

Book Review

Beethoven the European: Transcultural Contexts of Performance, Interpretation and Reception, edited by Malcolm Miller and William Kinderman. Turnhout: Brepols, 2023.

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Beethoven's Empire

“Beethoven the European.” What an ambitious and promising title! And this at a time when the world seems to be spiraling out of control, when the project of the European Union has suffered grave setbacks (because of the financial crisis of 2007-08 and Brexit), and when a war imposed on Ukraine by a meanspirited and aggressive Russia (a restless empire for centuries, but itself, west of the Ural Mountains, a part of Europe) to counter and derail the European project, resulting in destabilizing the continent.

Beethoven, for more than two decades of his life, likewise lived in a world spiraling out of control. The French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars had shaken the fragile equilibrium that had existed in Europe after the Peace of Westphalia, negotiated in 1648. Yes, we may even say that Beethoven “the European” in some of the works of his “heroic phase” gave a voice, in the cultural sphere, to events that were occurring on the political and military level. (The *Eroica* is the most prominent example of Beethoven capturing the spirit of the time: its Funeral March, its Finale alluding to the Prometheus legend, its bold dedication to Napoleon—contemplated, but then withdrawn—are signifiers pointing to the turbulent era.) And, yes again, he imagined himself to be a conqueror, like Napoleon, but through the mind and musical art rather than military might. In 1806, after the battle of Jena and Auerstedt, in which Napoleon delivered a crushing defeat to Prussia (and during which the philosopher Hegel, with a manuscript of his “Phenomenology of the Spirit” in his pocket, saw the *Weltgeist* incarnated in the French emperor on horseback), Beethoven is supposed to have said to his friend Wenzel Krumpholz: “It is a pity that I do not understand the art of war as well as I do the art of music. I would conquer him!”¹

1. *Thayer's Life of Beethoven*, ed. Elliot Forbes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 403.

A Peanuts cartoon by Charles M. Schulz (featuring a conversation between Marcie and her friend, Peppermint Patty), which the Beethoven scholar David Levy passed on to me in the 1980s, is a riff on what Beethoven allegedly did on another occasion in response to news he received from Paris in May 1804, and which reinforces the Beethoven myth and promotes it in terms of pop culture. Marcie (the girl with glasses) relates to Peppermint Patty the story about Beethoven dedicating the *Eroica* to Napoleon, but (next frame) when he heard about Napoleon crowning himself emperor, he “tore up the dedication.” Peppermint Patty applauds that decision and (in the last frame) asks herself: “Who was Napoleon?”

These are lines that make us feel good as musicians. Not only is one of the most powerful political figures of Europe compared here to one of the most powerful characters in music history, but it seems that the composer wins in terms of name recognition over the emperor. Art, so it appears, prevails over politics and military matters, is longer lasting, perhaps even lasting forever.

True, Napoleon’s empire was short-lived, but for fifteen years he was the most powerful man in Europe, with the goal of, and almost succeeding in, unifying the continent under French hegemony. Then his enemies caught up with Napoleon “the European” and, after battles, aggravated by mistakes of his own, he ended up on the ash-heap of history, or, less metaphorically speaking, on a rock island in the South Atlantic, where he ended his life in the custody of British soldiers and with sheep as companions.

Beethoven’s empire—this much is clear—has lasted longer, and as artists and musicians, we are pleased about this turn of events. We see it all around us in concert halls that are built like temples to the goddess of art (or is the goddess perhaps a composer and male?), in the musicians gathering as an orchestra under the semi-dictatorial commands of a conductor, in the music being played in these halls, in the curricula of music schools and conservatories that are devoted to a repertory that, entirely or at least in part, can be linked to that great musician who was a contemporary of Napoleon: Beethoven the European. (Or, following the Peanuts cartoon, should we put it the other way around: Was Napoleon perhaps a contemporary of Beethoven?)



Beethoven's "Contemporary"

"Not so fast," I could and should interject here as a parenthesis. Let's avoid hubris by at least acknowledging that even Beethoven's empire may not last forever. There are signs that it is under attack right now and perhaps even crumbling, as the world of classical music, symphony orchestras, and concert halls is changing, and the curricula of music schools and conservatories are re-envisioned and, in turn, already are or will soon be revised. As historians, trained to observe and record change, we also may have to live with change (even when we may disagree with it).

