

Ideological Symphonies: Beethoven and the French Revolution

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ABSTRACT

The development of western art music from the Classical era to the Romantic era is often treated as a narrative separate from its contemporary political history, despite the importance of the historical backdrop against which this shift began – the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. It was during this period, characterized by the rise of individualism and resistance against Europe's absolutist monarchies, that the musical giant Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) produced some of his most important works. While not all of Beethoven's works had explicit political connections, over time, there were stylistic developments within his pieces that captured the political progressiveness of the historical period. This research paper uses a range of primary and secondary sources, as well as music score evidence, to compare stylistic choices and developments over time in Beethoven's music with the political and ideological narrative of the French Revolution, from reformist reticence to unreserved revolutionary violence. Additionally, it argues that starting from the Third Symphony, the structure of each symphony reflects the Jacobin revolutionary ideal, from violence and terror to the ultimate utopian victory. The paper concludes that while it remains unclear whether Beethoven intended the political connotation in his works, his progressive compositions present a parallel narrative to that of the French Revolution, and the stylistic developments echoing the revolutionary vigor, radicalism, and violence across his symphonies served as a means of radicalizing the public and glorifying the ideals of the French Revolution.

Keywords: French Revolution, classical music, romantic era, Beethoven, symphonies, Robespierre, Napoleon

Introduction

It is often difficult to associate classical music with politics. In fact, the exclusive, niche nature of classical music renders it difficult for one to associate it with any other specific field of study; however, with closer examination, one can find deep political connotations carefully woven between the notes and staves in musical masterpieces. Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) is considered one of the greatest musical giants of all time, often deemed as the composer who advanced the world of classical music into the deeply expressive Romantic period at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The majestic grandiosity, idiosyncratic harmonic language, and sheer scale of Beethoven's works were absolute breakthroughs from previous conventions of classical music, and many of his works remain the most celebrated and acclaimed in today's classical music repertoire (Botstein, 2010, p. 361). Beethoven's music is often absolute, meaning that instead of being about specific, concrete concepts, the compositions represented subtler emotions and more abstract ideas via the music itself (Pederson, 2009, p. 242). This lack of programmatic content is among the reasons why political messages and implications within Beethoven's music are sometimes ignored.

The start of the development of western art music from the Classical to Romantic periods occurred concurrently with a historical period of extreme significance – the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars (1789-1815). Over these years, characterized by resistance against the absolutist monarchies of Europe and the rise of individualism, Beethoven produced some of his most important works. This brings the discussion to the research question of “to what extent did stylistic features of Beethoven's symphonies reflect the ideological development of the French Revolution?” Indeed, Beethoven himself worked in Vienna, instead of the period's center of revolutionary change that was France, and his personal battle against the crisis of growing deafness cannot be ignored when examining reasons for his change in musical style. However, while not all of Beethoven's music had explicitly political connections, there certainly were stylistic developments within it that capture the overall political progressiveness and radicalism of the period. Beethoven's true intentions remain unclear, but it

can be argued that his progressive compositions possessed characteristics similar to the vigor, radicalism, and violence of the revolutionary ideals at the end of the eighteenth century; therefore, the stylistic developments across and within Beethoven's symphonies mirror the ideological developments of the French Revolution and served a means of indirectly revolutionizing the public and glorifying the ideals of the French Revolution. This paper will examine Beethoven's symphonies Nos. 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 9 one by one, and situate them in conversation with the history of the French Revolution.

