Review of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony: Rehearsing and Performing its 1824 Premiere by Theodore Albrecht

Marten Noorduin

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/beethovenjournal

Part of the Musicology Commons

The size of the literature on historical rehearsal practices as it currently stands is inversely proportional to the importance of the subject, at least to those interested in the history of music performance. Probably the largest sustained examination thus far is the 2010 project *De la répétition au concert* on early nineteenth-century orchestral rehearsals at the Paris conservatoire, which was chronicled in a documentary film as well as a book chapter.¹ A few insightful case studies have explored various aspects of subject since, ranging from studies of the rehearsals of Beethoven’s late string quartets in Paris in 1825 to 1829,² the rehearsals for the first performances of Wagner’s *Der fliegende Holländer* in Dresden in 1843,³ and some others.⁴ Despite these efforts, however, the subject clearly remains a very understudied niche.

Although the existing studies focus on very different settings in the nineteenth century, two understandings of the subject matter are

² Fabio Morabito, “Rehearsing the Social: Beethoven’s Late Quartets in Paris, 1825–1829,” *Journal of Musicology* 37, no. 3 (Summer 2020): 349–82.
broadly shared. First, understanding historical rehearsal practices has not been hindered by a lack of interest, but by the difficulty of identifying appropriate sources that document these practices. Second, there are three interdependent aspects that are vital in understanding historical rehearsal practices: the material circumstances, including the size and shape of the room, the physical positions of the musicians, and the nature of the parts used; the social relations between those involved in the rehearsals; and any articulated or implied artistic goal. Simply put, understanding historical rehearsal practices requires studying what might be called the associated wider pre-performance practices.

It is in this context that Theodore Albrecht’s new book, *Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony: Rehearsing and Performing its 1824 Premiere*, is probably best examined: Beethoven’s conversation books, the primary sources used in this volume, provide some unique insights into the preparation of the first two performances. At the same time, only a small number of pages are concerned with the rehearsals and performances in itself; the overwhelming majority of the book is dedicated to the social interactions between the individuals involved in organising the premiere and the second performance of the Ninth. This is by design, as in the introduction Albrecht states on p. xxxiv that this book attempts to provide readers with a certain sense of “being there” when Beethoven composes the Ninth Symphony, but especially a sense of being present in the room as he makes the preparations for its first performance: the planning sessions, the copying of scores and parts, the selection of the soloists and performing venues. Readers who know the Symphony, and especially those who have ever attended or participated in orchestral or choral rehearsals, will be able to imagine these taking place day by day, even minute by minute, before their eyes. Readers will easily imagine themselves present at the first performances of the Ninth Symphony with a sense of reality that has never before been possible.

Before answering whether this book meets the standard that Albrecht has set for himself, we should consider what the book does irrespective of its stated goal. After a lengthy introduction, to which we will return later, the first chapter summarizes the compositional history of the symphony, both the early attempts as well as the period during which the bulk of the symphony was composed in 1823–24. Chapter 2 discusses
the “Ludlamshöhle” petition of February 1824, which pleaded for Beethoven to allow Vienna to have the first performance of his new symphony (as opposed to London or Berlin), as well as efforts in getting the parts copied by the right copyist and picking the right musicians. Chapter 3 is largely concerned with finding a location for the premiere, which in the end is settled on the Theater am Kärntnertor. This chapter also includes, on page 68, the first real mention of the preparations for rehearsals. Chapter 4 is the first of two chapters that includes substantial discussion of the rehearsals itself, in particular on April 28 and May 2; Chapter 5 covers May 3 to May 6, when further rehearsals took place. Chapter 6, titled “Premiere and Celebratory Dinner,” very briefly discusses some of the goings-on during the performance itself on May 7, with an insightful passage about the famous moment during which Caroline Unger turned Beethoven around to face the applauding audience. The last two chapters briefly discuss the second performance of the symphony in the Redoutensaal on May 23, which included a slightly different programme.

