

Beethoven Going Blank

DANIEL K. L. CHUA

One ought to follow the example of the two rabbits; when the [hunter's] shot comes, fall down giddily, half-dead with fright, collect one's wits and then, if one still has breath, show a clean pair of heels.

—Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (1974)

Going blank is a strategy.¹ Blacking out, turning white, seizing up—these are reactions with complex, if sometimes unconscious, motivations. Such behavior is sometimes hard-wired in nature: playing dead (thanatosis), for example, is an instinct designed to outwit danger; in contrast, a sudden paralysis in the face of death can signal fear or surrender before the final kill. At other times, going blank is a psychological tactic: it could be the blockage of trauma where patients cannot retrieve the defining moment that shapes their condition; or the drama of blanking out at the moment of truth in order to give nothing away. It could be the fear of performance—stage fright; or an impenetrable stare that causes others to take flight. Whatever the strategy, going blank is never a trivial affair. The information blackout, the memory loss, the unreadability of the sign, the inscrutability of the face—these blanks are always highly significant moments that reveal as much as they hide. Tellingly, when it comes to freedom, Beethoven's music draws a blank. It is an aesthetic strategy, one that claims for music the ineffable status of autonomy. But it does so with all the motivations associated with going blank—to outwit, to surrender, to intimidate, to forget, and

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to evade. Its blankness is full of meaning. Indeed, with so many motives lurking beneath its flat surface, music's vacant sign of freedom inevitably assumes multiple and contradictory meanings, making its point as pointlessly as possible in order to elicit and elude our gaze. Beethoven's blank look therefore should not be taken at face value if its meaning is to be grasped. Its complexity demands a deeper analysis, one that preserves the blank by undoing its claims. Taking the blank seriously means that it must be understood as anything but blank.²

Drawing a Blank

In the reception history of Beethoven's music, freedom is a word that is virtually synonymous with the composer's name. We need only recall the numerous occasions on which the Ninth Symphony has been used to mark moments when human freedom has been threatened, anticipated, or celebrated—from Wagner's politically charged performances in Dresden before the 1848 revolutions to the atrocities of 9/11, when the finale was performed in a hastily reprogrammed "Last Night of the Proms" in London under Leonard Slatkin.³ In such events, Beethoven represents the hero who grapples with fate, overcomes adversity, and inspires the resilience of the human spirit. Beethoven is music's freedom fighter. Exactly what this freedom means, however, is ambiguous, with opposing political and philosophical ideologies adopting the composer's music as their mouthpiece. In the mid-nineteenth century, for example, Parisian audiences heard the finale of the Fifth Symphony as their revolution, whereas a hundred years later the National Socialists in Germany heard it as the victory of their Führer.⁴ Similarly, different scholars have aligned Beethoven's music to numerous political agendas as diverse as Marxist emancipation and democratic freedom.⁵ How can this be? On the face of

² This article is an elaboration of an earlier piece published in *Beethoven Forum*. Although sections of the original text will surface, this is less a variation on a theme than a foundational footnote that anchors the earlier article. See Daniel Chua, "The Promise of Nothing: The Dialectic of Freedom in Adorno's Beethoven," *Beethoven Forum* 12, no. 1 (2005): 13–35.

³ Wagner's performances of the Ninth Symphony so inspired the audience with political fervor that when revolutionary fires broke out in Dresden, a guard shouted to Wagner from the barricades: "Schöner Götterfunken." See Richard Wagner, *Braunes Buch*, 8 May 1849, cited in Klaus Kropfing, *Wagner und Beethoven: Untersuchungen zur Beethoven-Rezeption Richard Wagners* (Regensburg: Bosse, 1975), 44. On Leonard Slatkin's performance of the Ninth Symphony at the Proms, see Peter Tregear, "The Ninth after 9/11," in *Beethoven Forum* 10, no. 2 (2003): 221–32.

⁴ See Beate Angelika Kraus, "Beethoven and the Revolution: The View of the French Musical Press," in *Music and the French Revolution*, ed. M. Boyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 277–99; and David B. Dennis, *Beethoven in German Politics, 1870–1989* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 151.

