

Myth and Misinterpretation in Beethoven's *Emperor* Concerto
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Upon his death in 1827, Ludwig van Beethoven quickly attained the status of a demigod. This reputation relied somewhat on influential figures like Franz Liszt, who ensured that his image and stature would never be forgotten or diminished, but more importantly, it hinged on the admiration of the general population, for whom he symbolized something greater than divinely inspired music. Beethoven was an icon of the libertarian philosophy offered by the Enlightenment, one-handedly emancipating the artist from the shackles of aristocratic patronage. Of course, this was not entirely the case for the great German composer, who “managed to reconcile his aversion to the aristocracy as a matter of principle with his dependence on them as a matter of reality¹,” but one must make allowances for such exaggerations when the figure in question is so substantial that myth and legend have overtaken the place of factual history².

Beethoven is perhaps the perfect example of a composer whose mythical life enjoys the same reputation as his documented life. One only needs to recall the famous mystery of the immortal beloved that surrounds works like the Moonlight Sonata (a title Beethoven incidentally had nothing to do with³), or the popular sentiment of Napoleonic heroism that surrounds the Emperor Concerto (another title not conceived by the composer). As fascinating as these tales may be, they pose a significant threat to the music itself. If these deviations from the truth are not accounted for, a performer’s fidelity to the composer’s intentions may easily be compromised. More than this, the interpreter may become so preoccupied with the extra-musical aspects of a work, whether relevant or not, that he or she risks overlooking crucial musical aspects of the piece. It is, therefore, not surprising that the Emperor Concerto, a work that has been greatly exposed to this fascination with fictional anecdotes, also suffers from decades of textual inaccuracies. As the work contains several innovations in pianoforte writing, it is equally unexceptional that the performance of the work on a modern piano and orchestra threatens to hinder the concerto’s effectiveness. Prior to addressing these issues, an investigation into some of the popular myths surrounding the concerto must be carried out in order to demonstrate how a performer can be easily misled.

Composed in 1809, Beethoven’s fifth piano concerto is the last complete model of its kind by the composer. In recent times the concerto has been compared to the Eroica symphony of 1803, with which it shares the key of E^b major⁴, and if one considers the popular myth surrounding it, some reference to Napoleon. In fact, it has even been suggested that the key of E^b major was, for Beethoven, a ‘heroic’ key.

¹ Antony Hopkins, *The Seven Concertos of Beethoven* (Vermont: Ashgate, 1996) 58.

² The distinction made here (i.e. *factual* history) is necessary in that often cases of folklore, myth, and legend are taken to be *historical*.

³ Mark Evan Bonds, *A History of Music in Western Culture* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003) 382.

⁴ Lewis Lockwood, *Beethoven: The Music & the Life* (New York: Norton, 2003) 248.

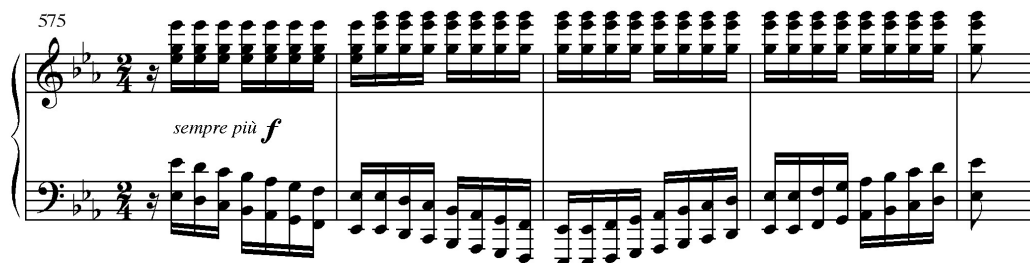
Similar arguments have been made about the composer’s famous ‘C minor mood’ (e.g. Fifth Symphony, Pathétique Sonata); however, as historian Robert Layton points out, “the works he [Beethoven] wrote in this key are surprisingly diverse.⁵” Needless to say, the key of E^b is no exception to this. If this key were to entail even some sort of reference to heroism, then at the very least, other E^b major compositions of the same year would represent this quality. Unfortunately for the ‘heroic key hypothesis’, Beethoven’s *Les adieux* sonata in E^b major that was composed in the same year, expresses sentiments that differ greatly from the heroic.

