

Tia DeNora, *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius: Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792–1803*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Tia DeNora has undertaken an important study of Beethoven's early years in Vienna. She examines three issues as they pertain to Beethoven: the nature of Viennese society; the concept of the artist, in particular the notion of genius in late eighteenth-century Europe; and the conflict of musical styles that emerged near the end of the century. Most of the issues themselves are not new. We know, for instance, that Beethoven succeeded in large measure when he first came to Vienna because he had strong backing from important aristocrats. We know that the concept of genius, particularly as applied to music, had gained currency by at least the 1780s. We also know that Vienna was a stratified and hierarchical city, and that the nature of the hierarchy affected artistic activities in a major way. In this regard Vienna may be contrasted with London, a comparison facilitated by Haydn's experiences in each city. And we know that Haydn's and Mozart's style changed later in their lives, as they wrote for a broader public, not to mention the French Revolutionary influences that had begun to affect many composers' work by the end of the century.

DeNora's book is of interest because she focuses on the intersection of these elements. She examines more closely than anyone else just which aristocrats supported Beethoven, where they were in the complex Austrian hierarchy, why they backed him, and how this affected aesthetic perceptions. Her study provides substantial insight into the interworking between musical creation and production and the social forces that shape them, although, as I will discuss, some of her conclusions about Beethoven and about the aristocracy's motivations possibly go too far.

In the first half of the book DeNora examines the aristocratic structure in Vienna in relation to musical patronage. She discusses how the concert world of Vienna changed in the 1790s as the aristocracy withdrew its support from public concerts. She also provides the clearest picture yet of the complex hierarchical world of aristocratic position and prestige that existed in Vienna. The strongest part of the book is the description and analysis of the changes in patronage that occurred in Vienna at the end of the eighteenth century. DeNora discusses the decline of the *Hauskapelle* and attributes it not to the declining fortunes of the aristocracy in the wake of the European upheavals, but rather to the loss of interest in such activity at the Imperial Court and the attendant increase of the same by the lower aristocracy and the upper middle class. A *Hauskapelle* no longer identified the aristocrat with the court nor separated him from the lower orders.

But the aristocracy did not abandon music. They shifted their support elsewhere, and where and why form the heart of De Nora's argument. Aristocrats supported public concerts, with institutions such as the *Gesellschaft der Associierten Cavaliere* founded by Baron von Swieten, considered the "Patriarch of Music" in Vienna (p. 20). In its simplest form, to associate the rise of the public concert with an ascending middle class misrepresents what happened. According to DeNora there were three groups of musical patrons—the old aristocracy, the new aristocracy, and the middle class (p. 47)—and in contrast to received opinion, each formed a relatively isolated circle, with little overlap between them. By distinguishing different types of concert venues according to their sponsorship, DeNora affirms the important role that the aristocracy continued to play in Viennese musical life well into the nineteenth century, but especially in the 1790s, when Beethoven's reputation was established.

This leads to her principal argument, that music remained a vehicle for prestige, but that as musical sponsorship broadened, upper aristocrats sought a way to separate their activities from those of the lower aristocracy and the middle class, and that they did this by supporting music that was more learned, grandiose, and serious. The concepts of musical taste and musical genius became pillars in the new aesthetic forming around this effort, and Beethoven became their champion not only because he evinced all the qualities of genius, but because his style was decidedly in opposition to the style favored by the bourgeoisie. Her claims are explicit and broad:

It seems fair, then, to suggest that serious music ideology, which took as its exemplars Beethoven and reconstituted more explicitly 'learned' and grandiose versions of Mozart and Haydn, emerged during the 1790s in Vienna, and that this ideology was primarily subscribed to by old aristocrats, not the middle class (p. 35).

[I]t was in Vienna that the new model of musical seriousness based around Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven was initially formulated (p. 36).