⁵ For a Marxist position see, for example, Christopher Ballantine, "Beethoven, Hegel and Marx," *The Music Review* 33, no. 1 (February 1972): 34–46, and the exchange between Robert C. Solomon and Maynard Solomon, "Beethoven and the Sonata Form" and

it, the answer seems relatively simple. As David Dennis points out, it was “Beethoven the *man*, not his music, [that] is the focus” of the propaganda in German politics.⁶ The volatile nature of Beethoven’s political identity—as “a supporter of enlightened despotism . . . a revolutionary idealist . . . an admirer of Napoleon . . . [and] an enemy of Napoleon”—enabled political commentators of all persuasions to indulge in a form of “selective scavenging and reinterpretation,” writes Dennis, in order to produce the Beethoven they wanted to hear.⁷ The idea of freedom, it seems, is a matter of discourse and biography. It has nothing to do with the music. Indeed, music’s only contribution, according to Dennis, is its inability to specify freedom. It is conceptually mute. In this reading, Beethoven, the genius of absolute music, cannot represent anything by definition since his music is apparently non-representational by design.⁸ So the abstract nature of the music’s empty signs enables the politicians to fill the void with their ideological rhetoric.⁹ Freedom is therefore

“Beethoven and the Enlightenment,” in *Telos* 19 (Spring 1974): 141–45 and 146–54. William Kinderman, on the other hand, argues for “the democratic ideal of personal freedom” in Beethoven’s music. William Kinderman, *Beethoven*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11.

⁶ Dennis, *Beethoven in German Politics*, 19. Dennis borrows the term “selective scavenging and reinterpretation” from Steven Aschheim’s reception history of Nietzsche; Steven Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany: 1890–1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 155.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 31, 22.

⁸ The term absolute music is used loosely here as a convenient term for various forms of the music itself. I have written at length on the meaning of absolute music and need not repeat its complex history here, suffice to say that the blank sign does not annul the music’s semiotic properties to gesture to various topics (horn calls, dance types, national styles, etc.) but subsumes such meanings under larger philosophical and formal claims; under the banner of absolute music, the essence of music is more than the sum of its topics. Blankness, in this sense, requires an emptying of its content by mixing topics, like the colors of the rainbow, to produce a whiteness that is as full as it is empty. Hence the so-called classical style was known as the mixed style that combined topics in contradictory ways that demanded a higher order of meaning if the music were to be ultimately intelligible. Going blank then does not annul the eighteenth-century topics but subsumes them in a formal process that both preserves and transcends their meaning. This blankness is a formal process used to efface representational meaning and also a conceit to convey more than any sign can express (the ineffable) by simply meaning nothing more than itself (the music itself). Crudely put, this is the difference between meaning as a baroque affect and meaning as a classical form. Such non-representational meaning is as much a property of the music as musical topics and should not be reduced to a fictional construction. In fact, blankness can constitute a topic in its own right, as this article will claim, albeit a special one that points to larger philosophical ideas. It is therefore important in any critique of the idea of absolute music not to dismiss the blankness as a mere ideology, but to tease out its historical specificity, its continuing influence, as well as the attempts to represent the non-representational in music. For a history of the idea of absolute music see Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, trans. R. Lustig (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), and Daniel K. L. Chua, *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

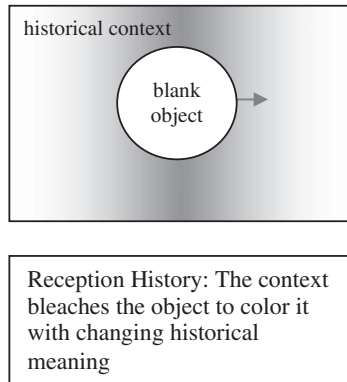
⁹ Dennis, *Beethoven in German Politics*, 19.

never internal to the music's meaning but is always imposed from the outside. Leonard Bernstein made this process explicit in his 1989 performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony at the Schauspielhaus (now Konzerthaus) to celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall; although freedom is not explicitly mentioned in the text of the choral finale, Bernstein replaced the word *Freude* (joy) with *Freiheit* (freedom) as if the music were a blank placeholder for interchangeable meanings.¹⁰ Beethoven's music, it appears, is merely an arbitrary vessel in the discourses of history or, to adopt Scott Burnham's phrase, a tune waving "in the winds of our Western world as a blank flag awaiting the colors of a cause."¹¹

Going blank, however, is a strategy that should not be taken at face value. To fly this flag is to believe in a common cause, but this cause is an assumption that should be interrogated rather than taken on faith. Its vacancy may seemingly explain the music's abstract essence if not its political promiscuity, but its blankness may hide as much as it reveals. What does this blank mean? Why is it blank? There are at least two answers: one is methodological, the other ideological.

