ACADEMY OF MUSIC–BEETHOVEN'S SYMPHONIES

J.S. DWIGHT

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THE concerts of the Academy[1] decidedly take the lead in our musical entertainments this winter. This speaks better of the progress of art among us, than any fact which has yet been announced. At length we have seen the great Odeon[2] crowded from floor to ceiling with all the best and most appreciating life of Boston, of Cambridge too, and the other suburbs, not to hear some famous virtuoso, who would feign persuade you that there is more in his fingers than in Handel's or in Mozart's soul; but really lending respectful, and, if looks deceive not, rapt attention to the sublime orchestral works of Beethoven. Who, even of enthusiasts for art, would have looked for this so soon? We had thought that Henry Russell "*et id genus omne"*[3] had long ago stolen the hearts of our august public; but it seems they heat again in the right place. and, sick of dazzling novelties, now find delight in the genuine, the enduring, the all-satisfying, yet never to be understood and exhausted works of real genius. Once the very few had almost to apologize for daring to admire Beethoven, for showing pedantic preference for names gone by, like Handel and the mighty line of tone-prophets which he led. Three years since, the noble orchestra of our Academy played to bare walls. Last year they found "fit audience, tho' few," – an audience

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[1] Otherwise known as The Boston Academy of Music, which was founded in 1833. It was one of the first music education venues in the United States. This was the first institution to bring Beethoven to Boston. (Guerrieri)

[2] A concert hall used by the Boston Academy of Music during the 1830's and 1840's. The great Odeon held 1,300 people and would be later known as the Boston Theater. (Boston Athenaeum)

[3] (1812-1900) composer, pianist, and singer. He was a popular musician in both Britain and America known for supporting racial equality and abolition (Library of Congress). The Latin phrase translates to "and everything of the sort" (dictionary.com). The author is commenting on how Beethoven far surpasses the music of Henry Russell and other similar musicians.

constant to the last, till all in a manner knew each other, and in spite of the vulgar separating cares of the day, felt the bonds of a certain high and pure friendship knit between them by the spell of those sublime harmonies, associated so with the sight of each other's faces, – faces which the music caused to glow with the best expression which they ever wore. This created a permanent demand. And now, it being known where taste and character betake themselves, the great army of followers and fashionables can no longer keep away– (indeed, any one sees, in looking round upon such an audience, that, given one half of it, you may be sure to have the other), and the multitudes of hearers pouring in, wave after wave, encroach upon the stage, and barely leave the players room to draw a fiddle-bow. So much for having faith enough in the power of genius to enforce a response from every soul; so much for bringing forward the *best* always, without stooping to please a vulgar taste, trusting that the crowd will come round to it at last. For this the Academy deserve the thanks of all who reverence art. Let them persevere in this course, and the noble works of musical genius will find a warm and faithful home in Boston, while our people will enjoy the most exalted of social pleasures, in listening together to that sublimest and most intimate language of the soul, the sound of which wakes chords within each one of us which are deeper than all difference, and make us feel a divine relationship. Rarely is there an assembly, where all are so lifted above themselves, and made to forget their selfish partialities, where one electric thrill so runs from heart to heart, where the hardened and the prematurely old are so surprised into the 'joy and open-heartedness of childhood, where the word " disinterested" becomes so much a felt reality, and where the one spirit which is in us all, despite our differences of opinion, taste and character, so wells up from the bottom of every mind, like fixed air, and gives us a never-to-be-forgotten glimpse of the fact that we are nearer to each other than we knew, whether argument and doctrine have yet reached so far or not, – as an assembly on whom Beethoven and the orchestra have begun to work. Music answers the soul's deepest craving for expression more nearly than any other language, not excepting poetry or prayer; while at the same time it is the most exquisite thing yet found for entertainment or excitement; thus reconciling what a blind morality esteems the two opposite tendencies in man, and speaking to the whole of him. And when we consider that music is the peculiar art of this last century, that more of the highest kind of genius has been employed of late in music than in any art or literature, that the more it is understood, the more is it felt to be, –the fact becomes one of great significance for the future development of humanity.