This is an important and exciting thesis, and DeNora makes a strong case for much of it. Just how far it can be carried, however, is open to question. At one level DeNora suggests almost a grand conspiracy: the aristocracy, with Beethoven's approval and Haydn's willing help, decided to engage in cultural wars on behalf of high musical culture; Beethoven became their lucky recipient, and the idea that he was a genius was a product, a "construction" that suited the aristocracy's own purposes. DeNora

suggests that our modern standards of musical evaluation derive from this construction, and implies that had the aristocracy decided to back another musician, we might use an entirely different framework to measure the canon:

It is interesting to consider what our modern musical evaluative standards would look like if a different composer had been inserted into the supportive frame that surrounded Beethoven: consider the Irish-born composer John Field (1782–1837), whose prophetically Chopinesque nocturnes provided a contemporary alternative to Beethoven's forceful approach (p. 142).

DeNora readily concedes that Beethoven was not a passive beneficiary of this aristocratic agenda. He did much to further the myth himself, ranging from positioning himself as both Mozart's and Haydn's heir, to carrying on an aesthetic campaign for stronger and heavier pianos more suited to his, and conversely less suited to his competitors', style.

There are two aspects of the book's argument that I would like to address; both have to do with the extent of inference and evidence. First, while DeNora, in establishing the relationship between social hierarchy and musical activity in Vienna, has contributed significantly to Beethoven scholarship, she extends her argument in a questionable fashion when she affirms that the activities of the Viennese aristocracy were the turning point for a new aesthetic in Vienna, and that Beethoven's success may be attributed to his being more or less a useful pawn in a grand scheme created by an aristocracy using music as a means to make a social statement. Second, there is an empirical problem with her evidence: in some cases evidence is either misread or whole lines of it are simply ignored.

A fundamental question that permeates much of DeNora's argument is Beethoven's position relative to the social structure of Vienna. According to DeNora Beethoven arrived at Vienna with particularly strong backing from his contacts in Bonn. This opened doors for him not available to most musicians. Beethoven knew how to capitalize on his advantage, and from there entered into certain musical and social alliances that solidified his position. He also willingly and knowingly let himself be used by those same aristocrats who supported him to further their own cultural/political agendas.

There are few Beethoven scholars who would disagree with the above remarks in broad outline. But what is the significance of specific pieces of evidence? DeNora, who considers in detail several incidents of Beethoven's early years in Vienna to demonstrate how musical and social issues interwove, places particular importance on what she refers to as the "Haydn's

hands" story. In many ways it forms the centerpiece of her argument. When Beethoven was preparing to leave Bonn to study in Vienna in 1792, Count Waldstein, along with several other Bonn patrons and friends, inscribed statements of congratulations and support in an autograph album. Count Waldstein's inscription contained the prophetic line, "With the help of assiduous labor you shall receive Mozart's spirit from Haydn's hands" (p. 84). Both the story itself and its significance are well known in Beethoven scholarship. Thayer included it, and Joseph Kerman chose to begin his book on Beethoven's string quartets with it. But according to DeNora it became the rallying cry for elevating Beethoven to a position of genius. It established Beethoven as the heir to both Haydn and Mozart, even though, as DeNora observes, in some respects Beethoven's aesthetic was diametrically opposed to Mozart's.

The real question is how important is the story, or rather how important was it, in establishing Beethoven's position in Vienna? DeNora marshals considerable evidence to suggest that the story was repeated and became a sort of mantra for the aristocracy, allowing them to focus on Beethoven. She quotes several other accounts of the Mozart-to-Haydn-to-Beethoven connection. With one exception, however, none of the other stories about Haydn and Beethoven that she quotes even refer to Mozart. On 23 January 1793, B. L. Fischenich, a professor at the University of Bonn, wrote to Charlotte Schiller, referring to a musical setting by "a young man from here, whose musical talents are praised everywhere and whom the Elector has sent to Haydn in Vienna" (p. 85). Schönfeld's 1796 *Jahrbuch* refers to Beethoven as a "musical genius," who "has put himself in the hands of our immortal Haydn in order to be initiated into the holy secrets of the art of music" (p. 87). And Haydn's own account, written to the Elector of Bonn on behalf of Beethoven, predicted that "Beethoven will in time fill the position of one of Europe's greatest composers, and I shall be proud to be able to speak of myself as his teacher" (p. 86).

The only account that does compare Beethoven directly with Mozart was written by Beethoven's teacher Neefe in 1783, and the reference is more to Beethoven's keyboard ability rather than his compositional skills. Neefe suggests that were Beethoven able to travel as Mozart did he would have been recognized as a prodigy similar to Mozart. But this story, suggesting that Beethoven may be a child prodigy in the same league as Mozart, is about a very different issue than the Mozart-through-Haydn-to-Beethoven legacy.

