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Review of Beethoven 1806 by Mark Ferraguto

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Mark Ferraguto, *Beethoven 1806*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 272 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-094718-7.

1792, 1802, 1808, 1814, 1824—if Mark Ferraguto wanted to write a book about a watershed year in Beethoven’s life, he could have chosen from many. For that reason it is significant he chooses 1806, a pedestrian, albeit productive year for the composer. It turns out there is much to gain from studying this year: *Beethoven 1806* is less concerned with a well-known pivotal moment than the way those pivotal moments have been enshrined as such, and have shaped the reception of his music.

The Introduction recounts how the works from 1806–7 sit uncomfortably within their given stylistic period, the so-called “heroic style”: “Critics have tended to view these works either as temporary regressions or, more optimistically, as evidence of Beethoven’s penchant for alternating between phases of radical growth and restraint” (p. 11). Instead of nuancing the heroic style to shoehorn these works into their designated period, Ferraguto embraces them as anomalies. He considers these works within their own milieu apart from the towering works that usually overshadow them—the Fourth Symphony apart from the Third and Fifth, for example (discussed in Chapter 4). Ferraguto therefore joins a list of scholars that have critically re-examined the historical setting during Beethoven’s so-called “heroic period”—he cites similar studies by Elaine Sisman, Scott Burnham, Lewis Lockwood, Nicholas Cook, Nicholas Mathew, and Nancy November (p. 2), as well as others by David Schroeder, Matthew Riley, Mark Evan Bonds, Thomas Tolley, and Melanie Lowe that seek to reconstruct past listening practices (p. 14).

In leveraging anomaly against historical continuity, Ferraguto describes his study as a microhistory that “seeks to elaborate the specific conditions in which the works of 1806 and early 1807 were conceived, composed, and heard” (p. 3). It is easy to think Beethoven is a prime candidate for microhistory given all the historical minutiae savored by aficionados (hence so many “watershed” years). Yet *Beethoven 1806* is hardly the fine-grained narrative one finds in Alain Corbin’s *Le village des cannibales* (Paris: Aubier, 1990). The book essentially comprises a series of case studies (the book’s later disavowal of case studies notwithstanding; see

pp. 208–9), with Chapters 2 through 6 organized by musical genre. Indeed, the book’s structure, which depends on Chapter 1 to provide “the historical and critical framework for the studies of individual works that follow in subsequent chapters” (pp. 19–20), precludes it from a post-structural genre designed to confound such frameworks through sustained historical description.

Another method cited besides microhistory is Actor-Network Theory (ANT) developed by the French sociologist Bruno Latour, which privileges a wide selection of materials, people, and ideas to help maintain focus on particularity and contingency. Ferraguto takes up concepts from ANT to circumvent an exhausted dichotomy in Beethoven studies of music and historical context, and to reconstruct a more historically-grounded, even mundane version of Beethoven (discussed below).

Chapter 1, “After *Leonore*,” addresses why the compositions from 1806 should be considered a cohesive group for study. An (un)timely combination of *Leonore*’s mediocre reception and Napoleon’s occupation of Vienna at the end of 1805 “effectively put an end to one of his major projects of 1803–5: his preparation for a career in Paris” (p. 28). With dashed hopes as a Parisian composer and disenchantment with the French Revolution, the 1806 works represent Beethoven’s return to instrumental genres, more familiar territory, to revamp his portfolio and “pivot” his career (p. 29). Ferraguto also highlights several “compelling musical affinities” among the instrumental works (p. 209) that suggest a “stylistic turn” away from the heroic phase following the composition of his opera *Leonore* (p. 29). Some pervasive traits include stripped-down orchestral scoring and use of timpani, “quiet but distinct openings,” and the effect of “suspended time” — all of which Ferraguto shows through analyzing pivotal moments of Opp. 58, 60, and 61. The major works from that year are subsequently given their own chapters—the Fourth Piano Concerto, Op. 58 and Violin Concerto, Op. 61 (Chapter 2), the three “Razumovsky” String Quartets, Op. 59 (Chapter 3), the Fourth Symphony, Op. 60 (Chapter 4), the Thirty-Two Variations on an Original Piano Theme, WoO 80 (Chapter 5), and *Coriolan* Overture, Op. 62 (Chapter 6).

