

Introduction

NANCY NOVEMBER

Eroica endures. This fact, discussed at some length in the final chapter of this book, was brought home strongly to me as I edited this volume. Escaping briefly from *Eroica*, or so I thought, after a day of proofreading, I turned to YouTube. Using a Google search with keyword 'Agatha Christie', I chanced upon a 1984 TV drama, *Second Sight – A Love Story*, starring Elizabeth Montgomery. The similarities to Beethoven's biography can be seen in the main character's stubborn and somewhat difficult temperament, and the painful irony that the sense that she most prizes and needs (sight) should be taken away from her. With hindsight – and with the help of this book's chapters on reception – it was clear that the choice of the *Eroica* finale for this movie's opening credits (fading in at bar 449) is overdetermined.

That the *Eroica* Symphony crops up frequently in popular culture is no surprise. It is one of the most discussed, performed and reinterpreted of Beethoven's symphonies, indeed of symphonies altogether. It is also one of the most controversial of his works in terms of interpretation. There is general consensus among past and present commentators that the *Eroica* is a 'watershed' work (there is a film about that, too: *Eroica*, 2003), but little agreement on why or how. Rather, there are continued efforts to locate the 'heroic' element or pin down the 'hero' of (or in) the work; this has resulted in a great deal of discussion of contextual elements – especially Beethoven's views of Napoleon, of revolution and of his conception and representation of heroism – but few detailed analyses. The work has attracted, and continues to attract, major analysts and thinkers, including Heinrich Schenker and Carl Dahlhaus. Lewis Lockwood explains: 'Its special status remains essential in modern discussions of his artistic career, despite inevitable reappraisals.'¹ The multivalent nature of the work makes for reappraisal, especially of its connections to biography, politics and society in the 'Age of Revolutions': *Eroica* lends itself to new and varied approaches, both cultural and musical. It is consistently invoked not only as a compositional model but also as a testing ground for music theory.

This *Cambridge Companion* functions, in part, to fulfil a need for a guide to the wealth of literature the work has spawned. The guiding takes place not so much through literature surveys or summaries as by addressing the main topics associated with the symphony – among them

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political context, dedication, sources of the symphony's inspiration, 'heroism' and the idea of a 'watershed' work. These topics cut across the book's three sections, on genesis, analysis and reception history respectively. The *Companion* includes critical study of writings and analyses from Beethoven's day to ours, and a range of other relevant discourses relating to the work, especially compositions, recordings, images and film. The reader will find many fresh insights here, with consideration of little-studied analytical avenues (register in Chapter 7, for instance) and source material (arrangements and film in Chapters 11 and 12 for example). Thus the *Companion* alerts students and scholars to a range of evidence relating to *Eroica*, and suggests new lines of enquiry.

Above all, this book answers to a need to understand and critique the mythology surrounding the work, and to consider where it comes from and what it has to tell us. The first four chapters are important in laying out the groundwork here, starting from a broad consideration of heroism and moving towards a detailed discussion of the genesis of *Eroica*. Scott Burnham writes: 'the narrative urge associated with critical interpretations of this music may tell us more about ourselves than simply the way we hear the *Eroica* symphony'.² In evaluating previous viewpoints, this book attends to influential listeners and performers of the past, considering how their perspectives have influenced their interpretations, and ours. The final four chapters are key in this respect. This *Companion* is less Germanocentric than previous *Eroica* studies, while it still acknowledges important German scholarship and reception of the work. There is, for example, discussion of the special character of French reception of the work, including that of Hector Berlioz (Chapters 9 and 10); and consideration of how the symphony gets reinterpreted in light of shifting cultural and political aspirations and fears, including those in Europe and the United States (Chapters 10–12).

