

To what extent does Ludwig van Beethoven
have autobiographical elements in his Third
Symphony “Eroica” op. 55?

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Abstract:

The investigation of this paper was to find out to what extent does Ludwig van Beethoven have autobiographical elements in his Third Symphony “Eroica” op. 55? This symphony was Beethoven’s first symphony to be written in the “heroic” style and was considered innovative at the time of composition. Some biographers have connected elements of this piece to that of his biography, while others have refuted those connections. Connecting the piece to the composer’s biography may provide some insights into why Beethoven had started writing in a new style. Also, it may enhance the musical experience felt by the listeners if such linkages were made.

After the investigation, it was found that there are many biographical implications throughout the piece. The storyline of a hero overcoming the obstacles, dying and subsequent rebirth and triumph can be associated with Beethoven’s own life and sentiments felt just previous to this composition. The innovative features of combining two opposite traits may be heard throughout this unique piece. Therefore, with the many linkages from Beethoven’s biography to his musical elements, it was concluded that Beethoven has autobiographical implications in his third symphony, “Eroica”.

To what extent does Ludwig van Beethoven have autobiographical elements in his Third Symphony “Eroica” op. 55?

Music is a subjective language written by composers to express their thoughts and feelings to the world. To some extent, all music is autobiographical. Elements of the composers' lives, emotions and views transfer from their mind to their music. Understanding such linkages between the biography of the composer and his music may provide some insight as to why a composer wrote a certain work. Autobiographical elements are particularly evident in certain works of Ludwig van Beethoven, who is considered one of the greatest composers of all time. He was the pivotal character in musical development from the classical style to the romantic style. An evolutionary step towards the nineteenth century style was seen from his early period to his “heroic” middle period. Certain events in his life greatly influenced this composer to make this transition and this can be shown through one of his compositions, *Symphony no. 3 in E^b major op. 55*, otherwise known as the *Eroica* symphony. There are many autobiographical implications in this piece and to be demonstrated, Beethoven's life both before and after the composition in relation to the music of this piece will be examined.

The *Eroica* symphony was written during 1803 and 1804 and published in 1806. This must be put into the context of Beethoven's life. In 1802 on October 6th and 10th, Beethoven wrote the *Heiligenstadt Testament*. In the testament, he bade farewell to the world and was considered to be his will to his brothers, Carl and Johann. Looking at this document, one can deduce the pain the great master felt towards his ailment. The first symptoms of his deafness showed up in his writing in 1801 and from that date, his hearing was becoming progressively worse. Beethoven felt much anguish and at the

writing of the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, he almost lost the will to live. However towards the end of his stay at Heiligenstadt, he did vow to overcome his deafness somehow. This vow eventually leads him to resume life despite his sickness and to create greater compositions. This validated that he was a true musical genius whose musical ideas and expressions came from within his own mind and not from listening to other sounds around him. From this context, one could link Beethoven's biography to the *Eroica* symphony.

Also at Heiligenstadt, Beethoven made advancements towards a more original, distinctive style. Beethoven stated to violinist Wenzel Krumpholtz that "[he is] not very satisfied with what [he has] written to date. From [that day he] intend[s] to enter upon a new path."¹ The new path refers to his "heroic" style, which appeared right after the writing of the Heiligenstadt Testament and is supported by his compositions at that time. Of significance are his two sets of variations, op. 34 and 35. The composer himself stated that the variations were written in "a really wholly new style"² and that he can assure others that "the style of both works is entirely new and it's [his]."³

Beethoven's third symphony is a fully developed example written in this distinctive style. The inherent struggle between the esoteric and exoteric traits is evident. In this symphony, as in all of Beethoven's heroic works, the struggle between the esoteric and exoteric traits is demonstrated in the "spirit of the age of revolution"⁴ and, at the same time, "an inclination towards the abstract and a need to address himself to all of mankind."⁵ The work tends to go towards the "abstract, which is a turn inwards,"⁶ and at the same time

¹ Dalhaus, C. *Ludwig Van Beethoven- Approaches to his Music*. Pg. xvii.

² Dalhaus, C. *Ludwig Van Beethoven- Approaches to his Music*. Pg. xviii.

³ Dalhaus, C. *Ludwig Van Beethoven- Approaches to his Music*. Pg. xviii.

⁴ Dalhaus, C. *Ludwig Van Beethoven- Approaches to his Music*. Pg. 7.

⁵ Dalhaus, C. *Ludwig Van Beethoven- Approaches to his Music*. Pg. 16.