But *Beethoven the European* has no such qualms: it celebrates the composer as an undisputed icon of music and more. The book grew out of an eponymous conference marking the 250th anniversary of the composer's birth in 2020 organized by the Centro Studi Opera Omnia Luigi Boccherini in Lucca, Italy, in conjunction with *Ad Parnassum*, a journal devoted to the study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century instrumental music. Celebrations of the two-hundred-and-fiftieth iteration of Beethoven's birth in 1770 had been planned all over the world in the form of concerts and conferences—certainly more events than for the 250th birthday of Napoleon a year before (which, I assume, were, most likely, limited to France anyway). But then the pandemic struck and poked a hole in many festivities. Events were either cancelled or went online, and the latter was the case also with the Lucca conference. Scholars from all over the world participated to celebrate Beethoven the European (by way of Zoom or another app, allowing encounters and communication without the heavy carbon footprint of travel): European and North American researchers

were complemented with expertise heralding from South America, Asia, and Australia, and, surprisingly, most of the chapters were written by scholars relatively new to Beethoveniana (especially when compared to a similar undertaking, honoring Lewis Lockwood on his 90th birthday: *The New Beethoven*, ed. Jeremy Yudkin and published by University of Rochester Press in 2020, with a list of contributors that looked like a Who's Who in Beethoven Research).

A table of contents and a succinct blurb for *Beethoven the European* can be found on the publisher's website: <https://www.brepols.net/products/IS-9782503602905-1>. The editors have arranged the essays into three groups, giving each a different title. (I adopt these three titles as section headings in what follows.)

Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology

William Kinderman, one of the editors of the volume under review (and one of the Beethoven scholars in the Who's Who just alluded to), begins the discussion of Beethoven the European with what may be considered a keynote address: "Beethoven's Ninth Symphony as a Disputed Symbol of Community: From Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* to the Brexiteers of 2019." He acknowledges that Beethoven's paean, celebrating universal brotherhood under the banner of joy, has been questioned (or in Richard Taruskin's words "resisted") as a cultural artifact. In fact, Beethoven himself may be considered a "resister," as he pondered the possibility of concluding his symphony with an instrumental finale of a less lofty kind. (A passionate melody sketched out in D minor was finally used, transposed, to wrap up Beethoven's String Quartet in A minor, op. 132—in Kinderman's words, "the dark companion to the Ninth.") But the composer opted for an affirmative ending, even intensified the narrative of his Fifth, sometimes described as "Per aspera ad astra" (i.e., through hardships to the stars, or from struggle to victory, or from darkness to light), with the vocal-choral finale, as we know it, setting selected strophes of Schiller's poem invoking community (and passing over those that were just drinking songs).

The reception history of the Ninth confirms the aptness of Beethoven's decision which Kinderman (no "resister" he) links to the continuing relevance of the composer in today's "increasingly global world." The Ninth, with its affirmative conclusion, is not "immune to propagandistic misuse" (he admits) but, over the span of two centuries, it has become a beacon (and this is what matters) of hope and community. The joy tune has served (without words) as the national or, rather, trans- and international anthem of the European Union; it played a role in the student demonstrations at Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989; it was performed, Leonard Bernstein conducting, a few months later, when the Berlin Wall fell with the Ode to Joy ("Freude") becoming an Ode to Freedom ("Freiheit"); it sounded as a commemorative response after the 9/11 attacks and as an uplifting piece of music ("daiku" or no. 9) when Japan had to cope with the disastrous aftermaths of a tsunami in 2011; and, if large numbers matter, millions of people have accessed YouTube links with flash mobs performing what may be the single most recognizable melody worldwide. Beethoven's

empire or “Beethoven’s humane legacy stands above the wreckage of history, defying politicians who build walls to divide peoples and enforce social inequality.” It is an antidote to cynicism, Kinderman concludes.²

Political aspects related to Beethoven and his work continue to be discussed in some of the chapters following. **Michael Christoforidis and Peter Tregear** (“Beethoven, the Congress of Verona and the Concert of Europe 1822/23”) insist that Beethoven did not turn “apolitical” in the last decade of his life, but that he was interested in the deliberations of the Congress of Verona of 1822 and in the Greek War of Independence taking place at the time. Despite a climate of censorship in Vienna, he was able during the time to restage his opera *Fidelio* and use the incidental music *Die Ruinen von Athen* in a revival of Kotzebue’s eponymous play (with a new libretto and a new overture *Die Weihe des Hauses*); the authors argue that these measures have a political subtext and should be understood as an expression of Philhellenism.