This thought must be unfolded when we have room. We must speak now of the music. At the time we write, the Academy has given two concerts. The *second*[4] and the *fifth*[5] symphony of Beethoven formed the great feature in each. Of these in due time. We stop now to try to do justice to the rest of the entertainment, which was all good. The bill of fare contained no piece which could not be esteemed classic, and worth studying as well as

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4 Composed in 1802, the *Second Symphony* is considered one of Beethoven's happiest and most upbeat works. Surprisingly, this came at a time when Beethoven was beginning to lose his hearing. His agony is described in a letter he wrote to his friends called "Heiligenstadt Testament" in which he contemplated suicide. (Gibbs)

5 Composed between 1804-1808, this is considered Beethoven's most famous symphony. It is thought to tell a complete story and contains a particularly famous opening four measures. (Gibbs)

hearing. To say the least, there was nothing offensive, no ridiculous bathos, from beginning to end. Even the few songs which might be supposed to " sing small " – too trivial even for diversion – between noble symphonies and overtures, were sterling compositions, and delivered in a pure, chaste style, which showed that the two gentlemen who sang them, (and whom, by way of encouragement to native talent, it was certainly well for the Academy to bring out), have been cultivating something more than a voice, and seeking something more than vulgar applause. Then there was each time a solo on the violin, by Mr. Keiser, gracefully accompanied by our old friend, Mr. Webb. The modest manner and straight-forward, conscientious delivery of those two earnest and artist-like men, were music to the eye as well as ear, after so much virtuoso flash and flourish as we have had. Here were men playing to bring out the sense of the composition before them, and not to exhibit themselves. Two overtures, the same both evenings, formed the substance of the first part of the concert. One was the overture to "*Die Felsenmühle*," by Reissiger[6], an overture in the truest sense of the word, –thoroughly dramatic, while the music abounds in beautiful and original movements. The other, rapturously encored both times, was the delicious overture to "*Zanetta*," by Auber[7], which could not fail to effect diversion in the most thought-haunted mind, and "pluck from the memory the most rooted sorrow." [8] It was not deep; but we never heard anything more exquisite in its way. Full of the most airy, dainty, strange, yet simple melodies, which chase each other like the dimpled sun-flecks on the water – leaving one no time to get weary, and mocking every effort to think; tickling our very soul to laughter, and calling round us all the gayest and most bright-colored scenes of life, the Hesperides-gardens[9] of the fancy, with roses and humming-birds, and sparkling *jets d'eaux*,[10] and forms most volatile flitting in the moonlight, weaving fairy dances, and enacting curious histories. It is music to make one smile in his sleep. Now it is a stealing in of faint warbling melodies of flutes and clarinets, waking up by the way and toying with their neighbors, the bassoons and oboes; and now an impassioned burst of fullest tenderness, followed by mysterious stillness, woke again ere long by those strange warblings; and now the melting, luscious harp-tones of the dance; and now a perfect foaming up of the very wine and essence of the violins; and now mellow horn passages, whose notes bring marvelous, startling reminiscences of what certainly never had historical being in us, like the Platonic ideas. The composer must have overheard some fairy orgies[11]. It is as if you lay with eyes half open in the middle of midsummer's night, when by the light of the moon steal in little elfin shapes, who straightway form themselves in some moon-spot on your floor, and are

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6 An opera written by German composer, Carl Gottlieb Reissiger. He was well known during this time and was even referenced by Edgar Allen Poe in *The Fall of the House of the Usher* (Müller)

7 A French opera written by Daniel Auber in 1840. (Naxos Digiital Service)

8 This line comes from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The character Macbeth says this phrase when asking the Doctor to help ease the mourning of Lady Macbeth. (Shakespeare Act 5, Scene 3, line 43)

9 The Garden of the Hesperides only grew golden apples and belonged to Hera, the wife of Zeus. Most notably, the golden apple that started the Trojan War comes from this garden. Retrieving a golden apple was also Hercules' 11th task. (Hamilton)

10 Water-jets

11 Most likely a reference to Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The play contains multiple fairy characters and sexual themes in addition to being mentioned shortly after by the author. (Empsom)

soon in the full tide of all their quaintest revelries for your diversion. Could not the Academy give us, some time, Mendelsohn 's overture to the "Midsummer Night's Dream,"[12] that we may know how far music has carried it in this vein?