Chapter 2, “Music For a Virtuoso,” demonstrates how the Fourth Piano Concerto and Violin Concerto “challenge the conventional notion of

the concerto as a vehicle for virtuosic display” (p. 48). The well-worn structure of historically-informed analysis is retained—context first, score-reading second. Here, context entails notions of virtuosity around 1800, especially from Johann Karl Friedrich Triest’s 1802 essay “On Traveling Virtuosos.” Borrowing a term from Philip Auslander, Ferraguto shows Triest theorizing a “musical persona”: virtuosos “perform” an identity that blurs distinctions between composer and performer (p. 57). The concertos bear traces of Beethoven’s musical persona, insofar as they repeatedly drum up the brilliant style only to submit to more interior, *dolce* figurations. Through topical analysis and attention given to unusually precise expression markings, Ferraguto argues, “the brilliant and expressive styles do not exist on equal footing; rather, the brilliant gives way to the expressive, accords it pride of place” (p. 63). Therefore, where other scholars have seen the “minimization of bravura writing” in these concertos as a suspension of the “heroic style,” Ferraguto sees subtle musical essays on the concept of virtuosity (p. 49).

Chapter 3 draws on Ferraguto’s substantial article on the Op. 59 “Razumovsky” Quartets published in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* (67, no. 1 [2014]: 77–124). Ferraguto reconsiders the famously fraught relationship between folk- and learned-style elements in the three quartets. He argues against the prevailing view that Beethoven’s overblown counterpoint saddled upon Russian folk melodies—especially in the finale of No. 1 and third movement of No. 2—constitute a “satirical send-up of Russian imperial might” (p. 73). Where Richard Taruskin and others have heard Beethoven mocking Russian stereotypes through Viennese counterpoint, Ferraguto essentially sees Beethoven mocking Viennese counterpoint through Russian folk tunes: “The issue is not so much that the Russian theme fails to meet the criteria of strict counterpoint, but rather that the criteria themselves become outrageous” (p. 93). Furnishing this interpretation, Ferraguto considers Beethoven’s amicable relationship with Count Razumovsky, and Razumovsky’s popular reputation as an adopted son of Vienna. As with any discussion of (musical) irony, it is difficult to distinguish which political side is getting lampooned. The answer seems to depend upon how much one sympathizes with Beethoven. On the other hand, what if both criticisms are right? That the

quartets may sound self-critical with a “sense of playfulness” during outrageously developed folk tunes does not preclude it from also sounding patronizing (p. 85). Anyone who has endured a condescending performance of white liberal social awareness might understand the cringing feeling Razumovsky may have had when hearing his folk songs zhooshed up by a string quartet in the name of “self-reflexive” German liberalism (p. 93).

Chapter 4 probes the influence of Joseph Haydn on Beethoven’s Fourth Symphony. It is well known that Beethoven turned to Haydn’s symphonic rhetoric when composing the Fourth, but the extent of Haydn’s influence remains an open question. Key choices, modulations, orchestration, thematic design, and formal structure are all meticulously compared between Op. 60 and Haydn’s Symphony No. 102. Ferraguto concludes that while “outright modeling” overstates the influence, it nevertheless seems that “Beethoven looked to Haydn’s symphonies when assembling the ‘bones’ of his new B-flat symphony...but that the working-out of material represents a freer approach” (p. 147). Ferraguto draws attention to Haydn’s celebrity status during this time, and suggests that within this context Op. 60 functions as a kind of musical commemoration to Haydn.

Chapter 5 analyzes the theme and variations of WoO 80 in relation to a broken Erard piano Beethoven owned from late 1803 until his death. Drawing from contemporaneous piano scores that bear similar registers and timbral tendencies, Ferraguto invokes Latour’s notion of a “mediator” to show the ways in which Beethoven’s Erard piano helped determine the composition’s design. With compelling score analysis centering around a climax at the Erard’s highest note, c^4 , Ferraguto shows how WoO 80 was largely composed with the physical limits of the Erard in mind. However, in describing the Erard as a physical limitation (as a “speed bump” is to a car, in an analogy from Latour), the author comes close to rehearsing archaic music criticism that depicts the composer attempting to transcend the musical technologies of his day. Though he disavows these older idealist interpretations, Ferraguto still manages to claim that WoO 80 “exemplifies [Beethoven’s] tendency to push the boundaries of pianos and pianism” (p. 175). To describe a technological innovation and its

contemporaneous uses in this way is to intuit and compare it with yet future innovations—it posits other roads without “speed bumps,” in Latour’s analogy. To consider the Erard as a “limitation” or “boundary” (p. 175), in other words, neglects the ways the Erard was more likely received in its time. In a world where most keyboards are five octaves, and seven are scarcely imaginable, the Erard’s c^4 , especially at the musical moment framed by WoO 80, might actually sound like a boundary already crossed—a limit broken—rather than a limit unto itself. Using Ferraguto’s own analysis, an alternative reading might consider the Erard’s keyboard less like a Latourian “speed bump” than a new, material frontier (the extra half-octave), one that the climax of WoO 80 celebrates as real (not imagined). (It should be noted that Latour’s original analogy works to efface the social differences of a speed bump and a stop sign, which is antithetical to Ferraguto’s application that sustains their social differences. Cf. pp. 172–75, and Latour, *Reassembling the Social* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2007], pp. 74–78.)

