

The BobCasts



Why All the Fuss About Beethoven?

Welcome everyone. I'm Bob Greenberg, Music Historian-in-Residence for San Francisco Performances, and the title of this BobCast is *Why All the Fuss About Beethoven?*

At the time I recorded this BobCast (okay, yes, podcast)—in June of 2020—we were precisely half-way through what was *supposed* to be a year-long celebration of Beethoven and his music, capped by his 250th birthday on December 16, 2020.

Thanks to you-know-what, Beethoven's most excellent birthday bash has been a belly-up bust, and I'm not talking about the Beethoven busts on our pianos that we so happily festooned with party hats last December. For months I have been advocating—tirelessly and tiresomely—that we stage the biggest “do-over” in music history, and that all of the Beethoven concerts, and lectures, and colloquia cancelled in 2020 be rescheduled for 2021.

Among my contributions to the Beethoven-love-fest-that-has-yet-to-really-be is a 10 lecture, five-hour exploration of Beethoven's life and psyche titled *The First Angry Man*, which was released on *Audible* in November, 2019. My intentions to hawk the course during the many lectures and talks I was scheduled to give this year have come to naught as have, obviously, those lectures and talks. So in the spirit of “do-over” I'm offering up a bit of Lecture One of *The First Angry Man* as we seek to answer what is, I think, a good question: why all the fuss about Beethoven?

Allow me, please, to first explain that title: *The First Angry Man*. Obviously, Ludwig van Beethoven was not, technically, the “first” angry man (or woman or girl or boy); human beings have been getting annoyed, irritated, livid, irate, incensed and furious since time immemorial (and we can expect that people will continue to do so as long as they feel threatened or attacked, frustrated or powerless, invalidated or ripped-off or disrespected). What makes Beethoven's anger *special* is that he was the first composer to actually portray his personal emotions—of which anger was a principal sentiment—in his music. At a time when composers were expected to amuse and entertain their audiences, Beethoven—who lived from 1770 to 1827—got it into his head that his music was not for anyone's piddling pleasure but his own: that first and foremost, the creation of music was an act of profound self-expression. (I would tell you that why and how Beethoven came up with this seemingly heretical artistic belief occupies no small part of the course.)

But to the present point: when it came to depicting raw, sometimes even violent emotions in music, Beethoven was—truly—the “first angry man” (or at least “the first angry composer”). And as a result, for more than 200 years, his music has moved and touched (and yes, sometimes

frightened and disgusted) audiences in a manner almost primal. Back in 1813—when Beethoven was in his 43rd year - the German author, composer, and music critic Ernst Theodor Amadeus (or “E.T.A.”) Hoffmann wrote:

“Beethoven’s music sets in motion the lever of fear, of awe, of horror, of suffering, and awakens just that infinite longing which is the essence of Romanticism.”

Once Beethoven had opened the door to this new, self-realized, self-expressive musical world, there was to be no going back to the polite, restrained Classical style that had preceded him. The musicologist Donald Grout correctly points out that:

“Beethoven was one of the great disruptive forces in the history of music. After him, nothing could ever be the same again; he had opened the gateway to a new world.”

Oh Beethoven, Why Do We Love Thee?

Because love thee we do!

Classic FM is one of the United Kingdom’s three independent National Radio Stations and one of the most listened-to “classical music” radio stations in the world. The station conducted a favorite composer poll in 2016 that attracted 170,000 votes; according to *Classic FM*, that response made the poll “the biggest public vote in the world on classical music tastes.” The winner of this not-particularly-scientific-but-nevertheless-not-uninteresting popularity contest was Ludwig van Beethoven.

Encyclopedia Britannica’s on-line site lists the “10 Classical Music Composer to Know” in the order in which we should presumably “know” them. Number one on that list? Beethoven. (Yes, of course I will name the remaining nine. In order, they are: J.S. Bach, Wolfgang Mozart, Johannes Brahms, Richard Wagner, Claude Debussy, Peter Tchaikovsky, Frédéric Chopin, Joseph Haydn, and Antonio Vivaldi.)

YouGov, an internet site that specializes in polling, lists “The most popular classical composers in America.” At number one is Beethoven, followed by Mozart, Bach, Chopin, George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Tchaikovsky, Brahms, Leonard Bernstein and Handel.

DigitalDreamDoor’s list of “100 Greatest Classical Composers” begins with Beethoven.

The internet site *Ranker* puts Beethoven at the top of its list of “The Best Classical Composers,” as does the site “List 25” in its “25 of the Most Celebrated Composers in History” and the site “The Top Tens” in its list of “Greatest Classical Composers.”

(Bucking the trend, the *New York Times* music critic Anthony Tommasini named Johann Sebastian Bach—or just “Sebastian” Bach, as his friends and family knew him—as the number one composer on his “The Top Ten Greatest Composers” list, published in 2011. For our information, Beethoven himself would have agreed entirely with Tommasini’s estimation of Bach. Number two on Tommasini’s list? Beethoven.)