Under the Seeming Apoliticism

The majority of Beethoven's works were produced between 1795 and 1815. In European music circles during this time, the idea emerged that music, by itself, can communicate its own innate ideas and emotions without composers having to explicitly link it to more concrete concepts (Johnson, 1991, p. 32). As a leading composer of his time, Beethoven's music was indeed more emotionally rich, nuanced, and complex than the compositions of the greats before him, Joseph Haydn (1793-1809) and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791). More importantly, the absolute nature of his music prompted audiences to not always consider his works in connection with contemporary societal events and politics, a view that has been acknowledged by scholars such as Leon Botstein (2010). Compared with later composers of the Romantic Period, Beethoven's music was significantly less programmatic, and for him, “sentiment and feeling, not depiction, were proper objects of communication through music” (p. 362). Amidst these deeply personal expressions of emotion, it is hard to imagine that there are any political connotations; however, with closer examination, it can be argued that there are subtle political undertones (notably the aftershocks of the French Revolution) present in his music, though not in an overtly explicit manner. As scholar Owen Jander argues, in the music of Beethoven, there are “structures... employed in composing but wished to remain hidden” (p. 362). Historian Jan La Rue argues that since around 1815, it has been historically established “with the support of long tradition” that Beethoven's form of supreme

musical accomplishment was the symphony (La Rue, 2001, p. 221), and not unlike the development of the French Revolution, Beethoven's symphonies, all written after the revolution, did develop an intense, glorifying, and almost violent character over time, filled with sudden changes that echo the narrative of the revolution. From a purely musical standpoint (even when disregarding Beethoven's contemporary politics), Beethoven's compositional scale, harmonic language, and emotional input were revolutionary in every way. While Symphonies Nos. 1 and 2 started with a comparably more conservative style, starting from the Third, titled the *Eroica*, abrupt twists that mirror the revolution's progression, as well as the Jacobin belief and narrative of terror followed by glorious victory, became gradually more apparent in the structures of Beethoven's symphonies. These contrasting characters are represented by contrasting movements, connecting the entire symphony as one continuous work of revolutionary narrative. This is especially apparent in the explicitly political No. 3, the devastating No. 5 that eventually reaches its heroic conclusion, the transition from the storm to peace in No. 6, and finally, the transformation from the first and second movement's terror to the finale's utopian explosion of joy in No. 9. In these structural, stylistic manipulations, Beethoven was able to revolutionize and almost terrorize his audiences with novel, revolutionary ideas and values in a musical version of the terrors the French revolutionaries inflicted upon their people.

Early Period: Early Hints of Revolution and Radicalism

Beethoven's earlier works, including his first two symphonies, consisted of compositional features that did indeed have a more conservative character; however, these features appealing to aristocratic aesthetics were mixed with hints of a more heroic style, mirroring the political and ideological uncertainty Europe faced during the early years of the French Revolution. While the narratives of Beethoven's stylistic change and the Revolution were not chronologically linear, their developments do follow a similar progression. Beethoven's budding heroism and idiosyncratic style lurking under the classical façade undoubtedly echo the initial compromise attempted between the revolutionaries

and royalists of the French Revolution – the idea of Constitutional Monarchy.

i. 1789-1791: Conservative Beginnings of the French Revolution

Though the French Revolution is often remembered as a period of great radical change, its initial stages were characterized by some rather conservative political views among the revolutionaries. During the famous Tennis Court Oath (1789), the purpose of the National Assembly was actually deemed as “to establish the constitution of the realm, to bring about the regeneration of public order, and to maintain the true principles of monarchy” (Mason & Rizzo, 1999, p. 60-61). At this point, the revolution was not aiming to completely overthrow the old order, and the image of the monarchical regime hadn't been reduced completely to one of despotism and tyranny. It is clear in the Oath that the revolutionaries merely aimed to ameliorate and preserve the explicitly mentioned monarchy. However, more aggressive views, although not prevalent at the time, certainly existed – as the Abbé Emmanuel Joseph Sièyes remarked: “The pretended utility of a privileged order for the public service is nothing more than a chimera; that with it all that which is burdensome in this service is performed by the Third Estate” (Sièyes, 1789). The privileged estates, consisting of the clergy and nobles, were viewed as inutile parts of society, and this notion lurking beneath the surface of political compromise eventually built up to the political radicalism and utter bloodshed that became the infamous Reign of Terror (1793). With the fiery crowds, riots, and radical journalism of France, especially Paris, the French public was easily steered into radicalistic political mindsets. Some people, however, particularly foreign spectators of the revolution, were not readily accepting these changes. As Irish statesman Edmund Burke (1729-1797) remarked in his *Reflections on Revolution in France*, the revolutionaries “had all these advantages in your ancient states, but... chose to act as if [they] had never been molded into civil society and... began by despising everything that belonged to [them]” (Burke, 1790). Radical changes against the established order were seen almost as an act of barbarism. One could argue that this was not unlike opinions in the European music scene a few years later, in more indirect and subtle ways.