Example 1 – Beethoven’s *Les adieux*, *Das Wiedersehn* mm.193-196.



The three movements of the sonata depict Beethoven’s sorrowful farewell (*Das Lebewohl*) to the Archduke Rudolph on his departure from Vienna on 4 May 1809, his sadness at Rudolph’s absence (*Abwesenheit*), and his rejoicing at seeing him again (*Das Wiedersehn*) on his return on 30 January 1810.⁶ The thin sounding octaves over the repeated tonic chords in the bass that bring the final movement of *Les adieux* to a close (See Example 1) are no match for the triumphant sixteenth-note chords at the end of the *Eroica* symphony (See Example 2), and the programmatic elements of the respective works do not coincide in the least bit. Having discredited the case for an E^b major mood puts one myth to rest, but the title of the concerto remains to be discussed.

Example 2 – Beethoven’s *Eroica*, *Finale* mm.575-579.



⁵ Robert Layton, *A Guide to the Concerto* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) 128.

⁶ Joseph Kerman, and Alan Tyson, “Beethoven: 1809-1812,” *Grove Music Online* 2005. 1 Mar. 2006 <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

“Beethoven’s life and fortune intersected at many points with the meteoric career of Napoleon⁷,” and as such, the composer constantly found himself grappling with the same question that occupied most of Europe at the time: Should Napoleon be seen as a liberator spreading the equality and freedom born of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution? Or should he be exposed as an imperialist, with the sole intent to conquer and gain power? Evidently, Beethoven chose the latter option, as is supported by his famous scratching out of the new emperor’s name from the title page of the Eroica symphony, and the composition of Wellingtons Sieg, which celebrated the final defeat of Bonaparte at the Battles of Vittoria and Leipzig in 1813. This evidence reduces the likelihood that Beethoven would have associated the concerto with Napoleon, or any emperor for that matter:

Should Beethoven have had in mind any such association, one would be hard pressed even to say which emperor he might have been thinking of: Napoleon, whose activities were just now making life so miserable for him, or the hapless Franz, defeated once more and about to yield up a substantial territory to the French in the treaty of Schönbrunn? The truth, of course, is that this concerto has no identifiable connection with any emperor. And though it fairly bristles with musical topoi of a military cast and with modes of expression we easily identify as “heroic,” one can hardly imagine that Beethoven, fed up with all the “drums, cannons, and human misery” on all sides, could have intended this piece as a celebration of any military hero or anyone’s victory in war.⁸

There is no question that the popular title originated from extra-musical associations not sanctioned by the composer, but this in itself does not prevent the perpetuation of the misleading nickname. It can only be hoped that performer’s do not base their interpretations on these unfounded anecdotes, and opt for a rendition that allows the music to speak for itself. After all, the piece has a lot to offer, and represents a pinnacle in the concerto repertoire in terms of its overall unity, its combination of innovative pianoforte writing with traditional techniques, and the meticulously notated score, hitherto uncharacteristic of Beethoven in this genre.

A discussion of the innovations in the Emperor Concerto would not be complete without a brief description of the methods by which the composer unifies all three of the movements. What is most striking about the tonal organization of the concerto is the relationship between the key of the outer movements and that of the Adagio. The E^b major tonality of the opening Allegro and the closing Rondo is juxtaposed against the B major tonality of the intervening movement. Seemingly far-removed from one another, the two keys actually represent a typical example of the

⁷ Leon Plantinga, *Beethoven’s Concertos: History, Style Performance* (New York: Norton, 1999) 252.