The book concludes with no less than seven appendices: a summary of Anton Schindler’s supposed acquaintance with Beethoven between March 1814 and May 1824; a translation of the abovementioned “Ludlamshöhle” petition; a description of Vienna’s principal theaters and halls from Beethoven’s time; lists of both the orchestral and choral personnel of the Kärntnertor Theater between 1822 and 1824; a list of sixteen individuals who volunteered to play in the premiere (although Albrecht argues that only ten of them likely actually participated); and Schindler’s account of the post-premiere festivities.

This book clearly builds on Albrecht’s earlier work on Beethoven, including his editions of Beethoven’s letters, but most importantly his projected twelve-volume edition of the conversation books that translates the text to English and provides some much-needed footnotes to explain the entries. The latest publication in this series was volume 4 in 2022, which covered the period the period May–September 1823, and it seems that volume 6 of the series will probably include the period that is the focus of this book. And much like in these volumes, most of the footnotes refer to pages in the original conversation books, allowing for easy comparison between the stated text and scans of the original

---

conversation books on the websites of the Berlin State Library and the Beethoven-Haus Bonn.

To those intimately familiar with the original German edition of the conversation books, as well as previous research on the premiere of the Ninth, there will be few surprises in this volume: much like Albrecht’s editions of the conversation books, the primary contribution to scholarship is that the information is presented a way that is more accessible to a wider readership, particularly to one that does not read German. Furthermore, this book contains much information about certain mundane aspects of the preparations for the performances that are often brushed over, such as the day-to-day problems of ensuring that all the parts are copied, which took about a month. Often, it was Anton Schindler, Beethoven’s unpaid secretary who will be discussed further below, who was responsible for these arrangements.

So does this book give the reader “a certain sense of ‘being there’”? One of the problems is that the interactions between Beethoven and his associates are lively portrayed through the conversations—they bicker over dinner, gossip behind each other’s backs, make funny and sarcastic comments, and do other very human things—but there is no sense throughout the book of the physical spaces in which these interactions take place. Information about this is certainly available: the inside of the Kärntnertor Theater has been described in several sources, as has the Redoutensaal, and there is even information on how the acoustics of these rooms might have influenced the performances that took place there. The lack of a map of Vienna, which was helpfully included in Albrecht’s edition of the conversation books, also means that it is often hard to place the events geographically, particularly for the more casual reader.

---

8 In particular Stefan Weinzierl, Beethovens Konzerträume: Raumakustik und symphonische Aufführungspraxis an der Schwelle zum modernen Konzertwesen (Frankfurt am Main: Bochinsky, 2002), 153-157 and 160-163.
A more pressing question is to what extent the book under discussion represents what went on in the weeks and days leading up to the two performances of the Ninth. This is not an easy question to answer: on the one hand, the conversation books clearly provide unprecedented insight into Beethoven’s day-to-day life in a way that few other sources can. On the other hand, as Nancy November has stressed in her review of the first two volumes of Albrecht’s edition of the conversation books, “conversations, much like letters, do not so much represent ‘the truth’ or ‘facts’, but present things in ways determined by the speakers and dependent on different peoples’ agendas.”\(^9\) One area in which this becomes particularly important is with Schindler’s entries, some of which were inserted after Beethoven’s death by Schindler in order to back up his own ideas, while others were part of genuine conversations with Beethoven. As several publications have shown, Schindler used many false entries to substantiate his fictitious tales about Beethoven.\(^10\) Fascinatingly, Albrecht even explains why Schindler went down this dark path, and it is in the discussion of this “Schindler problem” that this book comes closest to making a sustained albeit problematic argument.

