

Review of Beethoven Hero by Scott Burnham
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“Beethoven. When asked to name the single most influential composer of the Western world, few would hesitate.” (pg. xiii) This statement begins Scott Burnham’s introduction to his book *Beethoven Hero*. He further asserts that the style which has come to define Beethoven and our hearing of Beethoven is the heroic style. This subject has engendered countless studies and interpretations. So why, with an arguable glut of information on Beethoven and specifically his heroic style, would a musicologist write yet another book on this subject? Burnham renders this question of motivation moot by the end of *Beethoven Hero*: there is not only much more to learn about Beethoven’s music but through it, there is much to learn about ourselves.

As outlined in the introduction, Burnham’s aim in *Beethoven Hero* is to focus on Beethoven’s definitive heroic style and to question how it has become the dominant values of music itself. In short, as Burnham puts it, “why this music matters so” (pg. xiii). Also mentioned in the introduction is a gambit which at first seems no more than an interesting intellectual conceit: the duality of Beethoven’s hero (that is, an abstract hero that the music is heard to describe) and Beethoven hero (that is, Beethoven himself elevated to heroic status), the common denominator of which forms the book’s title. Burnham attributes the earliest form of this idea to Wagner, who effuses:

He [Beethoven], too, must have felt *his* powers aroused to an extraordinary pitch, his valiant courage spurred on to a grand and unheard of deed [unerhörte Tat]! He was no general—he was a musician; and thus in *his* realm he saw before him the territory within which he could accomplish the same thing that Bonaparte had achieved in the fields of Italy. (pg. xv)

This duality will eventually serve Burnham as powerfully as it did Beethoven and become the *telos*, the achieved goal, of Burnham’s book.

Beethoven Hero contains five chapters, which the reader may view as grouped into three parts. In the first two chapters, Beethoven's Hero and Musical Values: Presence and Engagement in the Heroic Style, Burnham gives a thorough and engaging account of the highlights of past scholarship on Beethoven's heroic style, focusing on mainly the first movement of the *Eroica* Symphony and the Fifth Symphony. He also presents his own ideas along side an assimilation of the ideas of his musicological predecessors. Chapter three, the second of three parts, explores formation of the theoretical canon as a response to and because of the influence of Beethoven. In the third section, in chapter four, Burnham situates the heroic style in a cultural context and connects it to our concepts of self, all of which can be best characterized by values prevalent in the Age of Goethe (the *Goethezeit*). Finally, in chapter five, Beethoven the hero emerges from Beethoven's hero as Burnham reaches the coda of his own musicological virtuosity: Burnham once again shows us with startling freshness how this music transcends and urges us *to* transcend (whether it be life, our own struggles, or even musicological studies).

Chapter I is mainly devoted to an exposition of key points in the *Eroica* Symphony through the eyes Marx, R  ti, Schenker, and Burnham in what Burnham himself calls "a master trope that I believe sounds the deepest common denominator of all the others." (pg. 24). What Burnham does is indeed masterful. For each chosen moment, Burnham deftly maneuvers the enlightened views of the aforementioned interpreters, as well as his own formidable background of knowledge, to assemble a picture which respects all his sources but which is also much more: a variegated but efficient (and theoretically supported) construction of the first movement of the *Eroica* symphony that weaves a well-balanced line through disparate views such as the organicism of Schenker and (in our contemporary view) the

hyper-subjectivity of R  ti. This is a delicate synthesis of objectivity and subjectivity which Burnham maintains throughout the rest of the book and could be an example for us all.

Chapter I sets the stage for Chapter II, in which Burnham explores how Beethoven's heroic style engages the listener and creates a presence (an idea to which Burnham returns later).

Using the Fifth Symphony in counterpoint against the *Eroica* Symphony, he shows the different ways Beethoven creates tension through formal and rhetorical constructs. An enlightening example comes to mind: speaking of an overall rhythm of down-up-down-up-down in the sonata (with exposition, recapitulation, and coda forming the downbeats), he notes that "This types of closure [through the final large-scale downbeat] works both as the teleological climax of a linear process and as the rounding off of a cyclical formal design. This result is a fruitful conflation of linear and cyclical time..." (pg. 55).