⁸ Plantinga 255-56.

third relationships that would later characterize the music of the Romantic. If the tonic degree of the outer movements (E^b) is enharmonically respelled, it becomes the mediant degree of the second movement (D[#]). The transition between the final two movements is even more fascinating, and preserves this tension between the various scale-degrees of the different keys. As the intermediate movement seems to come to a close on the tonic (B), the oboes extend the note by sustaining it, and suddenly fall a semitone to B^b. This becomes the dominant degree of E^b major, upon which the beginning of the rondo theme is sounded at a very slow pace, and gradually leads into the final movement. Although Beethoven achieved a new sense of unity within the concerto form, the idea of coherence between movements of a large-scale work had already been achieved in the *Eroica* symphony. In fact, it was against the same orchestral forces as he used in this symphony that Beethoven had to set the pianoforte, resulting in some innovations reflecting new trends in both compositional practices and instrument making.

Example 3 – Beethoven’s Op.2, No.1, Allegro mm.37-39 and mm.132-134.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for Beethoven's Op. 2, No. 1. The first system, measures 37-39, features a piano (p) melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand with dynamic markings of forte (f) and sf. The second system, measures 132-134, features a piano (ff) melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand with dynamic markings of sf.

When Beethoven wrote his fifth piano concerto, he had already composed several works that expanded the sonata form, particularly in the development section.⁹ Along with this formal trait, the composer employed the full forces of the orchestra early on in the concerto. “Whereas in the Fourth Concerto trumpets and tympani [sic] enter the scene only in the finale, here the full orchestral tutti with bass drums fills the sound space from the very beginning and remains prominent to the end.¹⁰” With such expansive uses of orchestration and form, the expected entry of the fortepiano following a long orchestral exposition would seem to remove all significance from the solo instrument in the piece. To remedy the potential problem,

⁹ For example, the *Eroica* symphony, or the Op.2 no.3 piano sonata in C major, which includes a fairly expanded exposition.

¹⁰ Lockwood 249.

Beethoven opted to introduce the pianoforte first with an opening cadenza outlining the harmonic progression of I-IV-V⁷, thus preparing the orchestral rendition of the opening theme on the tonic. This solution solved the problem of balance near the beginning of the concerto, but did not remedy the same issue later on. For this, Beethoven required the advent of new technology, and made full use of the new six-octave (FF-f^{'''}) keyboard of German and Austrian pianos. Unlike Mozart, who composed quite comfortably for the five-octave double-strung Viennese piano (FF-f^{''}) his entire life, Beethoven ran into problems concerning the range of the instrument very early on. In the first of his pianoforte sonatas dedicated to Haydn, he was forced to modify a section of the exposition when it reappears in the recapitulation for the sole purpose of accommodating the range of the available instrument, that did not extend beyond f^{''} (Example 3). In the Emperor Concerto, “the upward expansion of range [was] no mere technical detail; the resultant piano sound became a distinctive stylistic trait, and [an] instantly recognizable emblem of early nineteenth-century music.¹¹” Beethoven does, in fact, withhold the first use of the high f’s until measure 212 (Example 4), but from then on uses it consistently throughout the rest of the movement and much of the concerto. One final issue remains concerning the notational innovation of the fifth concerto, and poses what is perhaps the most significant performance practice issue.

Example 4 – Beethoven’s Emperor Concerto, Allegro mm.211-212.

The image displays a musical score for measures 211 and 212 of Beethoven's Emperor Concerto. The score is arranged in a system with six staves. The top staff is for the Piano, with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The piano part begins at measure 211 with a dynamic marking of 'p' and a 'g^{ua}' marking above the staff. The piano part features a complex rhythmic pattern with sixteenth and thirty-second notes. The other staves (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass) provide harmonic support with sustained notes. The key signature for the entire system is two flats, and the time signature is common time (C).

