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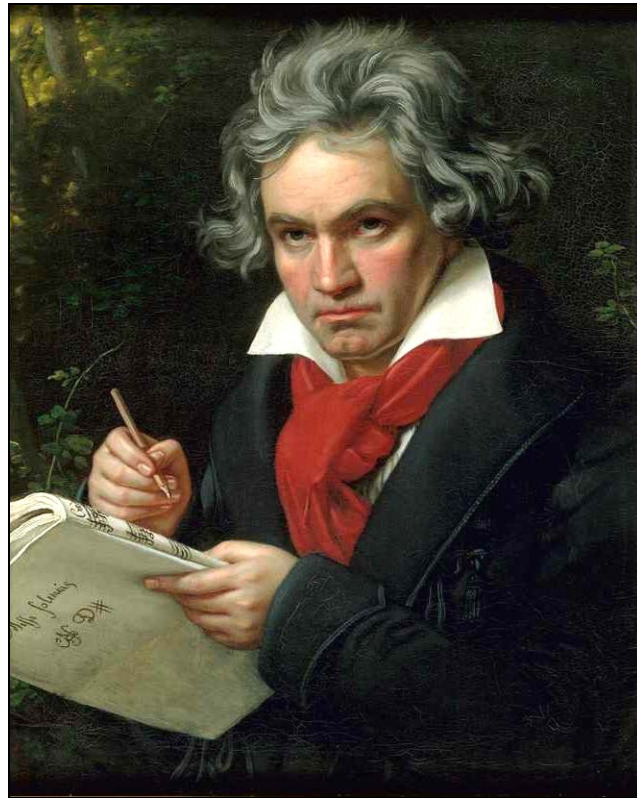
Beethoven: Patriotism and Social Justice

Fathi Habashi

BEETHOVEN: PATRIOTISM AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

The great composer Ludwig van Beethoven was not only an exceptional musician but also a man of great ideals who expressed social justice in his music

During Beethoven's relatively short life (1770-1827), the French Revolution which began in 1789 affected the whole world. Beethoven was then a young man, 19 years old, just enrolled at the University of Bonn to study German literature and philosophy. Austria was France's first enemy and wanted to re-instate Louis XVI and his Austrian wife Marie Antoinette. In the battle at Valmy on September 30, 1792 the Austrians were defeated and the French "Army of Italy" was sent with Napoleon Bonaparte as its leader to punish the Austrians. In the same year, Beethoven at the age of 22 had lost already his parents, he left to Vienna to study music under Haydn whom he had met in Bonn few months earlier when he was on his way to London. In 1796 he made trips to Nuremberg, Prague, Dresden, and Berlin then he remained in Vienna practically all his life. In 1797 Beethoven fell ill which affected his hearing. He was 28 years old, and at the peak of his fame. He started to lose his hearing few years later becoming completely deaf in 1802.



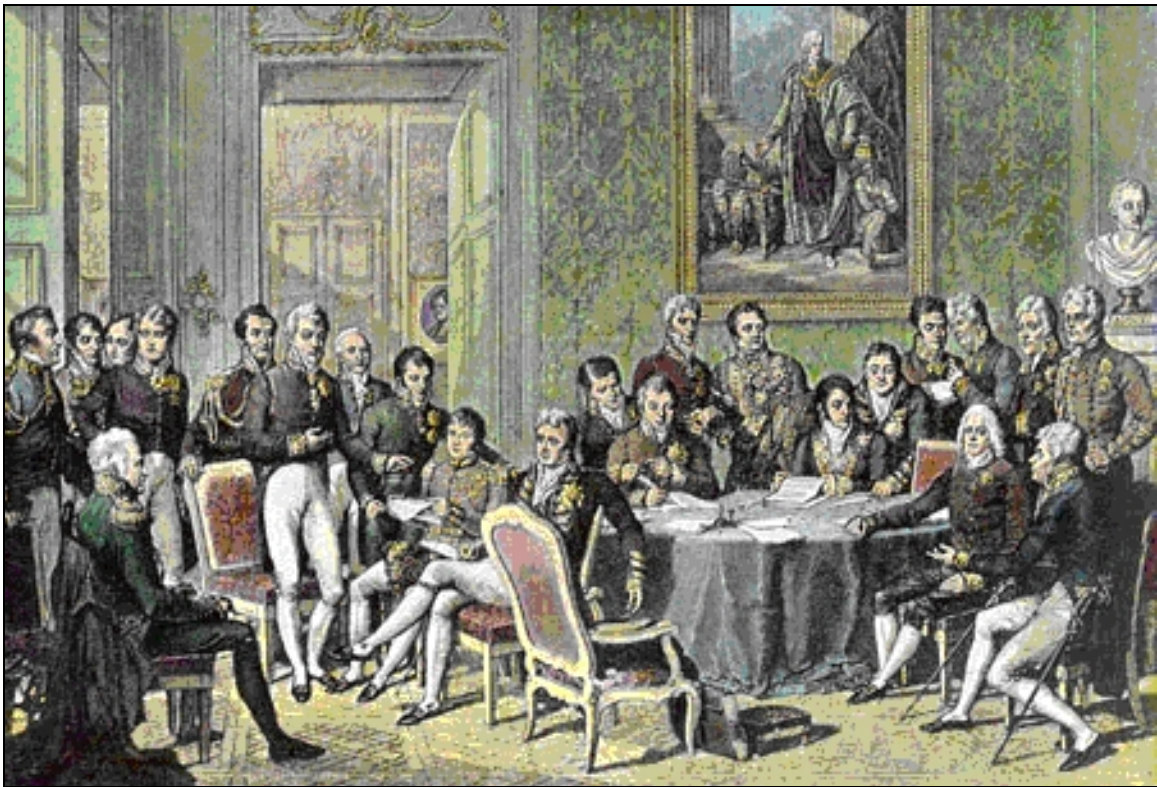
Beethoven (1770-1827)