Chapter 6 challenges scholarship on the *Coriolan* Overture, Op. 62, that interprets the overture either in light of Shakespeare’s tragedy or of that of Heinrich Joseph von Collin. Ferraguto sidesteps these debates to situate the overture within “a richer network of visual, literary, and political associations” (p. 188). By recounting popular Roman histories, translated editions of Plutarch, and engravings of Coriolanus contemporary with Beethoven, Ferraguto argues that the *Coriolan* Overture should not be thought of as strictly programmatic, but rather a musical text that invites “a wide array of interpretations,” just as Coriolanus was subject to divergent interpretations in Vienna around 1800 (p. 206). As if to affirm Beethoven’s intentions, this chapter does not contain a musical example to interpret. Ferraguto claims that the overture’s local context “necessarily complicates how one approaches the overture from an analytical standpoint, [and] acknowledges the historical contingency of analysis itself, inviting one instead to engage with the complexity, richness, and messiness, of Beethoven’s moment” (p. 206). If this clincher functions as a rhetorical refusal to interpret music, which was previously a strongpoint of the book, then it seems to concede that the best music history—the kind retaining all

the “complexity, richness, and messiness” of context—is the kind that contains no music.

The Conclusion summarizes insights from the previous chapters to propose an “everyday” version of Beethoven most visible at the heart of his heroic phase. This point is of historiographic importance: “In Beethoven studies, where the aesthetic and the social have often been viewed as distinctly separate realms, the idea of mediation... offers a path forward, a bridge between text and context” (p. 208). Here Ferraguto echoes (without citation) a recent special issue of *Representations* that considers how music studies has enlisted microhistory and Latourian sociology to go beyond conventional contextual studies (see Nicholas Mathew and Mary Ann Smart, “Elephants in the Music Room: The Futures of Quirk Historicism,” *Representations*, 132, no. 1 [2015]: 61–78). Yet as Mathew and Smart point out, there are unsettling side-effects to these post-contextual methods. In search of a more dynamic relationship between music and history, some musicologists “have found that the tastes and concerns of past listeners frequently push individual musical works and the critical modes for addressing them to the margins, or off the page altogether” (“Elephants in the Music Room,” 64). While previous chapters successfully stave off this tendency, it is arguably found in Chapter 6, which plainly foregrounds historical context at the expense of musical examples. Thus *Beethoven 1806* as a whole not only introduces Beethoven scholarship to musicology’s (less than) recent ambivalence to context through updated historical methods, it also exhibits that ambivalence through the series of objects and analyses it employs. Despite more relevant-sounding theories and terminology, the solution proposed by *Beethoven 1806* is ultimately more contextualization.

Recovering an “everyday” Beethoven may still be worth the trouble. The “everyday,” of course, has long been cast as a critical alternative to socio-political power structures, be it postwar consumer capitalism for Henri Lefebvre or Foucauldian disciplinary institutions for Michel de Certeau (see Lefebvre, *The Critique of Everyday Life* [New York: Verso, 1991], and de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984]). *Beethoven 1806* might have greatly benefitted from dialogue with such texts: Unlike these critics of the everyday, Ferraguto never wields his alternative “everyday” image against the “heroic,” but

leaves them side-by-side, unresolved. At best, this is a missed opportunity to revisit 1808 in light of 1806–7; at worst, the avoidance arguably divests much of the revisionary potency of the book. Indeed, it could be considered a safe bet to pick an already unmemorable year to argue for Beethoven’s mundanity; the gesture risks rehearsing the “heroic/non-heroic” framework it tries to critique by staying clear of “heroic” musical content. To be sure, Ferraguto is trying to wrest Beethoven from such momentous historicizing—not least those aforementioned watershed years: “the year 1806 has been an intriguing subject precisely because it is marked neither by one of Beethoven’s unequivocal watershed compositions nor by any of the truly canonical ‘moments’ in Napoleonic political history against which Beethoven’s musical output has typically been measured” (p. 208). Choosing a quotidian year seems as strategic as it is convenient. In this way, *Beethoven 1806* leaves open the critical potential of a thoroughgoing “everyday” Beethoven: future studies sensitive to microhistorical detail, he claims, “can add nuance to the macrohistorical account [of Beethoven], and in aggregate, perhaps even transform it” (p. 209). If for no other reason, the kind of imaginative research methods and historical inquiry modeled in *Beethoven 1806* are a most welcome addition.

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