

# to the ends of the word...

where words end, music speaks

Saturday, 27 June 2020

## "La Quinta Sinfonia di Beethoven Recensita da E.T.A. Hoffmann" by Benedetta Saglietti



### **La Quinta Sinfonia di Beethoven Recensita da E.T.A. Hoffmann: Nel Regno dell'Infinito by Benedetta Saglietti A review**

Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, with its dramatic, opening four-note motif, is one of the most instantly recognizable works in the Western classical music canon. I often wonder how it must have sounded like to ears less hackneyed than ours. In this regard, musicologist Benedetta Saglietti's latest book is an illuminating work. Entitled *La Quinta Sinfonia di Beethoven recensita da E.T.A. Hoffmann – Nel regno dell'infinito* ("Beethoven's Fifth Symphony reviewed by E.T.A. Hoffmann – In the Kingdom of the Infinite"), it has just been published by Donzelli Editore, right in time for the "Beethoven 250" anniversary. The core of the book is Saglietti's translation into Italian (the first) of E.T.A. Hoffmann's celebrated review of the symphony, first published in July 1810 in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*.

Hoffmann (1776-1822) was a major exponent of German Romanticism and a veritable Renaissance man – a jurist and civil servant, but also a composer, music critic, artist and, of course, an author of

such works of Gothic and fantastic fiction as *The Sandman*. Hoffmann was not present at the Symphony's somewhat disappointing premiere on the 22<sup>nd</sup> December, 1808, but, for the purposes of preparing his review, he was provided with the orchestral parts and the (then) unpublished transcription for piano duet (*quattro mani*) by Friedrich Schneider.

Hoffmann's review is significant because, at an early date, it recognised the symphony for the masterpiece it is. The review is also, in itself, a work of art. It starts with a generic introduction, setting out Hoffmann's ideas about musical aesthetics, before moving into a closer examination of the symphony's structure and content.

Benedetta Saglietti does not only present us with her (annotated) translation of the essay, which would have been interesting enough, but she also provides us with materials which place Hoffmann's review in context. A tantalising appetizer is her interview/conversation with Riccardo Muti who, in explaining his relation to Beethoven's Fifth, gives us a performer's perspective to the symphony. Other accompanying documents include the first (anonymous) review of the work, published by the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* a few weeks after the first performance; an extract from a letter by Johann Friedrich Reichardt describing the premiere; and a translation by Giangiorgio Satragni of Hector Berlioz's essay on the symphony, published in 1862, by which time the work had established a solid presence in the canon.

By far the most valuable ingredient in this book, apart from the Hoffmann piece, is Saglietti's essay introducing the review. Split in three parts, the essay first describes the concert at which the Fifth was premiered: overlong, in a freezingly cold theatre, with an under-rehearsed orchestra, this concert provided an outing for the symphony which was probably memorable for the wrong reasons. Saglietti then describes Hoffmann's relationship with the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* and the circumstances in which he was asked to review the symphony. The third and most interesting part of Saglietti's essay expounds Hoffmann's views on music, particularly as expressed in the first part of his review of the Fifth. I found it particularly eye-opening. Indeed, to me it was a given that a defining element in Romanticism is the moving away from "abstract" music towards "programmatic" works inspired by extra-musical (especially literary and/or philosophical) themes.

Yet, Hoffmann, that beacon of German Romanticism, takes exactly the opposite view. Inspired by the writings of Ludwig Tieck and Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder and, ultimately, by Burke's theories on the "sublime and the beautiful", Hoffmann argues that it is precisely "abstract" music which achieves the highest artistic plane. Unlike, say, sculpture (which in Hoffmann's time had not yet moved towards abstraction), music is not shackled by the strictures of the "worldly" and can therefore express what cannot be said in words. In Hoffmann's view, Beethoven is the perfect Romantic, whose music "evokes that infinite torment that is the very essence of Romanticism". That is why, according to Hoffmann, Beethoven is at his best in instrumental works, not in vocal ones. Language constricts him, music lets him roam free.

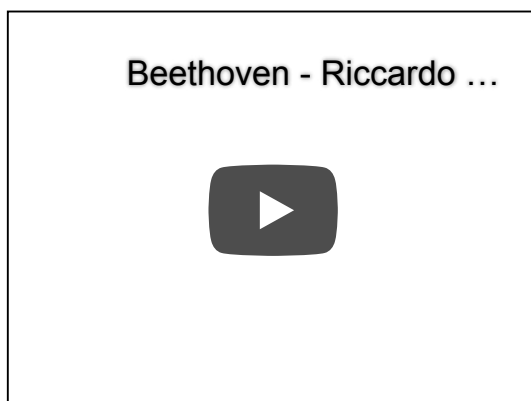


It is quite ironic that in the second, more technical part of his review, Hoffmann tries to pin down its elements using his theoretical expertise, analysing its structure, harmonies and themes. For a moment, it seems that Hoffmann the “poet” has given way to the “jurist”. But even in this technical analysis, the great Romantic cannot help slipping in references to “terror”, to “that which is extraordinary”, to the “spectral horror” which Beethoven’s music evokes. There’s Hoffmann the Goth for you!