ii. *Symphony No. 1 in C Major*

Beethoven's Symphonies No. 1 and 2, written between 1801 and 1802, are generally considered as Beethoven's most conservative symphonies that appeal more to the styles of Haydn (1732-1809) and Mozart (1756-1791), although some subtle Beethovenian characteristics are apparent under the surface (Tovey, 1944, p. 64). In terms of broader characteristics, it is reasonable for one to consider Symphony No. 1 a conformist and unprogressive work of the Classical period. It is written in the key of C major, the most basic key and arguably most common key in music, and thus a key with which audiences were immensely familiar. Additionally, the movements of the symphony follow the common fast-slow-fast-fast structure frequently used in the Classical period: Allegro, Andante, Minuet & Trio, and Allegro, further showing the conservatism of this work. However, under these broader conventional features are some deeply original, innovative techniques presaging Beethoven's instantly recognizable style in his later works. A notable example is the frequent use of *sforzandi* (sf), which are sudden, accented outbursts of volume or emphasis. These become an extremely prominent feature of Beethoven's later works (Huron, 1990), often marking instances of harmonic dissonance or conflict.



Here, they are placed amidst the conventional, consonant harmonies, suggesting a sense of turbulence and tension beneath the conservative surface, not unlike the lurking radicalism behind the French Revolution's initial pursuit of a mere political reform. The reception of this music also mirrors the foreign social response to radical ideals of the French Revolution. Politicians like Burke viewed the French Revolution's disdain and resistance against the old, established order as utterly unacceptable, and the reception to Beethoven's innovative attempts in Symphony No. 1 was no different: "Beethoven's first symphony premiered in Paris in 1807 and was unanimously recognized as a ponderous flop... he prepared his public for soothing cadences only to shock them with monstrous surprises" (Johnson, 1991, p. 24). Similarly, Beethoven's Symphony No. 2 in D Major, finished only a year later, presents similar elements of innovation and turbulence. This is done once again under a mostly unprogressive surface, although progressive characteristics start emerging more conspicuously.

iii. *Symphony 2 in D Major*

While Symphony No. 1 was a modest exploration of a bolder compositional style under the heavy influence of Haydn and Mozart, Symphony No. 2 marked the emergence of a more noticeable style, with an utterly Beethovenian opening foreshadowing his later works.

The image shows a page of a musical score for the beginning of Beethoven's Symphony No. 2. The score is written for a full orchestra and includes parts for Flauti, Oboi, Clarinetti in A, Fagotti, Corni in D, Trombe in D, Timpani in D, Violino I, Violino II, Viola, and Violoncello & Basso. The music is in 3/4 time and begins with a series of chords and rhythmic patterns characteristic of Beethoven's style.

Sforzandi are present again, and this time, instead of falling on the conventionally stronger beats, which are the first beats of each bar, they fall on weaker beats, or even between beats, to further create a sense of turbulence. Another defining characteristic of Beethoven's music is present in this introduction – sustained, grand opening chords played by the full symphony in an extremely loud volume, or fortissimo (ff). These chords appear twice in the opening, with the short-long rhythm giving them a unique sense of Beethovenian grandeur. Structurally, Symphony No. 2 marks the true emergence of Beethoven's idiosyncratic heroic style, with the replacement of the Minuet & Trio by the Scherzo as the third movement. The Scherzo follows the same form as a Minuet & Trio, but as opposed to the stately, reserved Minuet & Trio, it has a much more energetic, intense, and sometimes even violent character. Considering all these subtle but significant stylistic features, the first two symphonies of Beethoven are quite representative of Beethoven's early period. In other words, they conform to the classical norms with hints of an underlying independent style, which mirrors the clashing of ideologies during the early stages of the French Revolution – between radical revolutionaries and conservative reformists.