According to The League of American Orchestras, between 2006 and 2012 (the most recent data I could find), American orchestras performed the music of Beethoven more than that of

any other composer. In that six-season span, there were 3305 performances of Beethoven's orchestral music. (At number two was Mozart, with 2976 performances; no one else came close.)

I'd be happy to go on, but I expect it's time to stop, as the point has been made: for reasons I will identify, Ludwig ("my friends call me 'Louis'") van Beethoven, the bad boy from Bonn—bad hair, bad attitude, excessively bad karma—remains a compelling, audience favorite 250 years since his birth and nearly 200 years after his death.

Why? It's not because his music is particularly "pretty", which it is not. It's not because it's especially "easy" to listen to, which it most certainly is not.

It's not because Beethoven was a "natural composer", a technical wizard like Sebastian Bach or Wolfgang Mozart (for example), who quickly and neatly wrote down their music in full score with nary a sketch, cross-out or correction. For his part, Beethoven often worked for months—and later in life, sometimes for years—on a single piece, tirelessly sketching, reworking, erasing, crossing-out, and rewriting until his manuscripts often looked more like a Jackson Pollock painting than a piece of music, indecipherable to anyone but his copyists (and, on occasion, indecipherable to them as well!).

And it's not because Beethoven was a "genius", a word so overused in our top ten culture of superlatives as to have no more meaning than the phrase "real imitation margarine!" Yes, okay, whatever, Beethoven was a "genius", but again, in terms of pure, incomprehensible genius, he was not on the level of Sebastian Bach and Wolfgang Mozart. Those guys—Bach and Mozart—wrote perfectly crafted music in virtually every extant musical genre that existed in their time at a speed and in a number that leaves us shaking our heads in total disbelief! I like the way the English pianist James Rhodes puts it:

"Bach and Mozart had gifts that came straight from God. I'm an unbeliever, but there is simply no other possible explanation for the depth of genius they displayed. What Bach and Mozart did with music is quite literally beyond any human comprehension."

For all his "genius", Beethoven was—and remains—one of us. He fought with his muse; he wrestled and raged and dug to the depths of his soul to find the means to say - musically—what he had to say. At the core of Beethoven's expressive message was his own life: his humanity. Unlike Bach and Mozart, each of whom created in his music a better, idealized world; a place of truth and beauty and rightness that exists beyond the futility of the everyday, music that describes paradise, Beethoven's expressive world dwells here on earth, among his fellow humans. As we have already observed, he was not the first man "to be angry", but he was the first composer to allow his emotions to explicitly inform his music; the first composer to espouse the notion that music composition was and had to be a vehicle for profound self-expression. At a time when composers existed on bended-knee and worked for the church or the state or the aristocracy, Beethoven declared in word and deed that his music was for him and about him and you can take it or leave it!

As a composer, Beethoven was, then, the first modern: the first composer to consciously and repeatedly put his own expressive needs before the stylistic and expressive norms of his time. It wasn't that he went outside that clichéd "box" (as did both Bach and Mozart); no, when it came to the expressive content of his music, Beethoven actually obliterated "the box"; he stomped on it like some jack-booted Hell's Angel in a bar fight, and by doing so created an entirely new

paradigm for Western music: that of a composer consciously and often explicitly mirroring his own life experience in his music.

Life was unkind to Herr Beethoven. He grew up to be a deeply scarred, very angry man: surly, rude, and suspicious, sometimes even paranoid; predisposed to obsessive-compulsive and even delusional behaviors; a clumsy, sometimes suicidal, socially graceless dude who really needed to work on his hair and his personal hygiene.

But—yes, there’s always a “but” – he was also a deeply passionate, deeply loving and at times lovable man, one who aspired to be honorable and noble and to serve humankind through his music.

All of these conflicting aspects of his personality found their way into his music; and consciously or unconsciously, we hear all of this in Beethoven’s music. It is music that stuns us with its power and passion; delights us with its lyricism; awes us with its magnificence, but most importantly inspires us in the manner in which it depicts Beethoven’s humanity.

So back to the admittedly ridiculous top-ten, top-25, top 100, top-’o-the-morning lists previously discussed.

Why should the almost universal declaration of Beethoven as being—today—the most “popular” composer in history mean anything given the entirely subjective nature of such popularity?

This is why. Beethoven’s music—with its anger and pain, passion and beauty; with its primal rhythmic power and its striving and battling in search of exaltation—is, for us, here, today, like looking in the mirror. In his music we hear our own lives; the dramatic narratives in his music resonate with our own experience; with our own anger and pain, with our own striving for something better in a world that can be both dreadfully brutal and, at the same time, very beautiful. His is a body of music that feels utterly modern in our own, troubled times.

The great Beethoven conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler wrote this in 1936:

“In Beethoven’s works Music and Soul are one. Even to attempt to separate the one from the other is an offence. Through [his] music shall we gain access to the soul of this great man; nay, more: it is only in full awareness of our humanity that we shall fully grasp the tremendous reality of his music.”

To which we say: Amen.

Thank you.