⁶ Dalhaus, C. *Ludwig Van Beethoven- Approaches to his Music*. Pg. 18.

maintain “a revolutionary stance, a turn outwards.”⁷ The entire work is heroic in tone and is further enhanced by the addition of the third obbligato horn. Beethoven felt that the horn had a heroic sound and would emphasize the exoteric, revolutionary aspects of the piece as traditionally; there were only two horns in the symphony orchestra. The esoteric traits are seen in the structure of the entire work and of the individual movements.

This new style has certain characteristics that are unique and innovative. Furthermore, in with the techniques below, Beethoven was able to combine features of French revolutionary music and esoteric traits. First, he “drew the revolutionary tone into complicated formal dialectics.”⁸ Previous to this, all revolutionary music was simple and easy to remember but to fit the symphony; it became more complex, with more depth. Next, Beethoven “mediated between concrete and abstract thematic procedures.”⁹ This is the struggle between the two dominating traits of his heroic music. Furthermore, this struggle is shown between simple and complex structures of music. All of these features led to the mature heroic style, which shows a leap Beethoven had made in musical evolution. The announcement of his new path in the *Heiligenstadt Testament* led Beethoven to grasp a more sophisticated, complex style, one that was truly distinguishing.

The *Heiligenstadt Testament* and the *Eroica* symphony are almost parallel to each other in terms of content. The symphony consists of four movements including a Marcia Funebre as the second movement, followed by a Scherzo and subsequent Finale. The symphony portrays the death of a hero, rebirth and final triumph. This is essentially a portrayal of Beethoven, himself, as a hero. His life could be seen as the “model for the heroic

⁷ Dalhaus, C. *Ludwig Van Beethoven- Approaches to his Music*. Pg. 18.

⁸ Dalhaus, C. *Ludwig Van Beethoven- Approaches to his Music*. Pg. 19.

⁹ Dalhaus, C. *Ludwig Van Beethoven- Approaches to his Music*. Pg. 19.

artist.”¹⁰ He, being a great composer, was stricken with the worst ailment possible for such a profession. The deafness profoundly affected the grief-stricken composer. At first, he tries to heroically tackle his sickness. Beethoven tried to find a cure for his deafness and consulted many doctors over his problem. He tried many treatments. This bravery towards his illness is illustrated in the first movement of the symphony.

This movement is in sonata allegro form. However, compared to previous symphonies written by Mozart or Haydn, it was almost twice as long. The key difference is in the expanded development and coda sections, which show the advancements Beethoven made towards the Romantic style and portraying his newly found energy and boldness after the *Heiligenstadt Testament*. This boldness is also reflected in the heroic tone and the innovative techniques he used. There is a clash between the esoteric and exoteric features, which is established immediately. In bars 6-7, the relationship between the diatonicism and the chromaticism illustrates this discord. The abstract structure of the chromatic part affects the form and the way the music progresses as it is defined by rhythm and intervals, rather than by a melody, which exemplifies the exoteric trait.¹¹ The opening shows a unity of character from dialectic between two differing themes. Instead of introducing a traditional theme, like in the style of Mozart or Haydn, thematic configuration is used. A common musical foot formed by a long up-beat finishing on the down-beat relates the two second subjects and it is the conflict between the down-beat and the up-beats, which create a rhythmic mode. This is both prominent and characteristic of the syncopated hemiola, which is further enhanced by the use of irregular sforzandos in the transition. The rhythmic contrast

¹⁰ Wikipedia, *Beethoven's Style and Innovations*. Retrieved October 24, 2005 from the Internet: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beethoven%27s_musical_style_and_innovations

¹¹ Dalhaus, C. *Ludwig Van Beeethoven - Approaches to his Music*. Pg. 17.

between the first and second subjects works itself out, as it is an antithesis.¹² The simple versus the complex is a further demonstration of the esoteric and exoteric traits of this symphony. By using rhythmic modes, Beethoven was able to take a step towards the abstract, an important part of realizing his heroic style. Furthermore, from the techniques used and the heroic tone, the listeners may get a sense of a hero trying to overcome his obstacles.

However, a failed attempt by the hero leads us to the Funeral March. This second movement demonstrates the death of the composer's former self. At this point, Beethoven realized that his deafness would only get worse and that it was incurable. He no longer had a will to live and over-exaggerated his symptoms. The despair he felt overwhelmed him and therefore Beethoven "enacted his death [through the Testament] to be able to live again."¹³ This parallels the *Marcia Funebre* with its mournful sentiment, portraying Beethoven's life and the pain he felt at that time.