Middle Period: Sublime Terror Comes Before Utopian Victory

In 1793, with the start of the Reign of Terror, the narrative of the French Revolution turned into one of abrupt twists and violent developments fueled by the people's growing political radicalism. Similarly, in Beethoven's subsequent compositions, he adopted a more vigorous and intense style, with more sudden changes and dramatic contrasts. Two of Beethoven's most prominent compositions in this developed style are Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, the *Eroica* (Heroic), and Symphony No. 5 in C Minor.

i. 1793: *The Reign of Terror*

Under the growing Jacobin radicalism among the French people, the old regime became a symbol of pure evil, and monarchist elements no longer seemed viable as a part of the new government order. With Louis XVI's unsuccessful attempt of fleeing Paris in 1791 to instigate a counterrevolution (the Flight to Varennes), the monarchy became a representation of outright despotism and tyranny that did not care for the interests of the ordinary French people. With the execution of Louis XVI in 1793, France sank into complete revolutionary chaos. The rise of the Committee of Public Safety (1793-1795), a provisional governing body during the revolution, and its leader Maximilien Robespierre (1758-1794) marked the start of a period of mass denunciation, execution, and extreme political violence driven by revolutionary utopianism. This was under the belief that only violence in the name of virtue and revolution could cleanse France of her despotism and injustice (Elshtain, 1989, p. 210). This was the Reign of Terror, justified by Robespierre as "liberty's despotism against tyranny" (Robespierre). The people's radicalism, as well as the revolution itself, became deeply violent and capricious, with the revolutionary leaders eventually turning against each other. The label of the counterrevolutionary emerged, a term used by Committee of Public Safety leaders to label all who opposed their extremist ideals, the "assassins" who aim to "dishonor the people's cause, to kill public virtue, to stir up the fire of civil discord, and to prepare political counterrevolution by moral counterrevolution" (Robespierre). Eventually, other revolutionary leaders Georges Danton and Jacques Hébert were sentenced to death by guillotine by

Robespierre, who was also executed months later. In this period of extreme political turmoil and instability, described by Burke as “instructive monuments of rash and ignorant counsel in time of profound peace” (Burke, 1790), the narrative of the revolution turned into a deeply unpredictable one, full of sudden twists. This is a characteristic that Beethoven’s symphonies curiously start adopting, starting with the *Eroica*, completed in 1804.

ii. Symphony 3 in E-Flat Major, *Eroica*

The *Eroica* is often considered Beethoven’s entrance into writing deeply expressive Romantic music, and sometimes even the first work of the Romantic Era that drove the entire western musical world into Romanticism (Hamilton-Paterson, 2017), due to its sheer scale, emotional intensity, and rich political connotation. Again with two emphatic, full symphonic chords, the *Eroica* grandly opens its majestic first movement, but before the main theme is even elaborated upon, Beethoven interrupts the consonant, flowing melody with striking chromaticism, an intrusive C-sharp following the E-flat major opening.



This sudden introduction of dissonance is only one of the many sudden twists in mood that the colossal *Eroica* undergoes over the course of its four movements. Although the general structure and order of the *Eroica*'s movements remain unchanged, the mood changes only continue Beethoven’s journey of pushing the boundaries of the classical symphony. Amidst the triumphant first, third, and final movements, Beethoven writes a vast, devastating Funeral March, “sorrowful in its sense of inevitable fall from all melodic tones on which it pauses” (Holden, 1962, p. 636), almost completely offsetting the glorious heroism. In addition to this bold juxtaposition of moods, the *Eroica* is only more intriguing when one considers the political context concurrent to its composition. After the French Revolution, Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) finally brought a measure of peace and stability to France, but after just a few more years, he proclaimed himself Emperor, regressing to absolutism. Indeed, Beethoven originally wrote the *Eroica* for Napoleon for being the heroic savior of Europe (Steblin, 2006, p. 63), but

consequently, with Napoleon’s rise to absolutism (by crowning himself First Consul for life in 1803),



