

Letters to the Editor

To the editor:

Much as I savored William Meredith's report on current fashions in *Beethovenforschung* (see his "Beethoven Papers Read at the 2002 Annual Meeting of the American Musicological Society and the Society for Music Theory" in the preceding issue of this journal), I found it hard to disentangle from a cognitive ambush somewhere in the middle of its second page. Discussing reactions to Sanna Pederson's paper on "Beethoven and Freedom," Meredith quotes trenchant remarks by Elaine Sisman and Stephen Hinton. Then he continues, "When asked by someone else if political freedom was predicated on psychological freedom, Professor Pedersen [sic] gracefully noted that this sounded much too difficult for her to answer and that she would pass it on to the authors of the following papers." When someone familiar to you from the cradle, so to speak, makes it to the printed page as "someone else," you begin to have identity issues. I should then relieve him from the burden of anonymity (for such it is at a national conference), assume his identity, and explain why I thought my comment worth generating further discussion.

The gist of my intervention was that ideological constructions may not perhaps stand for long without some anchoring in personal experience. In the "Beethoven and Freedom" trope, this last is the psychological release triggered by emotional upheavals in the music. Challenged to bid an example, I drew attention to a little-probed book from 1933, *Music: Its Secret Influence throughout the Ages* (London: Rider & Co.) by British avant-garde composer Cyril Scott.

There, indeed, Beethoven is proclaimed "the greatest musical psychologist" for his ability "to portray in sound every variety of human emotion" (p. 68). And given music's property of evading the rational mind, his works "induced Sympathy on a scale hitherto unknown" (p. 69). Beethoven thus compelled listeners "to realize not only the more obvious troubles of others, grief, deprivation, sickness, yearning, but also—in themselves as well as in others—that vast array of strange emotions, feelings, passions, of which men were too ashamed to speak" (p. 69). And so, "by the plummet of his music he fathomed and set free a vast number of emotions which had been forgotten and had sunk into the subconscious" (p. 72).

This state of psychological freedom could have possibly motivated social change, for "The subconscious prisoner" is also released from the "gaolership of social customs" (p. 73). By establishing an emotional rapport with the sick, the poor, and the destitute, Beethoven's music increased awareness of their appalling conditions, thus galvanizing efforts to improve them. Scott alluded to the steep rise in humanitarian activity during the



Photograph of Cyril Scott (from the "new and extended" edition of *Music: Its Secret Influence* of 1950)

nineteenth century. And he concluded in a way bold and rousing together: "It is the prostitute and the foundling, the incurable and the very aged ... who in reality owe [Beethoven] most of all" (p. 75).

The political ramifications of Scott's view should be within view now. Beethoven helped listeners realize their common humanity in emotional terms. This, in turn, spurred political action as a way of translating emotional unity into social justice: food and shelter for all; health-care for the sick and the elderly; protection of the children. Why? Because they knew how it feels to be in distress and pain. Beethoven raised these emotions within them and opened a window to the material foundation of this agony.

Certainly, the human rights discourse existed prior to and independently of Beethoven. But something vital escapes attention: it is one thing to respond intellectually to "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité" and an altogether different one to experience them *directly* as emotional reality ("I feel, therefore I know"). Scott's platonic view of music finds surprising resonance with an argument made recently by Lynn Hunt, Professor of Modern European History at UCLA. In her Presidential Lecture at Stanford University (see John Sanford, "Human Rights: A Novel Idea?" *The Stanford Report*, April 15, 2002; on-line version), Hunt argued that emotional response to eighteenth-century novels—epistolary ones, in particular—helped establish universal human rights as self-evident truth: "Human rights as a notion depends on empathetic identification with individuals who are now imagined to be, in some fundamental way, like you. ... You recognize yourself in the characters; you imaginatively leap into

the midst of the action; you feel the same feelings that the characters are feeling; in short, you learn to empathize with someone who is not yourself."

Like Scott, Hunt recognizes a creative function in works of art, one of agency for, rather than reflection of social change: "I believe in the notion that reading epistolary novels has somatic effects that translate into brain changes, through what is called synaptic plasticity, and come back out as new concepts about the organization of social and political life." Whether this cognitive changes owed to content (i.e. representation of anguish in contemporary life) or to structure (e.g. using alternate narrators) remains to be explored. In any case, words will always trigger cognitive processes and map sounds and signs to concrete ideas. Music, on the other hand, opens up a field of indeterminacy. Because of this, Scott asserted, the listener has no control over its effects on him: "The depictive value of music over and above that of literature, drama, painting and poetry, consists in its total lack of restrictedness, and in its direct appeal to the intuition or the subconscious ... people intuitively or subconsciously assimilate the meaning of music without—though there are countless exceptions—being objectively aware of the fact" (p. 69).