David B. Dennis (“Beethoven’s 100th *Todestag* in 1927: Ideological Battles over the Composer and His Music in Weimar Political Culture”) shows how Beethoven was “appropriated” during the year commemorating the one-hundredth iteration of his death by political parties from the far left to the far right. In fact, ideologues projected their own views, some of them quite extreme, on Beethoven’s life and works in the hope of persuading others to understand the composer in accordance with their political perspectives. The author concludes his observations on the Beethoven reception during the Weimar Republic by cherishing (and defending) “the present phase of interpreting Beethoven as a symbol of European and even global humanism.” That is, I would say, the very perspective that informs the volume at hand.

Sanna Iitti (“Patriotism and Islam in Ludwig van Beethoven’s *The Ruins of Athens*, Op. 113 and *King Stephen*, op. 117”) sheds new light on two neglected (and widely thought to have been hastily composed) compositions by Beethoven. Both works were initially written for Budapest and thus for the Hungarians in the Habsburg Empire and meant to shore up “patriotism” to a threat (by the time no longer imminent) posed by the “Muslim” Ottoman Empire and thereby reinforce the Austrian-Hungarian union, in part by invoking the common bond of Christianity.

With **Arabella Pare**’s chapter (“Beethoven as a Transnational Composer: *Straßenmusik*, Verbunkos and the Trio op. 11 ‘Gassenhauer’”), we abandon, to some extent, the “political” dimension that has informed the book thus far. She shows how the finale of Beethoven’s Trio for Clarinet, Violoncello, and Piano (op. 11) draws on a variety of musical styles and even taps into the vernacular, thereby creating a truly cosmopolitan and transnational idiom reflecting the multiethnic character of the Austrian capital around 1800.

2. It should be noted that Kinderman’s chapter is related to his recent book, published in 2020 in both English and German: *Beethoven: A Political Artist in Revolutionary Times* (University of Chicago Press) and *Beethoven: Ein politischer Künstler in revolutionären Zeiten* (Vienna: Molden).

Anton Schindler, Beethoven's amanuensis in the last decade of his life, has gotten a bad reputation among Beethoven scholars as an unreliable eyewitness and biographer. But **Susan Cooper** ("Beethoven, His Circle and Horace") marshals compelling evidence (Beethoven's library, conversations partly recorded in conversation books, entries in diaries, etc.) supporting Schindler's claim that the composer knew Horace quite well, having read some of Horace's classic texts in translation as well as in the original Latin. It should be noted that another Beethoven scholar, Theodore Albrecht, has repeatedly (and recently) proposed to take Schindler more seriously as a trustworthy source about Beethoven.³

Reception Across Europe and Beyond

María Encina Cortizo and Ramón Sobrino (in their "Interpreting Beethoven in Spain in the 19th Century: The Arrival of his Symphonic Music to a Nascent Concert Life") study the reception of Beethoven's music on the Iberian Peninsula, supporting their research with extensive lists of data. The reception of Beethoven's symphonic music in Spain was slow, sporadic, and initially limited to private or semi-public settings; it was spurred on with the Lenten concerts organized in Madrid 1859–66 and gained momentum in the 1860s and 1870s with the foundation of three professional orchestras in the Spanish capital and a general democratization of musical life.

Chiara Sintoni ("Ludwig van Beethoven and His Reception in Piano Methods") traces the Beethoven reception in various nineteenth-century piano-method books (Clementi, Louis Adam, Hummel, Kalkbrenner, and Czerny), revealing a growing awareness of the importance of Beethoven as a pianist and composer of piano music.