Beethoven shifted the tone of the *Eroica* abruptly from a celebration of Napoleon to an outcry against him. Compared with previous compositions by both Beethoven and other composers, the *Eroica* is utterly revolutionary, including not only directly political content, but almost an explicit political narrative within itself. Like the political instability of the Terror, the mood only continues to change after the Funeral March, as Beethoven returns to the triumphant mood in his third and final movements. The third movement is now a fully developed Scherzo, breaking away entirely from the reserved Minuet and Trio of the Classical period. The finale is once again filled with twists. Instead of having a grand opening in E-flat major, it opens with a dark, stormy passage in G minor, and then settles into E-flat major. The theme is then properly introduced, before going through a diverse variety of transformations in harmony, rhythm, and style, echoing the ever-changing, unpredictable narrative of the Terror.

iii. Symphony No. 5 in C Minor

Symphony No. 5 in C Minor, arguably the most recognizable work in western music, is characterized by its bold character and unmistakable, universally celebrated opening theme.



This motif immediately establishes a dark, unyielding, yet majestic character that sustains itself throughout the first movement. *Sforzandi* are once again present, and occasional transitions into more peaceful moods are uncompromisingly interrupted by the dark character of the opening, distinguished by its violent use of loud dynamics and turbulent, diminished harmonies.



This tumultuous, fierce character captures the brutal, capricious intensity of the revolution even more explicitly than the *Eroica* does, and as historian Rhys Jones states: “Beethoven’s music... sounded like the Revolution itself” (Jones, 2014, p. 954). Symphony No. 5, though still classical in structure, has advanced into Beethoven’s deeply unique compositional style, almost entirely different from any preceding musical work, that fills the music with energetic and sometimes restless excitement, dramatic shifts, and a hint of violence driving it forward.

Aftershocks of the Revolution: Legacy of the Jacobins

Even after the Reign of Terror had properly died down, the legacy of Jacobin ideals and utopianism remained in political thought (Furet, 1989, p. 267)

and Beethoven’s symphonies. The symphonies after the *Eroica* almost all become characterized by the common structure of an opening of terror and chaos that gradually builds towards a heroic ending of victory. Beethoven’s music started to not only mirror the Jacobin revolutionary ideals, but also force these ideals upon his listeners through the Jacobin-esque revolutionary rhetoric within his music.

i. The Jacobin Rhetoric: From Terror to Utopia

One of the primary factors that rendered the Terror’s scale and intensity possible was the powerful, stimulating rhetoric of the Jacobins. While revolutionary spirits prevailed among the Jacobins and their supporters, to the rest of France and Europe at the time, the radicalism of the French Revolution was deeply disturbing and posed a serious threat to European political stability and the established monarchist regimes. As a counteraction against the Prussian, Belgian, and domestic forces that were all attempting to overcome and reverse the revolution, institutions of the Terror were created (Furet, 1989, p. 266). To justify these extreme measures of violence, the Jacobins cited the dichotomy of “virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is powerless” (Robespierre, 1794). The frequent, constant repetition of abstract, somewhat undefined concepts such as “virtue” was a prominent rhetorical feature used by Robespierre. He argued that, “policy ought to be to lead the people by reason and the people’s enemies by terror” (Robespierre), and that this terror was only acceptable since it was carried out in the name of virtue. He further associated virtue with a plethora of concepts appealing to the French people’s desire for democracy and freedom, such as “the soul of the Republic,” “love of the nation,” and “natural to the people” (Robespierre), effectively establishing how terror was a necessity to the revolutionary administration. This rhetoric rich in repetition hammered abstract, revolutionary ideas continuously into the minds of the French people, justifying the political violence. It was believed that only through this sublime terror (Johnson, 1991, p. 952) could the revolution cleanse the evils of the old regime and bring about a glorious utopia. As these ideas grew, the Terror pushed France further into political turmoil. The revolution started embracing extreme degrees of radicalism, and traditional, fundamental components of the old regime, such as Christianity, were simply abandoned and abolished by the revolutionaries for the sake of a complete overthrow of the old order.