The *second* symphony has in it more of joy and triumph than we have been wont to expect from Beethoven, whose every utterance was either deepest yearning, or heaven-storming energy. Yet it is none the less characteristic. It is the joy and triumph of no common mind. It is no light-hearted cheerfulness. The grandeur and depth and unutterable wealth of inward experience, and uncontainable aspiration, of one of the intensest spiritual existences who ever took the form of flesh and blood amongst us, are all in it, to deepen and enrich the colors of the gorgeous scenery, and swell the current of the jubilee. He rejoices with all the strength of his heroism, and all the tenderness of his prayer. It is one of his earlier works, written before he was thirty. And, though it is hazardous at all times to attempt to interpret music, (which seems to be the intimate language of another element, of whose experiences all words, and thoughts, and scenes and things intelligible are only types and shadows,) we cannot help feeling, while we hear it, as if this symphony were the effort of a soul, all full of genius, and overwhelmed with the glories which crowd round it, so that it almost sinks under the weight of too much joy, to give expression to its sense of the depth and the richness of life, to proclaim the thrilling communion which it feels with all heaven and earth and boundless realms invisible. A quick electric spark seems to have shot through all things, and the oneness of the worlds within and without to have flashed upon him, exalting man to Deity, at the very moment that he sinks in utter weakness. This exalting consciousness of genius, its profound admiring sense of life, is perhaps known to few; and by nothing short of heroism can the poor feeble will of man bear fitting testimony to it, and give it utterance ere it effervesce. What shall I say, what shall I do, while the full roaring tide uplifts me, before it turns and ebbs away and leaves me sick and spent on the low muddy bed of common-place? is ever the stern question put to genius. To the poet or the artist, these unprepared for jubilees of the mind, these sudden accesses of too much bliss, these periodical rises of the under currents of life, bring on a conflict with the weaker individual will within him as intense as do the fearful outward obstacles in life, or the clouds of doubt and sin within us. A necessity seems laid upon him to utter, with weak individual speech, what is universal, unutterable, divine. Hence a jubilee symphony from Beethoven shall, like all his music, tell as much of earnest and gigantic struggle, as of light and joy.

To come at once. then, to the music. It is in the key of D major, the most splendid and triumphant key, which has been so much dedicated to martial strains. The principal theme
of the allegro, the fierce unbridled joy impulse, does not get out immediately; but is preceded by a marvelously grand and crowded passage in the 3-4 *adagio* movement[13], in which all the countless streams of life seem to be rolling in their waves together, and all the solemn clouds to be moving in above, their edges silvered by the light of every star, while thunders roll and lightnings fly from one to the other (so I would interpret those swift violin flights from

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[12] Felix Mendelsohn's symphony based off of William Shakespeare's play. The magical and ethereal piece was written in the early 1800s and eventually redesigned to function as background music to a performance of the play (Alsop).

[13] Slowly (MusicTheory.org.UK)

massive chord to chord, –one chord, as it were *lightening* into another,) and all the elements, and all the life and beauty and majesty of nature are gathered into the intensity of the moment. One by one, in solemn chord-processions, had each mysterious and august presence kept arriving; and a simultaneous shout, a rush of many voices (transition to the key of B flat) had announced the splendid circle full, before the rushing, heaving, hither and thither swaying, tumultuous movement began, which soon settles down, however, and all the vast array of conscious life, met face to face, is still with mutual expectation. The principalities and powers of all the solar worlds sit still and solemn round, as if upon the eve to celebrate glories which the tongue of man would be palsied in pronouncing. A short consultation in an under tone is heard between the violins and violoncellos (the melody in hurried triplets;) they seem to come to an understanding; rich, hope-inspiring chords, crowned by the light-trilling flute, like the sunbeam of expression lighting up a countenance about to speak, announce that the word is soon to go forth; and with an impetuous bound leaps from the goal the impatient theme, (allegro con brio,)[14] like live lightning: joy is no longer clogged by its own fulness; it scours the illimitable plains with resistless speed, scarce remembering to pause and whisper the burthen of its mission, the short glad *counter-theme*, or second subject (in A) to here and there a listener by the way. How it is carried through, what separate thoughts the successive phrases of the movement might suggest, we will not stop to consider. The very difficulty of executing a piece of such breadth and energy and rapidity helps out its true expression. Just as your wrists and fingers, if you try to play it on the piano, begin to give out, the music itself falters and pants exhausted, then gathers itself up by short, broken efforts, to rush forward in a fuller stream. This is exceedingly characteristic of Beethoven. What a determined, headlong energy is in his movements! How his theme goes on, gathering up more and more force and fulness in its movement, piling chord upon chord, climbing, climbing, like accumulated waves, which break and all fall back; then gather themselves again for the onset, and climbing by half-tones through all the chords, burst through, and lo the sea is smooth, and we sail along in the sweetest buoyant measure, triumphing with the theme.