Frédéric de La Grandville asserts quite early in his contribution ("Who Are You, Mr. Beethoven?"): "The opinion that Ludwig van Beethoven's music was not known in Paris until after his death is unfounded." He then demonstrates that some of the composer's piano music, despite its disturbing energy and novelty, was taught at the Conservatoire as early as 1804/05 and selected symphonies (certainly the First and the *Eroica*, as a whole or in parts, perhaps unnamed and unnumbered others as well) appeared in programs of the Paris Conservatoire between 1807 and 1814. François-Antoine Habeneck, thus, could connect to a tradition, however faint, of performing Beethoven symphonies in Paris when he founded, together with Cherubini, the Society of Conservatoire Concerts in 1828.

A peculiar kind of Parisian Beethoven reception is introduced by **David Hurwitz** ("Beethoven's French Liturgical Music—No Really") in the form of arrangements for organ of the slow movements of all nine symphonies and a few other works by Beethoven, published in the mid-1850s by Edouard Batiste, organist at St. Eustache and professor at the Conservatoire in Paris. The pieces functioned in the service as Offertory, Communion, Elevation, and *Grande Sortie*; their use in the liturgy elevated musical taste and introduced

3. See *Beethoven's Ninth Symphony: Rehearsing and Performing its 1824 Premiere* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2024).

Parisian church goes to works by Beethoven they may have never heard otherwise. “There is an irony in this,” writes Hurwitz in conclusion, and I feel the need to quote a little more from his insightful comments: “The history of music, especially the classics, normally gets written from the top down, while the evolution of cultural monuments—of the kind that made Beethoven’s name a household word all over Europe and beyond—requires a different perspective, starting from the bottom before moving up.”

Picking up on a similar study by Barry Cooper of 2002, **David Rowland** (“Further Light on Clementi’s 1807 Contract with Beethoven”) sheds light, or, rather, “further light,” on the complexities of doing music business in Europe in the early nineteenth century (in the absence of international copyright laws and difficulties of communication during the Napoleonic Wars).

Beethoven the European, the editors admit in the Preface of their book, “travelled very little compared to his contemporaries Mozart and Clementi, but his reputation quickly travelled much further,” not only to more distant European countries such as Britain and Russia but beyond to Japan and to the United States. The next two chapters, from very different angles, carve a path into Beethoven reception in these countries. **Mai Koshikakezawa**’s chapter (“Beethoven’s ‘Moonlight’ Sonata and the Japanese Reception of Western Music”) illustrates David Hurwitz’s plea (cited above) of being open to writing music history from the bottom up. The “Moonlight” Sonata—its first movement being heralded in music-history textbooks as anticipating the nocturne and the Romantic character piece—gained popularity in Japan for very different reasons: An anecdote, published in an English-language junior-high-school textbook, relates a story of Beethoven playing a piece of music to a blind shoemaker’s daughter on a moonlit night. While barely concealed eroticism seems to have been the “message” of the music for Western ears, the Japanese attached to the movement charitable thoughts about the consolatory nature of art. The completely fictitious story went “viral” (in modern parlance); its gravitational forces extended not only to the “Moonlight” Sonata but paved a way for the Japanese reception of Beethoven in general. Koshikakezawa, with a focus on the former, surveys the latter from the opening of Japan to the rest of the world in 1853 to the end of the twentieth century (with Japanese piano manufacturers as main beneficiaries of that charming little anecdote).

Beethoven made it across the Atlantic Ocean not by way of a cute piece of fiction but by way of the foundation, in 1842, of the Philharmonic Society of New York (today’s New York Philharmonic Orchestra) with the goal of advancing instrumental music (and thus, even though not mentioned explicitly, Beethoven symphonies). **Alison Minkus** (“Reception and Reflection of Beethoven’s Works at the Philharmonic Society of New York, 1842–1892”) presents a plethora of information supporting, by way of data gathered from archival sources and contemporary accounts, her thesis of how Beethoven empowered the lofty goals of the society of bringing musical works, in the well-established European sense, to New York audiences. (I cannot refrain from citing verbatim one of her key sentences: “While European orchestras were largely powered by states, cities, and nobility,

American orchestras were often associated with powerful businessmen and philanthropists.”) Her chapter can stand as a model for a music history focused (and rewritten with a focus) on institutions rather than great composers. (I noticed that she received her Ph.D. in Organizational Analysis from the University of Alberta in Canada; I am not entirely sure what this means, but her chapter is musicology of a high order.)