The other comments quoted by DeNora state what had become obvious by the 1790s: that Beethoven had extraordinary talents, which were recognized by many, and that Beethoven came to Vienna to study with Haydn. Thus the Viennese classical legacy was being passed on. There is

nothing new nor surprising in these accounts, and there is nothing unusual about the two facets—Beethoven's talent and his choosing to study with Haydn—being recognized by contemporary observers.

But DeNora also argues that Beethoven and Haydn are not just passive beneficiaries in this grand scheme: "Beethoven and Haydn were willing to collaborate to produce a fiction that became a resource for the construction of Beethoven's greatness" (p. 10). For Haydn it was "a way of constituting Haydn as great within the Viennese musical world" (p. 84). It is true that Haydn only later received the recognition he deserved. But in the 1790s Haydn did not need Mozart to establish his reputation. Haydn's first trip to London and the honorary doctorate he received at Oxford occurred before Beethoven arrived in Vienna. The relationship between Haydn and Beethoven was a complex one, and even though Haydn may have been troubled by Beethoven's more daring experiments, a musical bond between them at least begrudgingly existed. I believe the explanation is relatively simple: Haydn respected Beethoven because he recognized Beethoven's talent, even though he was not comfortable with some of Beethoven's compositions. The leap from this respectful yet strained pupil-teacher relationship to one of collaboration to promote a fiction is greater than I am willing to make.

But the real issue of this study is Beethoven's genius. What did the label of genius mean in the late eighteenth century, and how did it come to be applied to Beethoven? It seems that at the heart of this issue is the question of the relativistic nature of Beethoven's genius (p. 89). The older explanation is appealing: early on Beethoven displays the same outstanding talent that we hear retrospectively in his music, and this was recognized by those closest to him. If, however, we are not willing to accept that point, and DeNora suggests we suspend the "commonsense view" that Beethoven received special treatment because he had special talent, then we are compelled to say on what basis the concept of genius rests.

The issue of genius then becomes the question of how it is constructed. There is no doubt that the notion of genius underwent a change in the late eighteenth century, and that it was used for specific purposes, I believe to explain that which seemed musically inexplicable. And there is no doubt that social factors play a part in the idea of genius. Yes, genius is what we make it to be. But can we jump from there to the notion that the aristocracy, possibly in active collaboration with both Beethoven and Haydn, set out to create a myth, the myth of Beethoven's genius?

The concept of musical genius, as applied by the Viennese aristocracy, existed long before the 1790s. One explanation of Beethoven's genius lies in eighteenth-century terminology. According to eighteenth-century writers, such as Schubart and Koch, a musical genius was distinguished not by

a good ear, technical capacity, or facility, but rather by a feeling for music.¹ Beethoven apparently possessed all of the other elements, but it was his depth of feeling, the emotive power of his playing, especially his improvising, that set him apart and was immediately apparent to all. The evidence on this point is overwhelming, and the many accounts that discuss this aspect of his talent demonstrate at the very least that Beethoven's reception in Vienna was closely tied to it. The label *genius* flows naturally, the application of a concept previously defined to one whose particular musical abilities fit it precisely. One does not have to look for hidden agendas to understand why and how the label *genius* would be applied to Beethoven.

Much of the above argument involves nuance of intent and meaning. Granted, the evidence could be read in several ways. What concerns me more is the offhand way in which an entire galaxy of evidence is dismissed. DeNora argues that Beethoven aligned himself with the aristocracy to create a more serious and grandiose style in opposition to the lighter styles of Hummel and Spohr that later appealed to the Viennese public. It is worth noting that Spohr maintained as strongly as Beethoven that he was an artist.² Posterity has not reciprocated in that judgment, but the reason seems less that Spohr lacked aristocratic support than that he lacked compositional talent. This difference turns the argument back to the musical issues. Spohr did not lack exposure throughout Europe. A good public-relations representative or a well-placed Count might do much to further a composer's career and image, but ultimately there is a musical judgment at work. And upon that musical judgment Beethoven's as well as Spohr's position rests.