The world into which Beethoven lived was a world in turmoil, a world in transition, a world of wars, revolution and counter-revolution. In 1776, the American colonists succeeded in winning their freedom through a revolution which took the form of a war of national liberation against Britain. The American Revolution proclaimed the ideals of individual freedom that were derived from the French Enlightenment. Just over a decade later, the ideas returned to France in an even more explosive manner. The storming of the Bastille in July 1789 marked a decisive turning point in world history.

In its period of ascent the French Revolution swept away all feudalism, brought an entire nation to the forefront and confronted the whole of Europe with courage and determination. The liberating spirit of the Revolution in France swept through Europe. Such a period demanded new art forms and new ways of expression. This was achieved in the music of Beethoven, which expresses the spirit of the age better than anything else.

Beethoven's liberal ideas are well represented in his masterpieces: Prometheus, Eroica, Fidelio, Egmont, and Wellington's Victory. But, in spite of all the miseries that he suffered, he concluded his life by Ode to Joy in his Choral Symphony based on Schiller's poem. In this symphony he emphasized the universal brotherhood of man through joy. "O friends, not these tones, but let us rather sing more pleasant and joyful ones". Hardly one finds such attitude in other composers.

In Vienna, during Beethoven's time, a Congress was held from September 1814 to June 1815 to settle European affairs Napoleon's retreat from Moscow, his abdication, and his exile to Elba. The congress was still in session when Napoleon returned to France, lost the battle at Leipzig on October 18, and finally was defeated at Waterloo on June 18, 1815. There, at Ballhaus Platz, statesmen and emperors came from all over Europe, hosted by Franz I and Count Metternich, together with hundreds of representatives and agents. The Congress was the occasion for brilliant receptions and social activities as well.