First, as a method, blankness is an extreme symptom of reception history. The historical context bleaches the object in order to interpret its meaning with the ever-changing hues of time (fig. 1). Music is forced to turn white and play dead as though it had no meaning of its own, in order to survive the colorful context of its reception. It can mean anything, because it is essentially nothing.

FIGURE 1. Drawing a blank: reception history

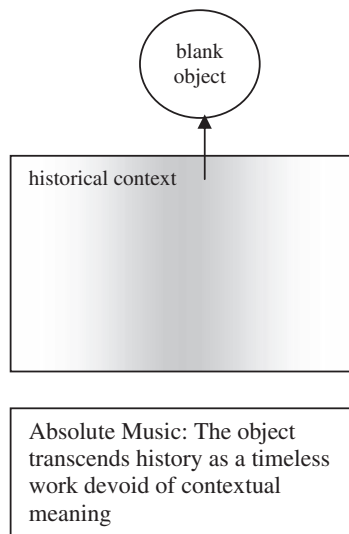


¹⁰ For a brief reception history of the Ninth Symphony see Nicholas Cook, *Beethoven Symphony No. 9* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹¹ Scott Burnham, "Review Article: Our Sublime Ninth," *Beethoven Forum* 5 (1996): 158. Burnham is referring to Cook's handbook on the Ninth Symphony, which advocates the meaning of the work as the discursive construction of its reception.

Second, music's blankness is an ideology. When a reception historian, such as Dennis, appeals to the abstract nature of music, music's blankness is no longer a victim of circumstance but a property of the object itself. White becomes a permanent stain. Blankness, in this case, is an ideology of absolute music. This blankness is completely different from its methodological counterpart; whereas the method is relative, the ideology is absolute. An abstract music is not a condition of history, but an attempt to transcend it as a timeless work emptied of all historical particulars (fig. 2). To reach this higher state, music does not so much annul its semiotic properties, but mixes them, like the colors of the rainbow, to produce a formal whiteness that is as full as it is empty.¹² In this state, music is no longer seen—it does not represent, as it was required to do in eighteenth-century aesthetics; rather, music's essence is the unseen truth that permits one to see. The unrepresentable stands over the visible properties of music, organizing their meaning into a higher form. Music's blankness is the sum of its own formal procedures. By meaning nothing other than itself music encloses its meaning in a self-sufficient abstract world independent of the contingencies of time. Absolute music's non-representational claim therefore is a bid for immortality, and Beethoven is the name that represents this ahistorical assertion.

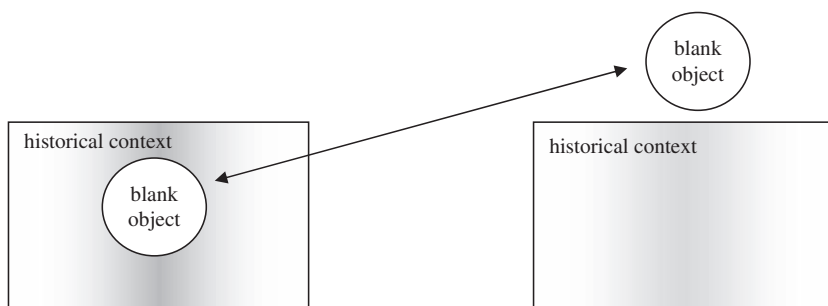
FIGURE 2. Drawing a blank: absolute music



¹² See fn. 8.

A reception history of Beethoven's abstract music therefore conflates both blanks, creating a doubly vacant sign—a kind of blank-on-blank—that neutralizes the political agenda twice. It *con-fuses* the method and the object, simultaneously erasing the essential meaning of Beethoven's works and forgetting that the history of music's abstraction is itself a political ploy (fig. 3). The vacant sign is intended to blind us with its dazzling whiteness; and, if we believe it, we can assert with Michael Steinberg that "Beethoven's heroism is itself abstract. . . . If it feeds no political ideology, it likewise provides no concrete charter of political emancipation."¹³ Beethoven, in other words, is a hero without a cause.¹⁴

FIGURE 3. A conflation of different blanks



Drawing a blank is not the answer to the question of freedom but an evasion that falls prey to the very ideology it espouses. Absolute music claims to be blank in order to tell us that it has no history, no context, no cause, and no politics. But of course there is a history and, more significantly, a politics. Aptly, given its vacant insignia, the meaning of this music is best represented as a white flag—a sign of political surrender. Blankness, in this sense, is not an evasion of politics but is integral to its very meaning in its act of capitulation. Throughout its history, absolute music has functioned as a blank flag hoisted above the parapets of some political crisis in the hope that the erasure of meaning would compensate for the reality of failure. The abstract reigns as a refuge when the politically concrete breaks down. The early romantics were the first to raise music's non-representational sign, displaying its empty surface as

¹³ Michael Steinberg, *Listening to Reason: Culture, Subjectivity, and Nineteenth-Century Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 62.