After this first fury of joy has spent itself, the serene and thoughtful *Larghetto*[15] commences, in the childlike, happy key of A major. The theme is given first by the delicious quartette of stringed instruments, which seems the full heart's pious, cheerful hymn of gratitude, in a gentle, equable narrative style, as if recounting all its hidden bliss. Three or four, at least, new subjects enter in the course of the movement, all of exquisite beauty, like the blending of the winds and starlight with our serenest, richest thoughts. Some of the modulations by which new subjects are ushered in, or old ones in new keys, are solemn and imposing, as the shiftings of the clouds around the setting sun. The deepest tenderness and seriousness reigns throughout; and faith was never blessed with fuller, purer utterance.

Can music laugh and jest? Is there wit and humor, or aught answering to them in its mystic sphere? At least, let none, unless the choicest, most refined, and most imaginative, provoke to mirth a mind composed to such serene, sweet musings by the *Larghetto*. Yet the

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14 Quickly with vigor (MusicTheory.org.UK)

15 Rather Slow (MusicTheory.org.UK)

wild *Scherzo*[16] must, by the compensating power of nature, have its place. And here it is indeed *Scherzissimo*! It seems as if the motliest, queerest group of bachanalians were assembled, all beside themselves with gladness, and disputatious with excess of joy. Every instrument must have its say in turn, and all so rapidly, they mingle and chime in in spite of themselves, and are whirled away in one hurricane of concord. Or does it seem rather as if *ignes fatui*[17] were dancing and blazing through the air in all directions, now diverging, now rushing together into one great splendor, and showing through what oddest freaks of diversity the deep unity can maintain its law. And then, in the same breath, the rustic trio, of oboes and bassoons (in B flat); – what! Pan himself and all his satyrs come to join the revels! Then a long, loud burst– in unison, on F sharp, with all its chords reverberated in swift succession, and dying into a murmur, as if they had reached the acme of mad-cap enthusiasm; and stunning peals of merriment, and rough tumultuous embraces, and tossing up of caps could go no further. Another peal, and a return into the scherzo, and the grotesque revellers frolic off the stage as they came on.

The *Finale* (presto) is only a more serious freak of madness– joy so possessed and frantic, that it must vent itself or die. It reminds us of those states of mind, in our highest communion with nature, when song and prayer, and inward still delight, and rapturous looks and words are not enough, but it becomes an animal impulse, and away we plunge through swamps and thicket, hill and vale, and run till we can run no more, and kind fatigue and sleep deliver us. It is very despair of utterance, and ends with the acknowledgment, as it were that faith can feel, but neither word nor action quite express the depth and riches of our life.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

EDITOR'S NOTE

The piece Academy of Music– Beethoven's Symphonies offers an in-depth examination of Beethoven's second and fifth symphonies as well as what is considered some of the first mainstream American music criticism. Author John Sullivan Dwight has a rich and unique history that must be understood in order to appreciate fully his writing and its subsequent impact on American society. J.S. Dwight is most known for the establishment of Dwight's Journal of Music in 1852 (almost a decade after this article), which would run for nearly 30 years as a periodical solely dedicated to music reviews, philosophies, and topics (Waters). The popularity gained by this music periodical was unprecedented for the 19th century and helped initiate the movement to give legitimacy to music as an art form equal to