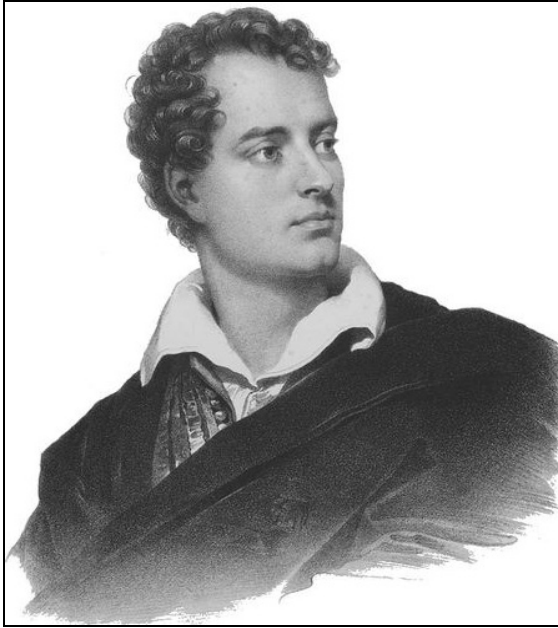


Congress of Vienna, 1815

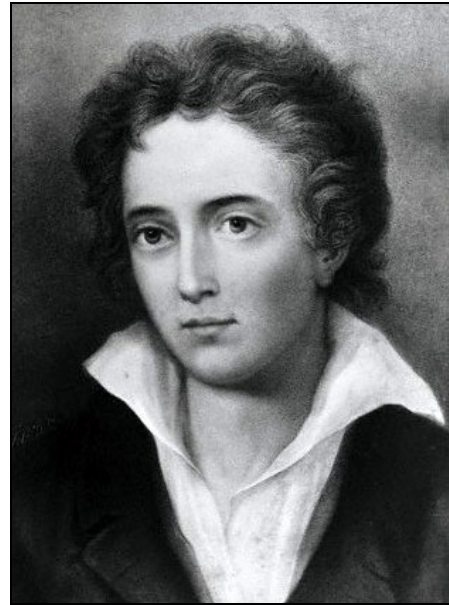
Prometheus

In 1801, Beethoven wrote music to the ballet "Prometheus" (opus 43). Napoleon was compared to Prometheus, bringer of fire, liberator of mankind. He was thought of as the hero who will liberate mankind from absolutism. The Italian poet Vincenzo Monti (1754-1828), a contemporary to

Beethoven, had already written “Il Prometeo” and dedicated it to the French general who was brilliantly sweeping through Italy. Monti believed Bonaparte, by disseminating the ideals of the French Revolution, was freeing Italy from the yoke of Hapsburg oppression. Lord Byron (1788-1824) another contemporary of Beethoven wrote “Ode to Napoleon Bonaparte”. Shelley (1792-1822) a friend and companion to Byron in his Italian trip wrote “Prometheus Unbound” expressing belief of a perfect society governed by liberty, justice, and wisdom.



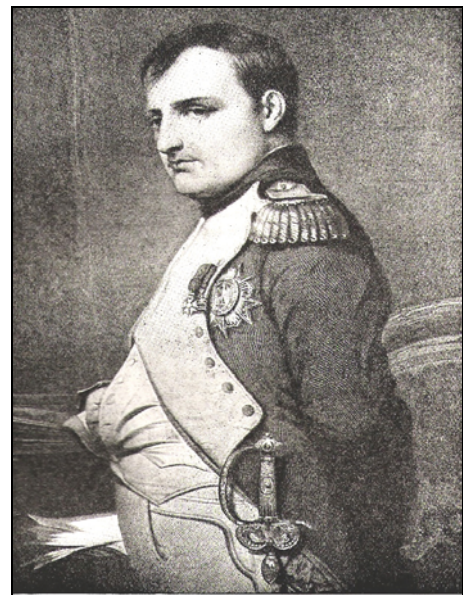
Lord Byron (1788-1824)