¹⁴ In this article, I will not be discussing Beethoven's *Fidelio*, an opera where the politics of freedom is writ large. Obviously, an operatic medium would portray freedom differently from a symphonic one. On my view on *Fidelio* and freedom, see Daniel Chua, "Untimely Reflections on Operatic Echoes: How Sound Travels in Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* and Beethoven's *Fidelio* with a Short Instrumental Interlude," *The Opera Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (2005): 573–96.

the tattered promise of a freedom that the French Revolution failed to deliver. In the wake of The Reign of Terror that followed the euphoria of 1789, their philosophy of pure music internalized the revolution as an aesthetic state bristling with the potential for freedom but with no concrete policies for the present in case liberty were to realize itself prematurely again as violence.¹⁵ Wagner followed suit some fifty years later with the collapse of the 1848 revolutions. He retreated from his politically charged readings of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which were designed to incite revolutionary fervor, and aligned his symphonic banner with the metaphysical abstractions of the Schopenhauerian Will. Instead of enflaming political insurrection, music dematerialized into a transcendental realm as a narcotic for a tragic philosophy. In the same year as his Schopenhauerian conversion, 1854, Wagner's nemesis, Eduard Hanslick, published what would become the manifesto of music's formal blankness—*The Beautiful in Music (Vom Musikalisch-Schönen)*. Hanslick purified music from all possible political contamination by distilling its essence to form.¹⁶ Music's meaning became self-referential, separated from reality by its structural enclosures as "the self-subsistent form of the beautiful."¹⁷ This formalist ideology came to dominate the history of twentieth-century music. Its banner was used to block out the trauma of both world wars as if such pristine structures were conscious acts of historical amnesia.¹⁸ After World War I, serialism and neoclassicism asserted "the music itself" as its tautological essence. And after World War II, total serialism and constructivism intensified such claims in the hope of erasing the past. As Pierre Boulez puts it, "In my opinion we must get rid of [history] once and for all."¹⁹

¹⁵ See Chua, *Absolute Music*, 3–11, 162–66.

¹⁶ See Eduard Hanslick, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen: Ein Beitrag zur Revision der Ästhetik der Tonkunst*, 2 vols., ed. Dietmar Strauß (Mainz: Schott, 1990), trans. G. Cohen as *The Beautiful in Music*, ed. Morris Weitz (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1957); reference to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, 68–9n. See Carl Dahlhaus, "The Twofold Truth in Wagner's Aesthetics: Nietzsche's Fragment 'On Music and Words,'" in *Between Romanticism and Modernism*, trans. M. Whittall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980): 19–39; Jean-Jacques Nattiez, "Wagnerian Androgyny and its Romantic Counterpart," *Wagner Androgyny*, trans. S. Spencer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 102–62; Thomas Grey, *Wagner's Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1–129; Chua, *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning*, 228–34; Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), 2:450.

¹⁷ Hanslick, *The Beautiful in Music*, 9.

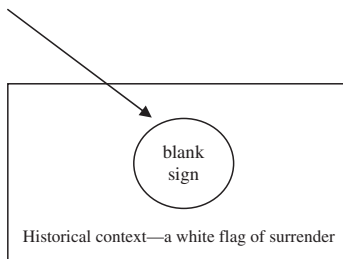
¹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno "The Aging of New Music," in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 181–200.

¹⁹ Boulez is the book-burning zealot of new music for whom history is an unnecessary burden and memory loss an asset of strong musical civilizations. This is one of many quotations; Andy Carvin, *The Man Who Would be King: An Interview with Pierre Boulez*, 1993, at <http://www.edwebproject.org/boulez.html> (accessed April 2013). For a current take by an artist on the withdrawal of the past after catastrophic events, see Jalal Toufic, *The*

From this brief history of music's abstraction, it is evident that the claim of blankness is both a form of retreat and an act of freedom. The eradication of reality on the surface enables music to retreat into an independent realm where it can reformulate the possibility of a freedom that has yet to be realized. Both the withdrawal and the promise are blank; one erases the present as a political failure, whereas the other prefigures the future by abstracting the ideals as form emptied of content. Music's aesthetic autonomy is therefore a form of displaced political autonomy—a blank sign of freedom on a white flag of surrender (fig. 4).