The second movement is one that is unusual for a symphony. It is a stately funeral march in adagio, with the form of an altered second rondo form, in the style of a minuet (A-B-A). It is altered as instead of having a second theme, Beethoven composed a development section. This slow movement is "analogous and made from a knotting of a dense network of motivic relations."¹⁴ The network is shown especially in the fugue (bars 114-150), whose motive is found in the inversion of bars seventeen and eighteen, and the inversion of the *maggiore* section (bars 69-73). Also of significance is the extensive coda of this movement in bars (209-247). The coda has four special features. They are a repeat of the *maggiore* section in bar 213-214, the sighing motive in the bars 217-232, the syncopated motive, and the breakdown of the first subject in the fourth progression, which is related to the fugue. "The

¹² Dalhaus, C. *Ludwig Van Beethoven- Approaches to his Music*. Pg. 137.

¹³ Solomon, M. *Beethoven*. Pg. 121.

¹⁴ Dalhaus, C. *Ludwig Van Beethoven- Approaches to his Music*. Pg. 29.

paradox that differentiates at the extremes leads off towards the abstract”¹⁵ in this movement portrays the esoteric traits of the movement. Furthermore, the mood and atmosphere is dark and brooding, bringing out the esoteric, abstract elements. These elements link directly to the intense hopelessness Beethoven felt at the time of Heiligenstadt and this movement portrays these emotions throughout. This funeral march portrays the death of the thoughts of suicide during Beethoven’s time of crisis at Heiligenstadt. During that time, he was extremely distraught and had withdrawn from the society. There, in the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, he exaggerated his symptoms of deafness in his despair. Furthermore, during this time, his close friend Karl Amend left Vienna and he had an ill-fated flirtation with Guiletta Guicciardi.¹⁶ Life was not going the way he wanted it to. Thus, the mood of the second movement is a direct connection to the mood of himself at that time. Even so, he was able to have the courage to continue living his life. Therefore during this time, the death of his suicidal thoughts signifies a new beginning, a rebirth, which brings us to the scherzo of the *Eroica* symphony.

The rebirth of himself is portrayed in the Scherzo. It preserves the mood of the second movement in the first half with the strings. The opening is ambiguous as both the tonic and the meter of the piece are uncertain. It is not until the oboe asserts the triple meter that the listener gets a sense of the meter and the tonic is still ambiguous for a while. It is not really until the second half, where it becomes an uprising surge of energy and the rebirth occurs. The hero is reborn and becomes more alive than before. The form of the movement is that of a traditional Scherzo. Beethoven had moved away from the minuet and trio, which was used in the symphonies of previous Classical masters, to the scherzo, although he did consider

¹⁵ Dalhaus, C. *Ludwig Van Beethoven- Approaches to his Music*. Pg. 30.

¹⁶ Solomon, M. *Beethoven Essays*. Pg. 123.

using a minuet serioso for the this movement at first.¹⁷ This piece has often been linked to wine and the joys of celebration after a great battle. The major battle of Beethoven's life was that fought against his deafness. With the determination to continue his art, he courageously won the battle. Thus it would be linked to the happiness and revival of Beethoven's self confidence after struggling against his own suicidal thoughts. There was a song found by A.B. Marx, an early Beethoven biographer that he claimed to be the basis of the theme of this movement. However, some other biographers have refuted this. The movement is still associated with drinking and happiness despite either argument.¹⁸

Finally, in the last movement, the hero is seen to triumph over all his problems. He shows himself as one that "conquer[ed] his suicidal thoughts, and struggl[ed] against fate."¹⁹ The Finale symbolizes victory and how the composer prevailed over his deafness. In the Testament, victory was achieved when Beethoven stated, "it was virtue that upheld me in misery, and to it next to my art I owe the fact that I did not end my life with suicide."²⁰ Subsequently, this newly revived energy led Beethoven to be able to realize a new style, the "heroic" style. Therefore, this victory over his despair led him to compose many more advanced works that pushed the limits of the Classical style and began the growth and development of the Romantic style.

This final movement of the symphony is a theme and variations, essentially a variation on a double theme. There is a melodic theme and a bass theme. The movement is unusual in that the principle theme does not appear until the third variation of the bass theme.

