A SHAKESPEARE OF THE MASSES: BEETHOVEN AND THE RUSSIAN INTELLIGENTSIA, 1830-1914*

The French Revolution erupts — Beethoven appears! — Anton Rubinshtein

Music is a difficult medium to measure. No other art form proves as elusive in content, so viscerally immediate in impact. Its effects cannot be controlled, nor described with any degree of accuracy. Its appeal, however, is universal. Music has enlightened elites and energized masses. It has been the preserve of the aristocratic salon and the shared experience of the underground. It has been dismissed as an effete form of snobbery and embraced by those who would move millions. Yet music works in peculiar ways. Some theorists argue that its effects are primarily physiological in character. Others consider it a separate language that does not require normal cognition for comprehension. Still others view it as a spiritual medium that operates on a different plane of perception altogether. How music interfaces with the soul of man is one of the great mysteries of life — and of history.

Music moves subliminally through the web of human consciousness to conjure up fantastic imagery and forbidden dreams. There are those who have feared it for these reasons. Conservative regimes have done everything in their power to curb its influence, from prohibiting the performance of music considered subversive to restricting the length of applause at concert programs. But because its tones penetrate instantly into the deepest recesses of the psyche where they are deciphered and assimilated simultaneously, the effects of music cannot be regulated. At once the most abstract of all art forms and the most immediately accessible, music exhibits a force that defies hu-

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1. A. Rubinshtein, Muzyka i ee predstaviteli: razgovor o muzyke (Moscow: Tip. Iyurgensona, 1892), p. 35. Rubinshtein’s emphasis.

2. As employed in the following discussion, this term refers to classical music in the European vocal, chamber, symphonic, and operatic tradition. The term can of course be construed more broadly in these opening paragraphs.
man understanding. Its influence extends far beyond the concert hall, though no one can say precisely why or how.

Perhaps no other voice has proved so powerful nor been feared so much as that of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827). As David Denis writes in his study of Beethoven in German politics: "It was not individual tones or phrases that inspired early-nineteenth century listeners to link some of Beethoven's music with social and political upheaval, but the sheer multiplicity of themes that passed, as well as the churning rhythms in which they did so — their "élan terrible," as contemporaries put it." Because of this "psychology of perception," newspapers in 1848 cautioned German authorities not to allow the performance of Beethoven's music because it would permit the disaffected to hear "a music which would best resonate with fire and social collapse... One can only pour so much water into a glass before it overflows."

In Paris, the performance on March 9, 1828 of Beethoven's Third (Eroica) Symphony at the inaugural concert of the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire caused audience members to leave the concert hall "in a kind of delirium," shouting "divine!," "delicious!," "superb!" The Journal des débats reported that "a revolution has just occurred in the musical world." The performance of the Fifth Symphony a few days later had the same effect, the driving force of the first movement alone generating "a kind of stupor visible on every physiognomy." Following a performance of the Ninth Symphony in 1838, the composer Hector Berlioz observed: "During the playing of the scherzo and the adagio... the assembly seemed to be strongly moved; at every instant, exclamations of admiration rose up from various part of the hall, and at the end of the long adagio... the enthusiasm burst out in explosion." These accounts, if not suggestive of seditious sentiment, testify at a minimum to the powerful emotional impact of Beethoven's music on those experiencing it for the first time.

In England, the performance of Beethoven's music had an unsettling effect as well. It was not concern over social unrest that disconcerted British critics but the degree to which the sensibilities of the listener were bombarded with "barbaric" sounds. In 1825, the Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review used such phrases as "crude, wild and extraneous harmonies," "fearful uproar," and "outrageous clamor" to describe the effect of the mass of "acoustical missile instruments" that Beethoven employed in the choral conclusion to his Ninth Symphony, and as late as 1881 John Ruskin quipped that