ii. *The Romantics' Utopia*

Comprehensively examining the symphonies of Beethoven starting from the *Eroica* by viewing the movements as a whole, the narrative of terror growing into glorious, virtuous victory – as well as the Jacobin rhetoric utilized to support this narrative – become apparent within the music. Beethoven's style shifted toward Romanticism in his middle and late periods, with music that “was not mere entertainment, but a moral force capable of creating a vision of higher ideals” (Kamien, 2018, p. 238). Not unlike the revolutionaries, musicians of the Romantic Era also sought to “escape from melancholy in dreams, in endless longing for a utopia glorious future” (Kravitt, 1992, p. 103), and as a pioneering figure of early Romanticism, Beethoven was masterful in incorporating ideas of utopianism, as well as the ideals and rhetoric of the French Revolution into his music. As previously discussed, within separate movements in the *Eroica*, instances of stormy, chaotic passages leading to triumphant grandiosity were already apparent, but the first full emergence of this narrative from the terror to the victory, consolidated by Robespierre-esque rhetoric, was Symphony No. 5.

iii. *Symphony 5, Revisited*

The violent, uncompromising opening theme of does not only dominate the motivic and rhythmic development in the first movement, but also returns several times in subsequent movements.



From movement 2



From movement 3



From movement 4

This is not unlike Robespierre's rhetorical choice of continuous repeating ideas in speech to strengthen their significance and people's memory of them: “The first four notes of the Fifth achieved their overwhelming effect... that permeates the entire symphony, imbuing it with an obsessive, convulsive, repetitive rhetorical trajectory... a similar propensity towards repetition, rhythm, even incantation in the oratorical techniques of... the National Assembly” (Jones, 2014, p. 966). Indeed, like Robespierre, Beethoven uses the turbulent first movement as the formal, explicit introduction of his motif, or revolutionary ideal, which keeps making indirect, returning appearances in all three later movements, continuously enforcing his ideas upon the audience, or the public.

Viewing the symphony as a whole, the movements aren't only tied together by the motivic connections either – a tonal narrative reflecting revolutionary ideals is also apparent. While the turbulent, chaotic first movement is in the dark key of C minor, the unrushed, delicate second movement transitions into the tranquil, delicate A-flat major, written in a much calmer mood. This can be considered as mirroring the revolutionary narrative by following a passage of chaotic terror with peace and tranquility, virtuously brought to the people after the violence. The third movement returns to C minor, but the character is tersely serious and much less aggressive, perhaps representing the final struggles of the revolution before arriving at the victory of virtue and liberty, and indeed, the ultimate triumph is arrived at in the majestic, unreservedly optimistic finale written in C major. The key is not only the most fundamental and joyous key

there is, but also the parallel major of the preceding key C minor, emphasizing not only the importance and jubilation of the revolutionary victory, but also the fact that terror and triumph, like C minor and C major, are fundamentally connected, and that triumph cannot arrive without the preceding terror. The final movement is characterized by its fanfare-like main theme, driving the music forward in unmistakable, unyielding but victorious Beethovenian fashion.



The quasi-rhetorical use of repetition is again present. Unlike classically accepted traditions, this movement barely modulates, consistently remaining within the tonality of C major to maintain the triumphant, glorious energy established from its very first notes. At the end of the movement, like Robespierre’s impassioned cries of determination, the majestic, concluding C major chord is repeated forty times consecutively, as the final, almost forceful consolidations of the revolutionary, violent ideas into the audience. Considering this with the aggressive character of the opening motif, it can indeed be argued that like the speeches and executions of the Terror, Symphony No. 5 is a political means of terrorizing, stimulating, and revolutionizing the public by exposing them to radical ideas and continuously reinforcing them through repetition and rhetoric.

iv. Symphony No. 6 in F Major, Pastoral

The remaining symphonies of Beethoven continue alluding to the ideals and rhetoric of the French Revolution, and their stylistic innovations further progress, reflective of the complete overthrow and abandonment of traditional ideals at the peak of the Terror.