To return to the question of evidence, DeNora outlines three phases of Beethoven's career: 1) his first fifteen years in Vienna, when his musical public was essentially the aristocracy; 2) in 1814, around the time of the Congress of Vienna, a brief phase as a popular composer; 3) from 1819 a retreat from the public and an increasing alienation from the lighter styles that had become popular (pp. 9–10).

DeNora is on target in her analysis of the extent to which Beethoven associated with the aristocracy. Given the position in which he found himself from the start, a position that, as DeNora observes, many musi-

¹ Christoph Friedrich Daniel Schubart, *Ideen zu einer Aesthetic der Tonkunst* (Vienna: n.p., 1806), 368–70, written in the 1780s; Heinrich Christoph Koch, *Versuch einer Anleitung zur Composition*, 2 (Leipzig: n.p., 1782–93), 9.

² *Die Selbstbiographie von Louis Spohr* (Kassel and Göttingen: n.p., 1860). Republished in part as *The Musical Journeys of Louis Spohr*, trans. and ed. Henry Pleasants (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1961), 66–67.

cians envied, there is no reason he would not cultivate those contacts to the fullest. What modern artist, launching a concert career today, would turn away sponsorship by the most powerful management agencies in the business?

But while Beethoven was performing in the salons and palaces and writing his big, major compositions, he was also publishing a lot of other music: many sets of variations on popular opera tunes and other sources, songs and vocal ensemble pieces, and sets of German dances, minuets, and *ländler*. DeNora dismisses them out of hand: "His lighter and more popular compositions aside, Beethoven was not, during these years, particularly concerned with appealing to middle-class audiences" (p. 8). But by 1801 his publications had become a significant part of his income. In a letter to Franz Wegeler, dated June 29, 1801, Beethoven commented: "My compositions bring me in a fair sum; and I may say that I have more commissions than it is possible for me to fill. Besides, I have 6 or 7 publishers after each piece and might have more if I chose; people no longer bargain with me, I ask and they pay."³ There are too many lighter compositions among his publications, and Beethoven's income from publishers was too important, to say that Beethoven ignored the middle-class dilettante world in the 1790s. He may have been quite commercial and calculating, and clearly the lighter pieces have little bearing on his historical position. But they cannot be dismissed in a study of the publics Beethoven cultivated. Worse, to dismiss them because they are trivial (DeNora, herself, gives no reason for doing so), would be to fall prey to the very trap of viewing Beethoven through the filter of his current canonical position, a trap from which DeNora's study itself goes far to free us. I believe that Beethoven, in his first fifteen years in Vienna, pursued his career in every way possible, and that he did what worked. Beethoven threw his lot in with the aristocracy, and, like Spohr, saw himself as an artist who aspired to write serious music. That, however, is not the same as saying that he wrote serious as opposed to frivolous music.

Finally DeNora analyzes in depth the Beethoven/Wöfl piano competition of 1799. It did pit two aesthetics against each other: Wöfl, trained in the school of Mozart, played with brilliance, clarity, and precision; Beethoven's playing was heavier, more powerful, and fantastical. DeNora considers it a duel between "popular and serious music," between "*Kenner* and *Liebhaber*" (p. 155). Wöfl and Beethoven did represent two aesthetic poles, and in one sense Wöfl represents the Mozartean as opposed to the

³ *Thayer's Life of Beethoven*, rev. and ed. Elliott Forbes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 283.

Beethovenian pole. Such a distinction undercuts the "Haydn's hands" story, in which Beethoven is perceived as the heir-apparent of Mozart, as transmitted through the vessel of Haydn. That issue aside, however, I believe that there is another way of viewing the exchange: Wölfl and Beethoven represent late classicism and a burgeoning Romanticism respectively. The issue then becomes as much temporal as social.

I have raised several issues based on the direction or the extent DeNora has taken some of her arguments. This is in no way meant to diminish the importance or the originality of DeNora's thesis. She has looked intensely and in a new way at an issue usually glanced at cursorily. Inevitably such a new approach will raise many questions, and I have addressed some of my own. More than anything I hope to have demonstrated that her study is provocative, and as such is worthy of careful consideration by the world of Beethoven scholarship.

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