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16 Jokingly (MusicTheory.org.UK)

17 A flitting phosphorescent light seen at night, chiefly over marshy ground, and believed to be due to spontaneous combustion of gas from decomposed organic matter. (Random House Inc.)

poetry, painting, and other visual arts. Prior to Dwight, evaluating non-lyrical music through a philosophic lens was mutually exclusive to more technical and aesthetic criticism. J.S. Dwight sought to reconcile these ideas by asserting the moral and ethical underpinnings of Beethoven's symphonies along with an in-depth critical review of the technical musical components of the work (Saloman). This approach was unique and laid the framework for American criticism of non-lyrical music in conjunction with redefining the potential for music as a medium for political and philosophical ideas.

Crucial to J.S. Dwight's comprehension and writings about music comes from his involvement in transcendentalism, the Brook Farm Community, and Unitarian Universalism. These movements, which were also based in Fourierism, believed in helping humanity reach a utopia state through communal, equal living conditions (Gordon). Fourierism preached that flawed social organization led to all ills of humanity, which was coupled with the transcendentalist idea of merging the spiritual into the physical world. The approximately twenty members of the Brook Farm Community lived in woods outside of Boston in the 1840s as part of a social experiment with the hope that their methodology would spread to the rest of society. The farm functioned as a communal living space emphasizing physical, spiritual, and mental labor (Robinson). Although Brook Farm ultimately failed, the impactful ideas of J.S. Dwight, as well as other notable members including Nathaniel Hawthorne and Ralph Waldo Emerson, would survive. With the help of writings by J.S. Dwight who was heavily influenced by his time on the farm, transcendentalists adopted Beethoven as their ideal musician who they believed created harmony through the perfect combinations of sound (Robinson).

Most reviews of music during this time period were short and discussed the quality of the piece of music without typically venturing into an actual description of the sound. As a contrast to this, John Dwight utilizes verbal ekphrasis in which he verbally represents a piece of art. Typically ekphrasis is used in reference to paintings, poems, or music representing some other form of art rather than as a verbal practice (Bruhn). This article, however, systematically and elegantly describes each portion of the music allowing the reader to imagine the symphony without actually hearing it. Interestingly, J.S. Dwight was not a musician or a composer despite his status as the American music critic of the mid to late 19th Century (Waters). When focused on the language used, the reader not only experiences the sounds of the instruments but also can sense Dwight's philosophy of music and its purpose. Phrases such as "Every instrument are whiled into…one hurricane of sound", "a simultaneous shout, a rush of many voices (transition to the key of B flat) had announced the splendid circle full", and "what is universal, unutterable, divine", all point to the broader purpose of music as a unifying force for society. Dwight's writings set a precedence and framework for future American music criticism; articulating the apparent goal of a piece of music and then discussion of if the technical aspects of the piece achieve this goal.

While this style of writing may seem unremarkable to the modern reader, one must note how unique this was for the antebellum era. Verbal ekphrasis, especially as it relates to music, was not common or thought necessary. The work of J.S. Dwight was partially responsible for bringing music up to the esteem of other forms of art (Saloman). Despite his legacy, Dwight was also an infamous conservative in regards to music and was known to dismiss anything that did not match Beethoven and the classical conception of non-lyrical music. Throughout his decades of writing, Dwight's refusal to modernize or accept new

forms of art ultimately led to criticism by other writers and musicians (Saloman). In modern times, the prevalence of new media, specifically the accessibility to see and/or hear something regardless of location, reduces the need for any form of ekphrasis. No longer must someone see or hear art in person to experience it. While this allows for more people to observe directly different forms of art, there now no longer is a common voice of authority to determine the merits of a single work. Rather, the collective is able to deem something as "good" or bad" through the Internet and other new forms of media. What was once a necessary component of criticism, ekphrasis today seems to hold less importance when compared to a video or photo. John Sullivan Dwight's push for music as a medium to unite humanity and communicate philosophy, however, still remains prevalent in today's culture of criticism.

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