Having explored the musical values in Beethoven's heroic style, Burnham moves on to institutional values in Chapter III. He revisits the theories of Marx, Riemann, Schenker, and R  ti, but this time from a direction opposite to that of the approach in Chapter I. Rather than observing how theories apply to Beethoven, he shows how Beethoven applies to the theorists. In the ideas of each of the theorists, Burnham sees the seed of Beethoven's music blooming into self-perpetuating ideas *about* Beethoven's music. For example, while he amidst no hope of "proving in any positivistic sense that Beethoven's Fifth Symphony was formative for Schenker's concept of the *Urfinie*," Burnham notes that this was the work "on his [Schenker's] mind when he began to formulate his notion of the *Urfinie*." (pg. 100).

Through processes such as these, Beethoven's music has placed theoretical value in a music which follows a structure that Beethoven himself used. Thus is the formation of institutional values and a theoretical canon also defined by Beethoven's heroic style. After all, "tonal

theory has been listening almost exclusively to Beethoven and, more specifically, to his heroic style.” (pg. 110) Burnham’s investigations in this chapter are also useful beyond the scope of Beethoven scholarship. It calls for consistent self-evaluations of our own work and brings to light the possible dangers of forming canonic theories based on (and applicable only to) the canon.

Chapter IV is almost a preparation, although a necessary and important one, to Chapter V. In Chapter IV Burnham clearly defines the characteristics of Beethoven’s heroic style which tie it to the *Goethezeit* and a heroic concept of self. The key notion here is duality. Goethe, as well as those affected by Goethe’s views during the *Goethezeit*, sense simultaneously their own lives as a narrative and as an embodiment of that narrative (which is in the physical reality a syllogism, since the narrator, the one who effectively actualizes a person’s life, is the person itself). Burnham’s example of choice of this concept is Goethe’s story of *Egmont*. Beethoven’s music at the end of the play is simultaneously (as the heroic concept of self) a narrative of the apotheosis of Egmont as well as the embodiment thereof. This fundamentally ironic duality is what gives Beethoven’s music such power to connect to the self and also what gives Burnham his own heroic triumph in Chapter V. In this final chapter not only does Beethoven hero emerge as a separate entity, itself a subtle and surprising connection to the book’s start with Beethoven’s hero, but the concept of the heroic self is truly realized as transcendent. Burnham lifts the Beethovenian concept of the heroic out of the music and applies it to musicology. Since many of our musical notions are based upon this style (he cites how Schubert is described always as “non-processual rather than processual, reminiscent rather than goal oriented, feminine rather than masculine” (pg 155), in short, not-Beethoven rather than Beethoven), we adopt a subconscious Beethovenian

paradigm without realizing it. Burnham suggest that we do the seemingly impossible, to “move beyond our situatedness in the Beethovenian paradigm...[which would] require that we transcend ourselves, that we somehow rise above the very foundations of our discourse.”(pg. 162) To Burnham, this is precisely why the heroic style still carries meaning for us because the “struggle to hear beyond the heroic style may even seem . . . heroic.” (pg. 162)

While musicology may have yet to rise above itself away from a Beethovenian paradigm as Burnham has suggested, *Beethoven Hero* has certainly risen above its most explicit intentions. Burnham gives ample evidence in answering his first question, “why does this music matter so?” But in embarking upon such an effort, he has, intentionally or not, given us an example of a consistent and innovative approach to scholarship. He draws heavily upon not only the “absolute music” itself but from reception history (as transmitted to various theorists, for example) and cultural history (the *Goethezeit*, for example). Even in the earlier chapters, when he is engaging the music at the detail of single notes, Burnham fluidly mixes analytical and descriptive prose. The result is not a compromise of one for the other. Instead, his “descriptive analyses” successfully prepare the reader for his personal view of the material at hand without sacrificing technical clarity. It is one of the best examples of musical semiotics that seamlessly blends objectivity (in the form of positivistic analysis) and subjectivity (in the form of personal reactions, cultural context of audiences, etc.) and it infuses every sentence.

Beethoven Hero also rises above itself in exposing our relationship to the heroic style in academia. Far from being historically removed from us, the concept of the heroic self is needed now more than ever. We need heroism to break free of the hidden restrictions

imposed upon us by paradigms or assumptions taken for granted, such as the heroic style itself. It is a concept which continually challenges itself and the self. The ability of Burnham's book to bring this to the fore is at first seemingly implausible. If it questions its own existence, how can it possibly assert it? Its attempt (and success even) seems to me...well...heroic.