FIGURE 4. The politics of the aesthetic—a blank sign on a white flag

Art withdraws from political failure in an attempt to preserve and reconfigure political ideals of freedom as timeless truths for the future



Philosophers have long recognized these complex negations in the politics of the aesthetic, from those like Friedrich Schiller who initiated such ideas to the belated reflection of Theodor W. Adorno. Jacques Rancière is the most recent thinker to explain the autonomy of art as a deliberate disengagement that disrupts the political consensus. What he calls the “aesthetic regime” at the dawn of the nineteenth century promotes a disjunction or “dissensus” characterized by a “radical indifference”—a blankness—in which the artwork, by its very separation, enables a “reframing of the real.” For Rancière the subtraction of art from politics is not so much an abdication from social responsibility as a new experience of the world that creates “a commitment to its transformation.”²⁰ Simply put, the “aesthetic regime” has three parts:

1. A withdrawal into illusion: art disengages from society into an autonomous realm.

Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster (Forthcoming Books, 2009), at <http://www.jalaltoufic.com/publications.htm> (accessed 4 June 2014).

²⁰ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London and New York: Continuum Press, 2010), 138–40, 142.

2. A reframing of the truth: art's separation enables a re-imagination of reality.
3. A transformation of the future: art's reframing of reality commits it to new possibilities.

In the history of music, Beethoven represents this "aesthetic regime" at the cusp of the nineteenth century. Given the composer's position in this regime, the abstraction epitomized by his symphonic works should be understood not only as an aesthetic revolution but also a political one. The music itself, by being itself, speaks of freedom. Drawing a blank, then, is the very image of liberty. In fact, this was how Adorno heard the music. For him the abstract, internal laws of Beethoven's compositions expound a liberty as ambitious as the philosophy of Kant and Hegel.²¹

If music's aesthetic autonomy mimes the autonomy of the subject, then absolute music underscores an historical hour where a specific idea of freedom born under the Enlightenment comes to dominate modern society as its universal definition.²² By the close of the eighteenth century Kant had reoriented the meaning of liberty, purifying it from the concrete world into a transcendental realm of ideas. Freedom was no longer a means but an end in itself.²³ It was exalted as an absolute value as high and as immortal as the soul itself, transforming an individual from a mere object in the empirical world to a subject driven by a timeless principle independent of the world.²⁴ This law of freedom became the abstract imperative that each person was compelled to fulfill in order to be fully human. To be human was to internalize this law willingly as a rational principle from which to act morally. Thus freedom became synonymous with autonomy, linking the *autos* (self) to the *nomos* (law). As Kant explains, autonomy is "the will's property of being a law to itself," for a self-given law both frees the subject from being determined by the external world and undetermined by its own arbitrary decisions.²⁵ Freedom is

²¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 43. These three figures are related in a triangulation of abstraction: just as Hegel would accuse Kant's idea of freedom as empty formalism, so Adorno would use late Beethoven to denounce Hegel's account of liberty as equally abstract.

²² Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1990), 218.

²³ As Hegel notes, freedom is "the end of its own operation." G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction: Reason in History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 55.

²⁴ This new concept of freedom has its roots in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's writings and was systematically theorized by Immanuel Kant. See Isaiah Berlin, "The Idea of Freedom," in *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 88–154.

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Ak 4: 446–47. Translation modified. The *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* references the volume and page numbers of the *Gesammelte Schriften* (Akademie Ausgabe, 1900–).

therefore an internal necessity, a universal duty of rational self-determination that defines the progress of humanity.

Kant's definition of freedom set the tone in German idealism in the twenty-five years between his *Critique of Pure Reason* and the completion of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.²⁶ "Absolute music" came into being in all but name in this period under the banner of this newfound liberty. When Ludwig Tieck described instrumental music as prescribing "its own laws to itself,"²⁷ or when A. B. Marx claimed that musical form "is nothing other than self-determination,"²⁸ they were asserting a Kantian autonomy for music. What Kant calls the self-activity of freedom (*Selbsttätigkeit*) is realised as the self-activity of a musical process. Beethoven's contribution was to thematize this process so that his music was not merely the medium of autonomy but its narrative. He programmed the absolute into his works. Hence A. B. Marx could claim that Beethoven brought to fulfilment the first "real, autonomous, free-standing" artwork.²⁹

For Marx, the work that defines this freedom is the *Eroica* Symphony of 1803.³⁰ Its form, its heroic program, and the story that surrounds its reception align perfectly to create a modern icon of liberty. Indeed, what other symphony could better portray the blankness of modern freedom than one on which Beethoven inscribed the name Bonaparte only to scratch it out in disgust when his hero declared himself emperor.³¹ The

References to the Cambridge edition will use the Akademie edition numbering and will be prefaced with the abbreviation Ak.