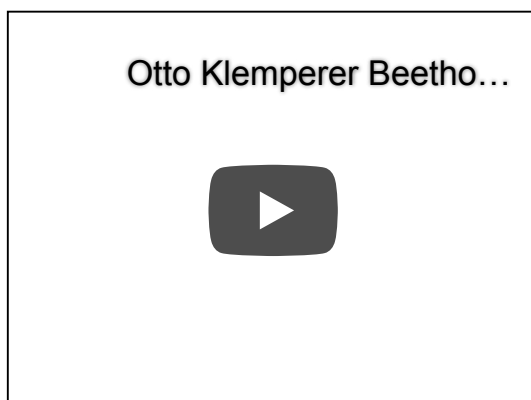
Although Benedetta Saglietti’s book is a scholarly work, it is an engaging read and a highly recommendable accompaniment to this year’s anniversary celebrations.

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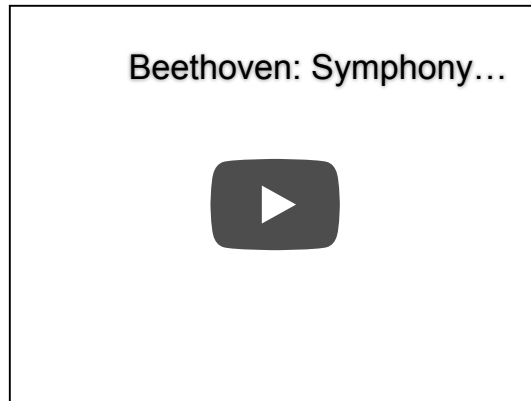
*Quando riapro una partitura, voglio ricominciare dall’inizio...* “When I reopen a score, I want to start again at the beginning,” explains Riccardo Muti in his interview with Benedetta Saglietti. This clip shows Muti rehearsing the work with the Orchestra Giovanile Luigi Cherubini, a youth orchestra founded by Muti himself in 2004.



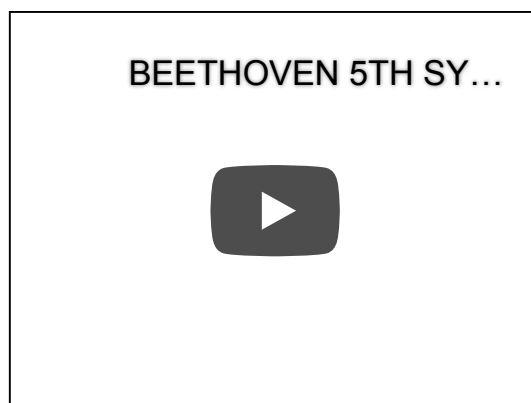
The first recording of Beethoven’s Fifth which I owned was on cassette tape (I betray my age). I don’t know where it is right now, nor what exact version it was. I do remember, though, that it was conducted by Otto Klemperer. Here he is, conducting the *Wiener Philharmoniker* in a 1968 recording.



There are, of course, many celebrated Beethoven conductors. However, in conversations with musicians over the years, a name which consistently crops up is Carlos Kleiber (1930-2004). The son of another famous conductor – Erich – he was dissuaded by his father from taking a musical career and first studied chemistry, before gravitating towards his natural calling. Kleiber Jr was a notoriously private person, appearing in public on relatively rare occasions, and also very picky in the repertoire he chose to conduct. Yet, Kleiber is very much the “musician’s conductor”. His recording of Beethoven’s Fifth and Seventh Symphonies with the *Wiener Philharmoniker* may not be the best-known of the crop, but it is justly one of the most highly regarded.



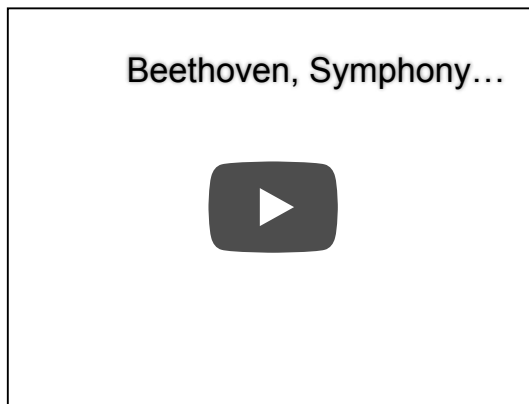
Given that Hoffmann had at his disposal a piano duet version of the Symphony whilst writing his review, I thought I’d look up a recording of such a transcription. I’m not sure whether the Scott Brothers Duo are using the Schneider version, and the candlelit video is rather gimmicky, but it’s great fun nonetheless. Besides, Hoffmann would probably have enjoyed the Gothic touches.



As I mentioned before, I’m often curious as to how great works were experienced by their first listeners. “Historically informed” performances try to achieve that effect by stripping the music of practices which build up over the years. In this increasingly crowded field, there is a well-known recording by John Eliot Gardiner with the *Orchestre Revolutionnaire et Romantique*. Recently, and possibly more surprisingly, Jordi Savall (better known for his recordings of medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque repertoire) has joined the fold. I am choosing as representative of this “school” a clip of the final movement of the symphony, performed by ensemble *Anima Eterna* conducted by Jos van Immerseel.



But what is authenticity? Is Immerseel's take more authentic than Kleiber's or Klemperer's? And, irrespective of the "authenticity" of the performance, can we ever be "authentic listeners" given we're not the audience sitting in a freezing theatre on the 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1808? Interesting questions to mull while listening to this rare recording of Toscanini with the BBC Symphony Orchestra from May 1939, its sense of urgency accentuated by our knowledge of the cataclysm which would assail the world only a few months later.



at [June 27, 2020](#)

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