Two *Cambridge Companion* volumes of particular importance in this area are those on Beethoven and the symphony.³ There are relevant articles on Beethoven's large-scale orchestral works in the former, and on structural principles and narrative strategies in the latter. The present volume departs from these with its focus squarely on *Eroica*. There are several books devoted to *Eroica*, but none that offers such a breadth of topic coverage and approaches. Martin Geck and Peter Schleuning's '*Geschrieben auf Bonaparte.*' *Beethoven's 'Eroica': Revolution, Reaktion, Rezeption* (1989) and Thomas Sipe's 1998 *Cambridge Music Handbook* devoted to *Eroica* are typical of *Eroica* studies in their emphasis on reception, and lesser attention to analysis.⁴ Fabrizio Della Seta's *Beethoven. Sinfonia Eroica: Una guida* (2004) contains a wealth of analytical detail, albeit from one perspective.⁵ The present volume places analyses in the

centre, with four chapters (5–8) that offer a synthesis of previous analytical discourse as well as new approaches. In this respect, the *Companion* helps fill some important gaps, including discussion of Schenker's approach to the work (Chapter 7), and detailed analysis of the finale (Chapter 8), which has been neglected in favour of the first two movements in previous studies.

Two other recent studies of the *Eroica* are comprehensive, but tend to adopt single approaches. Christoph Hohlfeld's *Beethovens Weg: Eroica op. 55* (2003) sets out to show the symphony's 'watershed' position in Beethoven's oeuvre by exploring a supposed 'evolution' in his works in C minor and E \flat major.⁶ The compositional trajectory that he traces is based on a theory of proportions. Constantin Floros explores the close relationship between the *Eroica* and *Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus*, Op. 43, in his *Beethoven's Eroica: Thematic Studies* (2012).⁷ His book is based on his theory about Beethoven's planned dedication of the *Eroica* to Bonaparte. The *Companion* steps back for a broader, more critical look at the *Eroica*'s context, including but not dwelling on dedication. It encompasses discussion of factors that might demystify and de-emphasise the 'turning point' theory, including periodisation as it pertains to the work (Chapter 2), and a careful look at the context of symphonic writing around 1800 (Chapter 3).

Each chapter stands alone as well as illuminating a part of a contextual area. The reader will find loose chronological ordering within each of the book's three sections. Certain chapters naturally pick up closely related topics. So Chapters 4 and 9, respectively on genesis and early reception, both deal with the topic of dedication but from different angles. Chapters 2 and 11 both consider the symphony within the culture of nineteenth-century musical arrangements. And Chapters 11 and 12 both consider modern-day *Eroica* reception, one from the angle of performance, the other through film. Chapters 2 and 12 can usefully be read together with Chapter 7; Chapters 2 and 12 (and several others) consider the prevalence of teleological and 'triumph' narratives in *Eroica*'s reception; while Chapter 7 suggests an alternative reading, developing a narrative of 'failure' in the finale that runs contrary to the typical 'heroic' readings of *Eroica*.

Notes

1. L. Lockwood, *Beethoven's Symphonies: An Artistic Vision* (New York, NY: Norton, 2015), p. 52.
2. S. Burnham, 'On the Programmatic Reception of Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony', *Beethoven Forum*, 1 (1992), p. 24.

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3. *The Cambridge Companion to Beethoven*, ed. Glenn Stanley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and *The Cambridge Companion to the Symphony*, ed. Julian Horton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
4. Martin Geck and Peter Schleuning, 'Geschrieben auf Bonaparte.' *Beethoven's 'Eroica': Revolution, Reaktion, Rezeption* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1989) and T. Sipe, *Beethoven, Eroica Symphony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
5. F. Della Seta, *Beethoven. Sinfonia Eroica: Una guida* (Rome: Carocci, 2004).
6. C. Hohlfeld, *Beethovens Weg: Eroica op. 55* (Wilhelmshaven: Noetzel, 2003).
7. C. Floros, *Beethovens Eroica und Prometheus-Musik* (Wilhelmshaven: Noetzel, 1978); and C. Floros, *Beethoven's Eroica: Thematic Studies*, trans. Ernest Bernhardt-Kabisch (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2012).