Performance and Analysis

The final chapters, strictly speaking, leave Beethoven the European and Beethoven the Conqueror behind and focus on specific works and performance issues. **Barry Cooper** (“Performing Beethoven’s Vocal Music in the 21st Century”) urges us to pay more attention to Beethoven’s vocal compositions (insisting that they are not inferior to the instrumental works), to observe the composer’s pedal signs, tempo marks, dynamics, and ornaments, and thereby to arrive at truly authentic performances.

Ned Kellenberger (“Beethoven’s Violin Concerto Opus 61: Toward Performances of Alternate Solo Violin Parts”) calls attention to the fact that there are no fewer than three different versions of the solo part of Beethoven’s Violin Concerto: two versions exist in the composer’s handwriting (1806 and 1807), the third is the one printed in the first edition of 1809. Kellenberger considers none of these versions as definitive and proposes a synthetic approach in performing the solo part.

Malcolm Miller, the book’s co-editor, analyzes (with inspiration from the Schenkerian method) the function of extreme registers (both highest and lowest) in Beethoven’s last works, especially the late piano sonatas (“Beethoven’s Registral Structures and Strategies of Transcendence in the Late Piano Sonatas”). Rather than seeing them as making unreasonable demands on performers and instruments caused by the composer’s having lost, in the last decade of his life, much of his ability to hear, he interprets them as necessary for providing linear and large-scale structural coherence as well as metaphors for Beethoven’s spirituality, encompassing an “upward gaze” and a “down to earth” perspective.

Beethoven’s Symphony no. 7 (“the apotheosis of the dance” in Wagner’s famous words) has inspired quite a number of choreographers to interpret the music through movement. **Eftychia Papanikolaou** (“Uwe Scholz’s Choreographic Conception of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony”) explores Uwe Scholz’s choreographic interpretation of the symphony (for the Stuttgart Ballet in 1991), which she encountered in a revival performance in Montréal in 2020. The essay, enhanced by numerous photographs of the performance, “proposes modes of analysis that explore the choreo-musical relationships of the two media synergistically.” Scholl’s choreography, Papanikolaou insists, is not merely a translation of one medium into another; rather, we can learn something new about the music. (Her fascinating claims would have been easier to assess if we had been given a link to a video—if such exists—of the performance, whether complete or just in excerpts.)

Peg Du Krol (“The Whimsical Character of Beethoven’s Salieri Piano Variations, WoO 73, 1799”) focuses on a little-known variation set of Beethoven, using a tune from Salieri’s opera *Falstaff*, that was quite popular at the time and used by other composers. The set shows Beethoven’s early mastery of comical devices following in the footsteps of Haydn and, when compared with Salieri’s conventional musical idiom, of musical parody and irony. (In other words, the composer of the Diabelli Variations seems to be lurking in this little gem without opus number.)

In Conclusion

Beethoven the European celebrates the composer at 250 as a cultural icon that, from modest beginnings in provincial Bonn and having spent most of his life in and around Vienna, has gone on, since his death, to conquer through his music, not only Europe but vast regions of the world. The diversity and richness of the individual contributions are remarkable, ranging from the lofty to the recondite and, in most cases, offering new insights. Multi-author edited volumes often risk becoming uneven in quality and even conceptually inconsistent. Miller and Kinderman (and by extension also the organizers of the Lucca conference) should be praised as editors for the choices they have made, giving the floor to younger scholars, drawing in also experts from disciplines other than musicology, and for having provided, in the Preface, a conceptual basis (some may call it a staple) that compellingly ties the diverse materials together.

Finally, I must sing praises to the publisher: Brepols located in the little town of Turnhout in Belgium (I also note that the volume is printed in Italy—in short, a truly European enterprise). The editors must be pleased about how Beethoven the European was treated at the 250th anniversary of his birth, and the many contributors must cherish how their contributions made it into print. It is a deluxe production in all respects: the illustrations are sharply reproduced, and the high-quality paper and binding, like Beethoven’s music, seem likely to last for centuries.

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