Under this perspective, Beethoven's music could have "softened" the Victorian industrialist in a stealthy way, enabling his transformation into a philanthropist. Or, it could unite large groups of people around a cause. This would throw light on the persistent view of Beethoven as a composer of universal appeal and the supreme artist for all people. Would it, then, be strange, if conflicting sides in World War II used and responded to the same Beethoven? Despite their lethal confrontation, both Britain and Germany rallied their peoples around the cause of nationhood. In the early 1940s Britain struggled alone for freedom and survival. On the other side of the Channel, too, the Germans were not oblivious to their own suffering under the punitive treaty of Versailles. Material want, unemployment and humiliation were within memory, their own leader, in fact, having been exposed to these adverse conditions. Belief—alas, a catastrophic one—in their destiny as a *Reich* could also have been potentialized through Beethoven's music. What matters here is that, underneath heavy layers of ideological starch, this music could still function in a pre-cognitive way, setting up an affective matrix for ideas of national solidarity to sprout.

If I understand correctly, Scott believed that, as long as pain and struggle underlie human existence, Beethoven will retain his position as music's greatest homeopathist, capable of exposing deep emotions to the light of consciousness and thus forcing us to address them within ourselves and in others. The resulting psychological freedom, then, comprises an experiential basis for the discourse on Beethoven and political freedom. For by the

time we grasp the link “Beethoven-Enlightenment-French Revolution-Schiller-*Ninth Symphony*,” music has already exerted its force on the subconscious, establishing freedom as emotional reality.

I see, then, in Scott’s view of Beethoven a useful reminder: to understand the Beethoven-freedom link we need to move beyond intellectual lineage and engage with the most vital aspect of his music, its affective power. In a broader perspective, Cyril Scott and his idiosyncratic book helps me articulate an embarrassing thought: intellectual engagement with art music—not any music, but one of the highest stylistic ingenuity—may not produce a discourse identical to that of philosophical concepts or social practices. Put simply, the fact that music scholarship reads like any other type of scholarship should be a matter of concern. And well-intended efforts to enrich our understanding of music may perhaps further obscure its unique aspects, adding yet more shade in a forest of shadows. Somewhere in-between the positivism of “notes only, please” and the surrealism of “readings were born free but they are everywhere chained to their objects” there might be a different approach: relaxed, joyous, inclusive, liberating. Which one, exactly? Finding it makes, I suppose, the task for a musicology in the 21st century.

Ilias Chrissochoidis
Stanford University

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San José State University

THE AMERICAN
BEETHOVEN SOCIETY

T H E
**Beethoven
Journal**

Summer 2003

VOLUME 18, ISSUE 1

The Beethoven Journal is published two times a year (Summer and Winter) by the Ira F. Brilliant Center for Beethoven Studies and the American Beethoven Society. ISSN 1087-8262

Editor: William Meredith

Assistant editors: Paul Ellison, Ai Goldsmith, Kristina Overcashier

Journal staff: Ira Brilliant, Susan Kagan, Patricia Stroh, Thomas Wendel

Graphic design: Thomas Fairbanks

The Editor welcomes the submission of articles for consideration, as well as other information regarding Beethoven. Potential contributors should consult the *Journal* for matters of style and citations. Bibliographic citations should include publisher, date, and place of publication.

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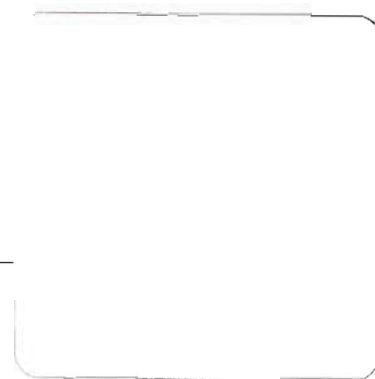
Letters to the editor are welcomed; they may be edited before publication for length and tone.

Publication of the *Journal* is made possible through funding from the SJSU College of Humanities and the Arts and the members of the American Beethoven Society.

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In honor of Beethoven’s love of nature,
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Cover illustration: Engraving for March from the 1807 C. Brightly edition of Sturm’s *Reflections on the Works of God* (“This moment perhaps some unhappy ship is dragged into the abyss.” &c. March 4th.”) (from the collection of William Meredith)



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