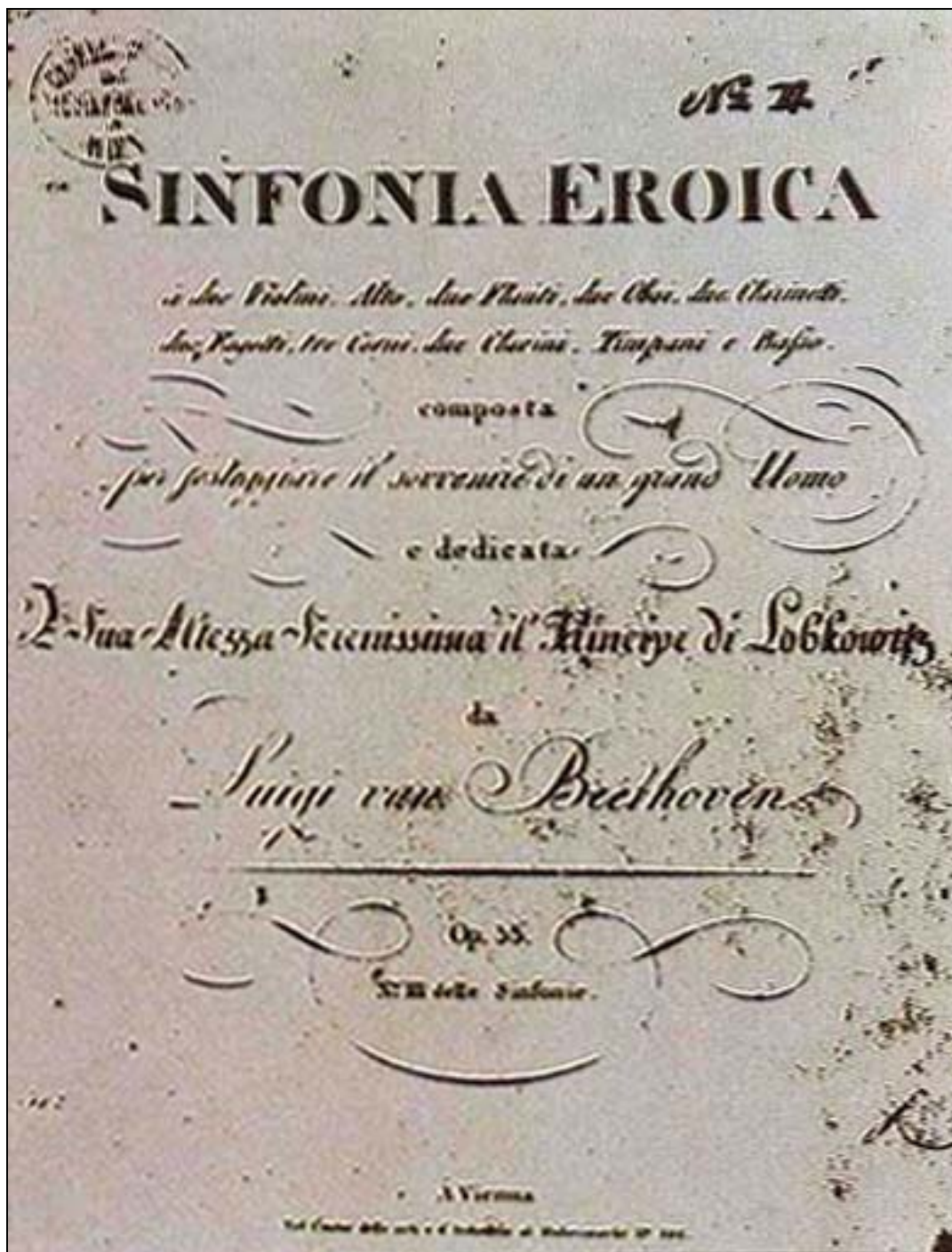
Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

Eroica

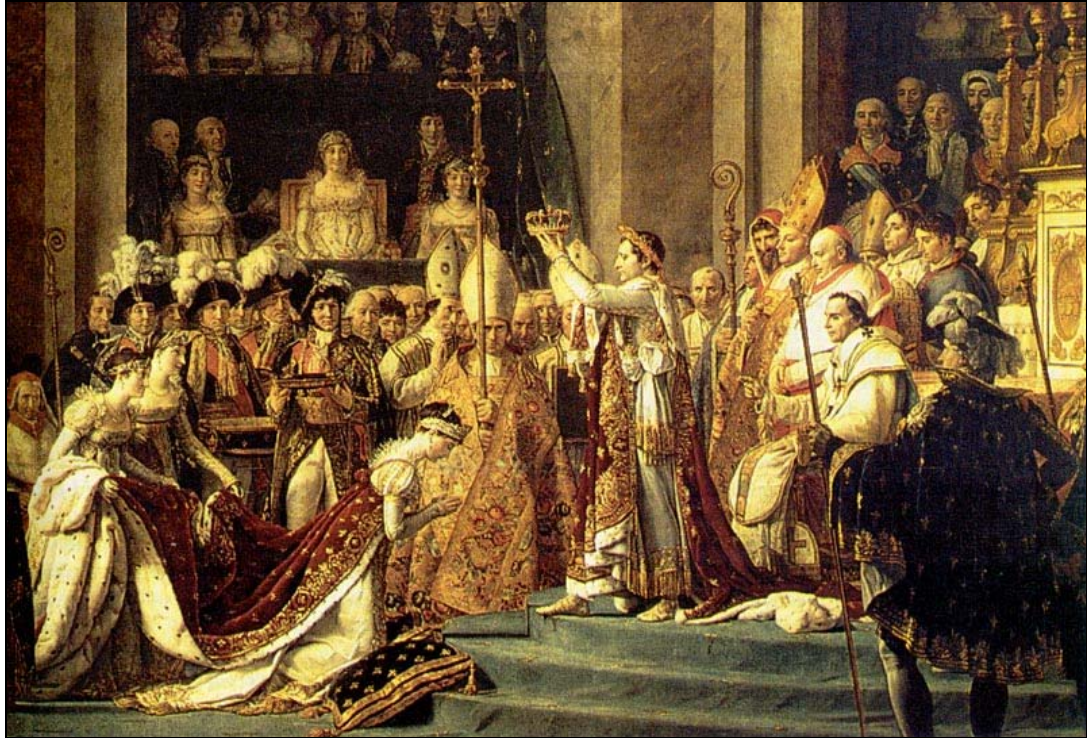
In 1803 Beethoven started working on his third symphony (opus 55) which he dedicated to the First Consul Bonaparte who was welcomed by the German sympathizers when he invaded the German states in 1792. He was thought of as reformer of the mediocre system of the hundreds of tyrants composing the German independent states. But, when in 1804 he crowned himself emperor, he lost this sympathy and was considered not different from the other tyrants. It is said that Beethoven became disappointed when he heard this news and tore the front sheet of his musical manuscript and changed the title to “Sinfonia Eroica”. The symphony was first publicly performed in Vienna on April 7, 1805.