After Schindler had published his first Beethoven biography of 1840, Moscheles’s English translation of 1841 appeared in London and elsewhere without Schindler’s name on the cover, in contrast to what was previously agreed. To add insult to injury, Heinrich Heine wrote a humiliating article about Schindler, describing him as “Beethoven’s friend, l’Ami de Beethoven, as he presented himself everywhere here, I believe even on his visiting cards. A black beanpole with a terrible white cravat and a funereal expression…” (p. xx). This story really stuck, despite none of these visiting cards ever being found, as Albrecht correctly and helpfully observes. Thus, Schindler was in the same year deeply wronged by two individuals, one of whom concocted a deeply embarrassing story about him, and another who denied him his rightful place in history by taking his name of the title page of his own book. In


reaction to this, Schindler may have thought that if others can make up stories, so could he. Thus in 1844 he fabricated the canon based on the second movement of the Eighth Symphony,\textsuperscript{11} with more fabrications being produced in the following years, culminating in the third edition of his biography in 1860, which some scholars consider to be so full of erroneous statements that it is completely useless as a biography of Beethoven.\textsuperscript{12} This is not to say that Schindler’s writings from before 1841 are without fault, as contemporaries disputed several of his factual statements there too,\textsuperscript{13} but compared to the later editions it the fabrications are less severe.

In the context of the book, this puts Albrecht in an odd position, because he aims in the introduction not to differentiate Schindler’s more truthful early biography from his later ones, but to exonerate him entirely. According to Albrecht, Schindler’s falsifications are “a tempest in a teapot that does not survive critical scrutiny” (p. xxix). Considering the fact that a portion of the book draws on conversations between Beethoven and Schindler for which the only evidence is Schindler’s entries in the conversation books, this seems rather overconfident: unless we have supporting evidence from other sources, how could we be sure that Schindler’s statements can be trusted, considering that we know he was prone to falsification? There are in fact several points in this book where Albrecht seems quite unsure of whether a statement is fabricated or not, for instance page 166, which contains a brief passage in which Schindler implored Beethoven to leave on time for the second Akademie on 23 May. This passage was not among those identified as falsified before, so it is clearly not so easy to identify all the fabrications lurking in Schindler’s entries.

Symptomatic is that Albrecht downplays how deceptive Schindler has been and uses Appendix A to argue that Schindler was associated with Beethoven since March 1814. The problem is that Appendix A almost exclusively draws on Schindler’s biography of 1860.

to substantiate his claims of having met Beethoven; this argument is therefore circular. And although Albrecht acknowledges that this biography contains falsifications, he considers these typical of the times, despite some other biographies contemporary to Schindler clearly being more reliable.14 Furthermore, Albrecht’s appeal to Alexander Wheelock Thayer’s description of Schindler, who despite noticing some errors in Schindler’s writings called him “a perfectly honest writer,” downplays quite how deceptive Schindler has been, particularly to Thayer, who completely fell for Schindler’s deception.15 We should therefore judge Schindler far more critically than Albrecht proposes here: although Schindler had unique access to Beethoven and probably had some valuable insights, the fact that he was willing to falsify historical evidence means that we should be extremely sceptical in cases in which no corroborating information is available. This does mean that we will throw out some babies with the bathwater, but that is inevitable when dealing with a deceptive source. This is the real “Schindler problem.”

All of this means that while Albrecht must be thanked for explaining why Schindler falsified what he did, his book never quite comes to terms with this “Schindler problem.” Furthermore, while the focus on the actual day-to-day tasks involved in organising the premiere provides valuable insights, a greater consideration of the spaces in which the rehearsals and performances took place would have helped create a more detailed impression. Finally, it is noticeable that this examination of the rehearsals and first performances of this piece provides rather little new information about what the music might have sounded like, which one would perhaps expect from a study that aims to create “a certain sense of ‘being there.’”

But these are perhaps the mere growing pains of coming to terms with the complexities of a new sub-field, and Albrecht must be congratulated for creating what is by my count the first monograph on rehearsal or pre-performance practices. It is an encouraging step

14 See for instance Franz Gerhard Wegeler and Ferdinand Ries, Biographische Notizen über Ludwig van Beethoven (Koblenz: 1838). For an example of how scholarship has confirmed the findings in this book, as well as the kind of minor errors present in Wegeler’s account, see Marten Noorduin, “The metronome marks for Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony in context,” Early Music, 49/1 (February 2021): 129–45, at 135.
towards a greater understanding of this important aspect of historical music making, and I hope to see others follow this path.

MARTEN NOORDUIN