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David B Dennis

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On 23 December 1989—the day after the opening of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin—Leonard Bernstein conducted a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in the Berlin Philharmonie. Transmitted around the world, Beethoven's rousing setting of Schiller's Ode to Joy was considered an apt expression not only of the German people's feelings but also of global hopes for a new era.

Music is often deemed a universal language. Yet history books celebrate the contributions of many musicians to the development of modern nation. Dvorak, Grieg, Verdi, Sibelius, Bartok: these and other composers are lauded far more than writers or painters for their roles in forging cultural identities.

It's not difficult to see why. Music—as it was formalised in 19th-century aesthetics—can readily be made to represent that ideal totality, outside the contingencies of history and geography, on which the myths of nationhood depend. The emotional charge that makes it so persuasive cannot be contested. And the real needs of the “folk” may be conveniently sublimated into its musical (as opposed to its political) voice.

But of course music does not escape discourse. Even if we were less wary than we are today of 19th-century nationalism, we would still have to recognise that the modern nation-state is built on the suppression of contradictions. Where they do emerge, they build their own discourses around music. Hence the premise of David B Dennis's book, a richly detailed account of the fierce political struggles over the interpretation of Beethoven's music in Germany during the past 150 years. Like “Shakespeare” (inverted commas are obligatory these days) in England, a myth of “Beethoven” as the symbol of Germanness was assiduously cultivated. But which Beethoven, and which ideal of Germanness?

For the left, it is Beethoven the supporter of the democratic ideals of the French Revolution; the composer of the liberation opera *Fidelio*, who furiously scratched out his dedication to Napoleon on the title page of the *Eroica* Symphony when he heard of Napoleon's assumption of an imperial title. To Kurt Eisner, president of the short-lived socialist republic in Munich in 1918, Beethoven's was nothing less than the voice of the proletariat. Musicologists in the DDR were later instructed to disseminate a rigorously orthodox “Marxist-Leninist Beethoven Portrait”.

For the right, Beethoven's patriotism and stubborn individualism exemplified a different kind of political virtue. To the Nazis, the heroism of Beethoven's music represented the heroism of the Teutonic spirit, symbolic of “Germanic strength and order”. Beethoven's music spoke of his (and the German people's) historic “yearning for a born Führer-personality.” And a whole academic industry sprang into being to explain away Beethoven's embarrassingly un-Nordic racial characteristics.

Trapped between the ideological claims of right and left, the liberal centre waged a no-less-vehement battle to depoliticise Beethoven and restore his music to the realm of a meaningless idealism where it could “shape the ethos of humanity”. To them, it revealed “the absolute essence of appearances” and the “final sense of all things”.

This largely empirical survey is somewhat constricted by a scholarly tunnelvision that betrays its undoubted origin as a PhD thesis. Even its lively style cannot quite make up for the lack of broader historical perspectives. Dennis would like us to

believe, for instance, that with the fall of the Wall Beethoven may have been liberated from the grip of the ideologues. Naive self-deception, I fear.

At that momentous performance of the Ninth Symphony in 1989, Bernstein instructed his chorus to sing the word Freiheit (freedom) in place of Schiller's and Beethoven's Freude (joy). There was to be no mistaking whose victory was being celebrated. Once again, "Beethoven" had been securely conscripted to the side of the victors.

Added material

Nicholas Till is the author of Mozart and the Enlightenment (Faber)

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