Whether or not to play basso continuo in the performance of Beethoven’s concertos is often seen as a question of personal taste, and is assumed to depend on the type of instrument and ensemble used; however, the evidence left in the

¹¹ Plantinga 294.

composer's own hand indicates otherwise. Beethoven adopted two methods in notating the basso continuo part in his concertos, each of which corresponds to a specific performance situation. A fully realized chordal figured bass was generally reserved for performances with a full orchestra, whereas a bass-with-melody version facilitated performances with limited forces by outlining the melodic contour of the composition. What is remarkable about the Emperor Concerto is that in the primary documents, Beethoven used both. In fact, unlike the simple figurations given in the published editions of his previous works of this genre, the fifth concerto contains a full set of meticulous figured bass symbols in Beethoven's own hand including "selected octave doublings in the bass, the instruction *tasto solo* ("play only this key"), and careful arrangements of figures for specific ordering of chord tones.¹²" Moreover, the piano score contains reductions of the instrumental parts, in which the idiomatic writing for orchestral instruments is adapted to the characteristics of the pianoforte (e.g. violin tremolos became octave tremolos on the keyboard). Even though all of these factors make it quite obvious that Beethoven intended for the basso continuo to be played under all circumstances, the proposition still has its critics. The editor of the piano concertos for the recent Beethoven Werke edition, Hans-Werner Küthen, drops the figured bass symbols of the original sources and substitutes them with rests. In the case of the Emperor Concerto, Küthen defends this modern practice of dropping the figured bass by suggesting that Beethoven only wrote out the figures for the extraneous purpose of instructing his patron, the Archduke Rudolph. Beethoven scholar Leon Plantinga puts this notion to rest:

In the absence of overwhelming evidence that such is the case, it is much easier [and more likely] to believe that Beethoven's figures mean what they say, that in his final completed concerto he clung persistently to entrenched traditions of the genre, whereby the pianist performing with orchestra could be expected to play multiple roles: as virtuoso soloist, as accompanist during the *tutti*s, and sometimes as director.¹³

To further substantiate Plantinga's response, it is equally puzzling to assume that Beethoven would have published the annotations he made explicitly for the Archduke's use. Now that the presence of basso continuo has been established as an integral part of the composition from Beethoven's point of view, it remains to be determined whether it should be realized in modern performances, or tossed aside as a stylistic trait of the past.

The answer to this question is, in fact, quite evident if one is aware of the history of continuo playing. Historians Peter Williams and David Ledbetter note that, "in the larger chamber or concert halls in Europe during two centuries [ca.1600-

¹² Plantinga 290.

¹³ Plantinga 290.

ca.1800] there was of course no consistent practice regarding the direction of the music. Sometimes the continuo player functioned as the director; sometimes there was a more specialized director, who did nothing else. In many cases the first violinist directed irrespective of whether or not he was a virtuoso soloist; in such cases the continuo player filled in the harmonies.¹⁴ In fact, at the time Beethoven wrote the Emperor Concerto, the practice of directing from the keyboard remained in consistent use only in the theatre and the church. In light of this, the realization of the basso continuo must not be passed off as an antiquated convention with the sole purpose of holding the ensemble together. It must be regarded as an integral part of the concerto that cannot be compromised under any circumstances.

Issues of performance practice often initiate quarrels between historians and the modern interpreters, with individuals of both distinctions on either side of the debate. Seeing that these arguments often perpetuate incessantly, it is rarely the case that the evidence supporting one of the two opposing positions proves strong enough to encourage a general consensus. Beethoven's Emperor Concerto represents one of these rare occasions in which the historical evidence is so strong that every interpretation must be informed by it. The performer must recognize the unprecedented unity achieved between the movements as a fresh take on the David versus Goliath notion that traditionally characterizes the relationship between the soloist and the orchestra. Modern performers must also be aware of the tensions created by the newly expanded range for which the concerto was written, and more importantly, must faithfully adhere to Beethoven's intention that the basso continuo be realized, regardless of the pianist's role (conductor, soloist, or both). To conclude the argument, no comment is more relevant than the following, made by the composer himself in a letter to publisher George Thompson: "I am not in the habit of rewriting my compositions. I never did it because I am profoundly convinced that every change of detail changes the character of the whole."¹⁵

¹⁴ David Ledbetter, and Peter Williams, "Basso continuo: Development," *Grove Music Online* 2005. 1 Mar. 2006 <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

¹⁵ Friedrich Kerst, *Beethoven: the man and the artist, as revealed in his own words* (New York: Dover, 1964).