Beethoven’s Symphony No. 6 in F Major, titled the *Pastoral*, completed in 1808, was another stylistic breakthrough from the conventions of the Classical Period. The symphony was written with extremely explicit programmatic content, with each movement having a specific title depicting the pastoral, peaceful concepts and images the movement portrays. The programmatic symphony only became a standard form of composition later in the Romantic Era, by later composers such as Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) and Franz Liszt (1811-1886) (Kamien, 2018, p. 262), so Beethoven’s *Pastoral* was yet another complete innovation for his time. Though this programmatic content is, as stated before, not explicitly political, the Jacobin narrative is present nonetheless. The turbulent character of the Terror is in the fourth movement depicting a storm, written in the dark key of F minor. The extreme dynamic of *ff*, clashing, diminished harmonies, and frequent *sforzandi* are once again present in the music, with the violent character even further amplified with the extensive use of percussion instruments to mimic the thunderstorm.

Following this, however, is the peaceful, tranquil last movement depicting people’s sentiments of joy and gratitude after the storm, “effortlessly transforming chaos into clarity... As the clouds part, the sense of sublime terror is overcome by a similarly naturalistic musical optimism” (Jones, 2014, p. 968). It is written in F major, once again in the parallel major of the previous movement, signalling the arrival at the glorious future, as well as the fact that it would be impossible without the terror that preceded it.

v. Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, Choral

Lastly, Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, or The Choral, completed in 1824, was Beethoven’s final symphony embodying the supreme revolutionary change he had brought to music and reflecting the peak of the French Revolution’s ideological overthrow of the old order. Structurally, even the movements no longer follow the classical tradition. The revolutionary, intense Scherzo is now directly after the fast first movement, and then followed by the slow movement and finale, to maximize the terror before the triumph.



Furthermore, as a final breakthrough against the established norms of classical symphonic music, Beethoven included a full choir with extensive parts in the colossal finale of victory. The first and second movements of terror are once again in minor key, both in D minor, and this time, even the Scherzo is given a violent, “diabolical” (Hanoch-Roe, 2002, p. 174) character full of abrupt twists to highlight the sheer intensity of the struggle and terror that revolution has to experience before arriving at the utopian outcome. Expectedly, the finale is once again an utter victory in the parallel major of D major, with the introduction of the full choir only elevating its triumphant mood. At the climatic ending, the familiar revolutionary rhetoric emerges once more, with boisterous final reiterations of the main theme, as well as twenty-eight consecutive repetitions of the concluding triumphant D major chord. In Beethoven’s incorporation of sublime aesthetics into his music, he was effectively appealing to the same rhetorical techniques of the revolutionaries during the French Revolution. Beethoven presented the musical version of stimulating, terrorizing, and almost oppressing the public into embracing and accepting new, revolutionary ideas: “Paris had the Terror, Vienna had Beethoven” (Jones, 2014, p. 967).

Conclusion

In essence, closer examination suggests that there does exist a parallel narrative between the developmental patterns of the political ideology of the French Revolution and stylistic features in the symphonies of Beethoven. Though those two developments were not chronologically concurrent, it is apparent that Beethoven’s music exhibits features across his nine symphonies reflecting the ideological narrative of the French Revolution, from reticent, reserved reformism to violent radicalism filled with revolutionary changes and sudden twists. Furthermore, while the nine symphonies together capture this broad ideological development, in each symphony starting with No. 5, the structure and stylistic devices actually follow the revolutionary narrative of the journey from sublime terror to glorious victory within the symphony’s movements. This is musically enforced in similar ways as the rhetorical devices used by Jacobin revolutionaries, most notably Robespierre. While it remains unclear whether Beethoven intended the heavy political parallels and connotation in his music,

his symphonies were undoubtedly reflective of the deeply progressive, sometimes destructive ideological shifts in France at the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth, and his grandiose music can indeed be unsettlingly interpreted as a means of radicalizing and terrorizing conservative audience during an era of great political change and radicalism.

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