Napoleon the Liberator



Sinfonia Eroica



Napoleon the Emperor

Fidelio

In the same year, Beethoven produced his only opera “Fidelio”. First performance took place in Vienna on November 20, 1805. The opera is a great work describing the desire of mankind for freedom. The plot is simple and its scenes are depressing, contrary to the other operas at that time which usually included extravagances and colourful dances. Florestan, a fighter of despotism in eighteenth century Spain has been thrown in jail by his enemy Pizarro the Governor of the prison. Florestan’s wife, Leonore, disguises herself as a young man, takes the name Fidelio, and becomes the chief jailer’s assistant. In the dungeon she helps digging the grave destined for her husband. When Pizarro arrives with dagger in his hand, Fidelio threatens to kill him with her pistol. At that moment the prime minister arrives on an inspection mission of the prison and Pizarro had to go to receive him. By an edict of the prime minister the prisoners are released. When he learns the story of Florestan’s ordeal, the prime minister orders Pizarro arrested.

In this work, Beethoven has described the eternal struggle of man for freedom, the defiance of all tyrants, and the proclamation of liberty, tolerance, and human dignity. The Prisoners’ Chorus is one of the most eloquent musical songs in praise of joy to freedom ever written.

Group: Oh, what a pleasure to be in fresh air!
 One can only here breathe freely
 Only here is life
 The jail is a tomb

One inmate: We have confidence in God’s help
 Hope is whispering softly to me
 We will be free, we will have peace

Group: Oh hope! Help! What a luck!

Oh freedom, oh freedom, will it come back?

One inmate: Speak quietly
We are watched

Group: Speak quietly, speak quietly

German text

O welche Lust! In freier Luft
Den Athem leicht zu heben, nur hier,
Nur hier ist Leben,
Der Kerker eine Gruft.

Wir wollen mit Vertrauen auf Gottes
Hülfe bauen,
Die Hoffnung flüstert sanft mir zu:
Wir werden frei, - wir finden Ruh'.
O Hoffnung! Rettung! Welch ein Glück!
O Freiheit, o Freiheit, kehrst du zu rück?

Sprecht leise, haltet euch zurück,
Wir sind belauscht mit Ohr und Blick.

Sprecht leise etc., etc.



A scene from Fidelio

On November 29, 1814 the new production of Fidelio took place while the Congress of Vienna was in session. Two empresses, the King of Prussia, and nearly all the nobles who were taking part in the Congress, attended.

Egmont

In 1810, Beethoven wrote his “Egmont Overture” (opus 84), a magnificent piece of music, based on Goethe’s poem with that name written in 1788. Again the theme is about injustice and tyranny. Count Egmont (1522-1568) was a Flemish statesman and governor of Brabant and Artois. Though a devout Catholic and loyal to King Philip II of Spain, he was beheaded by Duke of Alba because he had intervened on behalf of the persecuted Protestants. This action raised great indignation all over Europe. Beethoven met Goethe for the first time in the Bohemian resort of Teplitz on July 19, 1813



Count Egmont

Wellington

Duke of Wellington's victory at Vitoria on June 21, 1813 showed that Napoleon's empire was crumbling. This was the battle where Duke of Wellington won a decisive victory against the French at Vitoria in north of Spain. Beethoven's "Wellington's Victory or the Battle at Vitoria" was very successfully premiered in Vienna on December 8, 1813. In the work, Beethoven finally took sides against Napoleon. It was in the same year when Napoleon provoked Emperor Franz into declaring war against France on August 11, 1813.



Battle of Vitoria on June 21, 1813



Duke of Wellington

Suggested Readings

T. Sipe, *Beethoven: Eroica Symphony*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England 1998, 158 pages

J. Schmidt-Gorg and H. Schmidt, editors, *Ludwig van Beethoven*, Westermann Verlag, Braunschweig 1974, 275 pages

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