¹⁷ DeWitt, W.A. *Beethoven's Eroica Symphony*. Retrieved Dec. 29, 2005 from the Internet: http://www.beethovenseroica.com/Pg3_anal/preanal.html

¹⁸ DeWitt, W.A. *Beethoven's Eroica Symphony*. Retrieved Dec. 29, 2005 from the Internet: http://www.beethovenseroica.com/Pg3_anal/3mov/3m03.htm

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Boynick, M. *Ludwig Van Beethoven- The "Heiligenstadter Testament."* Retrieved Dec. 29, 2005 from the Internet: http://w3.rz-berlin.mpg.de/cmp/beethoven_heiligenstadt.html

In addition, near the concluding passages, the bass theme disappears altogether. This unique and innovative way of using a theme and variations was unheard of at the time as was the use of a theme and variations as the last movement of a symphony. To date, only one other symphony uses this technique, Brahms' fourth symphony.²¹ The genius of Beethoven's innovations further demonstrates the 'new' path and the autobiographical implications in his third symphony.

The Finale is a variation on a double theme. The use of a double theme shows the method of using double variations. The bass theme is introduced at the start while the melodic theme rounds off the movement. The melodic theme was first used in Beethoven's ballet, *The Creatures of Prometheus*. This theme was used a few other times in Beethoven's other works. It is a simple melody, one that is easily remembered and attractive. The bass is introduced alone, which begins in bar twelve and the first variation is based solely on the bass theme and the melodic theme is not yet introduced. Finally, in the third variation of the bass theme, the melodic theme enters. The two parts are independent of each other, having a successive and antithetical relationship, and the third variation leads into a fugue on the bass theme. This characterizes elements that are found in the heroic symphonic style of Beethoven. The fugue is followed by transpositions to C major and subsequently D major. Sequences lead us to the second fugue and the subsequent demise of the bass theme in the recapitulation. The highlight of the movement is the harmonic vs. contrapuntal principles. Alternating the themes shows an alternation of principles, a contrapuntal principle versus the harmonic and figurative ones. This alternation of principles once again shows the conflict between the esoteric and exoteric elements. The dual structure of the development dismantles

²¹ Frogon, C. *Beethoven: Symphony no. 3*. Retrieved Dec. 6, 2005 from the Internet: <http://symphonysalon.blogspot.com/2005/11/beethoven-symphony-no3.html>

the formal structure. The concrete and abstract contrast with each other to produce an effect that is characteristic of the heroic style.

This finale is based on the “abstract formal thought.”²² This shows the direction that Beethoven’s music will lead to and it is an important step away from the classical music of Mozart and Haydn. The basis on abstract thought further demonstrates Beethoven’s willingness to experiment and to begin to mix ideas. This is reflective of his life situation and how he became willing to try and overcome his grief. He triumphed over his deafness and continued to construct masterpieces, one after another. This masterpiece showed how Beethoven could still write amazing works, despite his illness. The triumphant ending of the Finale demonstrates that no matter how bad his hearing becomes, he would be able to conquer his fear and grief and continue his life doing what he does best, composing.

Besides the technical part of the symphony, Beethoven’s life and biography connects to other aspects of the symphony as well. Perhaps the most famous connection to Beethoven’s biography was the intended dedication to Napoleon Bonaparte. This dedication gives us insight as to why the great composer wrote this piece and indirectly hints at his political views. When Beethoven first wrote the *Eroica* symphony, it was to be dedicated to one of the greatest men of that time, Napoleon Bonaparte. In the end, however, it was dedicated to Beethoven’s friend, Prince Lobkowitz, who paid for six months of private use of the piece for this dedication. At this point, Beethoven then decided to entitle the symphony “Bonaparte” instead. However, this all changed when Napoleon crowned himself Emperor of France in the presence of the Pope. Beethoven’s pupil, Ferdinand Ries, made a famous account in May 1804 that “when he brought Beethoven the news of Napoleon, Beethoven exclaimed: “Is he too no different from an ordinary man! Now he too will trample all the

²² Dalhaus, C. *Ludwig Van Beethoven- Approaches to his Music*. Pg. 29.

rights of man beneath his feet, indulge only his ambition; he will set himself higher than all other men now, and become a tyrant!”²³ Then Ries said he picked up the title page, tore it up and threw it to the ground.” This tale became an instantaneous legend. In actual fact, Beethoven never tore up the title page. Instead, he just erased the title “Intitulata Bonaparte” and much later added “Geschrien auf Bonaparte”²⁴ (written in honour of Bonaparte) in pencil. This shows that he still recognized the association between Napoleon and the *Eroica* Symphony. This is further illustrated in Beethoven’s letter to Bretikopf and Haertel, a publishing firm in Vienna. Beethoven wrote that “the Symphony is really entitled *Bonaparte*, and in addition to the usual instruments there are, specially, three obbligato horns.”²⁵ This letter was written in Vienna on August 26, 1804 at a time later than the crowning of Napoleon as emperor of France. When Beethoven first wrote the symphony, he had Napoleon Bonaparte in mind, perhaps not the true image of Napoleon but the myth of him being a heroic figure. He never lost the admiration for Napoleon’s greatness. Beethoven especially revered the fact that Napoleon Bonaparte came from such lowly beginnings and worked himself upwards to become the leader of France. Thus, the First Consul of France, for Beethoven, epitomizes the ideal hero.

