolution are presented in an astoundingly clear and direct way. Only a veteran of many battles and many victories can be capable of this.

In the last two movements we move over conquered territory. Here we can feel an individual, a hero, using his faculties with freedom and confidence. The third movement complements the sparkling rhythm of the Scherzo with the long line of the Trio, the way action is complemented by vision of the future and tenacity. The last chords launch us towards the last movement. Here Beethoven builds one of his greatest finales on the simplest idea imaginable: the conflict between the first and second beats of the bar. It is natural for the first beat to be preeminent. However, the movement begins with the second beat dominating, and that is the way it goes for most of the movement. Not until the Coda does the first beat establish solidly its dominance. This leads us to a climax that is truly an orgasm. This is an example of how Beethoven can use a very simple idea to achieve a profoundly transforming result.

With the Seventh Symphony and the Archduke Trio, Beethoven culminates his most heroic period, the second. At this time he enters a terrible creative crisis, which will lead him into his third period. What made Beethoven turn his back on the ideas that he had developed during his whole life? We can never know for sure, but we can speculate that he could have felt this line of development had been spent. Supporting this hypothesis is the fact that when he returns to the great symphonic form in the Ninth Symphony, he does it from a point of view more cosmic than human. In addition, the beginning of this work seems to be a return to the beginning of everything: to genesis. Could this new beginning mean that Beethoven felt that our civilization needed to start anew?