A more practical reason to the dedication was the composer’s proposed move to France as there is almost always a concrete explanation for his dedications to which this symphony is no exception. On August 6, 1803, Beethoven’s pupil, Ferdinand Ries, wrote a letter to Nikolaus Simrock in Bonn. This letter stated that “Beethoven will stay here another year and a half at the most. Then he will go to Paris, which makes me extremely sorry.”²⁶

²³ Dalhaus, C. *Ludwig Van Beethoven- Approaches to his Music*. Pg. 23.

²⁴ Dalhaus, C. *Ludwig Van Beethoven- Approaches to his Music*. Pg. 24.

²⁵ Kalischer, A.C. *Beethoven’s Letters*. Pg. 48.

²⁶ Dalhaus, C. *Ludwig Van Beethoven- Approaches to his Music*. Pg. 22.

This coincided with the time Beethoven's third symphony was going to be dedicated to Napoleon Bonaparte. Therefore, the move to Paris would be smoothed if Beethoven dedicated the symphony to Napoleon, First Consul of France at the time. However, when he saw that the move was not going to occur, he removed the dedication and the title "Bonaparte". Furthermore, the removal of the dedication was close to a time when France and Austria started having tensions with each other once again. The Treaty of Amiens ending the Revolutionary Wars between the two countries was slowly dwindling along with the peace. Time and time again, Beethoven puts reverence towards his home country over his other ideals, such as republicanism. During the Revolutionary Wars, Beethoven wrote some patriotic pieces to Austria and dedicated them to the Hapsburgs, while his more idealistic pieces were written at times of relative peace in his life. Therefore with the prospect of Austria and France at such high-strung tensions, to renounce one's own country would be dangerous. He would be seen as a traitor to Austria and possibly sentenced to death. Thus, Beethoven had to withdraw the dedication to Napoleon Bonaparte. However, he still recognized this link between the *Eroica* symphony and Bonaparte among his friends and publishers. This association is of importance in linking the biography of Beethoven to his *Eroica* symphony.

With the writing of this masterpiece, one can examine the composer's political views. On the one hand, Beethoven was deeply patriotic to his country. On the other hand, he grew up in a world of enlightened ideals. The French Revolution occurred during his lifetime and he picked up many ideals from this Revolution. Even so, his patriotism often came in conflict with his republicanism. His republicanism could not be declared openly at times, especially when his own country was at conflict with the French Republic, and this became important in

his works. At times of relative peace, he was able to compose more idealistic pieces, ones that showed his republicanism and some even dedicated to important enlightenment leaders. The *Eroica* symphony is no exception. It was written during a time of peace between the Austrian Empire and the French Republic. The idealistic side of Beethoven overcame his pragmatic patriotism in this third symphony. The idealism in Beethoven's thoughts of relating mankind's struggle and abstract compositional procedures allowed him to give the material of the revolutionary music a form that satisfied the concepts of the symphonic style. Therefore, the symphony as a whole, showed the enlightened attitudes of Beethoven and his republicanism.

Recognizing all of these ties to Beethoven's life can help to enhance the musical experience. When listening to the symphony, biographical implications can be heard. With the knowledge of Beethoven's intended dedication to Napoleon Bonaparte or Beethoven's proposed move to France, one may listen to the symphony differently. By knowing the implications of the music, one would be able to have a more detailed, enriched acknowledgement of the beauty of the *Eroica* symphony. The embarking of Beethoven's music on a 'new path' could be heard clearly through the many abstract elements of the piece. Furthermore, the heroic style of Beethoven was shown fully for the first time in this symphony. The difference between this middle period style and the earlier classical one is portrayed and music lovers would be able to hear this. Therefore, with the knowledge of all the biographical details in relation to the *Eroica* symphony, one may see that Beethoven has many autobiographical elements in his symphony. Beethoven "cast his personal experiences, perceptions and biography" into the *Eroica* symphony and this would then "transport the

audience members to the emotional state of the artist and thus participate in a sublime experience.”²⁷

Word Count: 3680

²⁷ Wikipedia, *Beethoven's Style and Innovations*. Retrieved October 24, 2005 from the Internet: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beethoven%27s_musical_style_and_innovations

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