²⁶ Michael Rosen notes in his 2010 Isaiah Berlin Lectures at Oxford University that although Fichte, Friedrich Schelling, Hegel, Novalis, Friedrich Schliermacher, and Karl and August Schlegel differ on many points, they fundamentally agreed on Kant's moral conception of freedom as self-determination.

²⁷ "[S]ie schreibt sich nur selbst ihre Gesetze vor. . . ." Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder and Ludwig Tieck, "Symphonien," in *Phantasien über die Kunst für Freunde der Kunst* (Hamburg, 1799), in *Werke und Briefe von Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder* (Berlin: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1938), 254.

²⁸ Adolph Bernhard Marx, "Form in Music" in *Musical Form in the Age of Beethoven: Selected Writings on Theory and Method*, ed. and trans. Scott Burnham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 60.

²⁹ Adolph Bernhard Marx, *Ludwig van Beethoven: Leben und Schaffen*, ed. Gustav Behncke (Berlin: Verlag von Otto Janke, 1875), 1:265; translation from idem, *Musical Form in the Age of Beethoven*, 177.

³⁰ Marx, *Ludwig van Beethoven*, 1:261; idem, *Musical Form in the Age of Beethoven*, 174–75. Similar readings of the *Eroica* by Marx's contemporaries can be found in the writings of Wolfgang Grienpenkerl, Wilhelm von Lenz, and Richard Wagner. See, for example, Wolfgang Robert Grienpenkerl, *Das Musikfest oder die Beethovener* (Braunschweig: Eduard Leibrück, 1841), 109–10; Wilhelm von Lenz, *Beethoven: Eine Kunststudie* (Hamburg, 1855–60), 3:291; and Richard Wagner, "Ein Glücklicher Abend" (1840), in *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1912–14), 1:147. Of course, the *Eroica* itself, by assuming a heroic pose, gestures to its own canonization; this is evident in its programmatic reception; see Scott Burnham, *Beethoven Hero* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 3–28.

³¹ On the history of the symphony's title, see Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven* (New York: Schirmer, 1977), 132–42, and Thomas Sipe, *Beethoven: Eroica Symphony* (Cambridge:

title page of the autograph score is both a form of retreat and an act of freedom. The very erasure of the name functions as the symbol of a blank sign in which Napoleon is both liberator and tyrant, revolutionary and terrorist. He is the promise of freedom and its failure. By eradicating the name, Beethoven does not eliminate Napoleon but underlines the blank universality of the freedom that his name stands for. The concrete retreats into the transcendental. As Wagner rightly proclaims, the *Eroica* is not about a particular hero, but like the persona of Napoleon, “it is the act of heroism itself.”³² Or in Hegel’s terms, the hero in the *Eroica* is a “world historical individual” who transcends his particularity to embody the destiny of the universal.³³ It is precisely this escalation from the particular to the universal that elevates the symphony as the very essence of music’s autonomy and the boundary of the aesthetic regime. “On your knees old world!” commands Wilhelm von Lenz, “Before you stands the idea of the great Beethoven symphony. . . . Here is the end of one empire and the beginning of another. Here is the boundary of a century.”³⁴ And here, as Marx would assert, is the start of a new *Kunstepoche*—an unsurpassable era of freedom.³⁵

Beethoven’s music, however, does not simply draw a blank because freedom happens to be blank.³⁶ The similarity, of course, is striking, but “going blank” is not an analogy, as if music were a passive reflection of a political context; it is a strategy. The empty equation between music and freedom is part of a solution to a problem that had to be solved through the aesthetic. The moment Kant declared freedom a transcendental idea, the representation of freedom became a major philosophical project. “The inscrutability of the idea of freedom,” writes Kant, “entirely precludes any positive sensible presentation [Darstellung].”³⁷

Cambridge University Press, 1998), 30–53. Curiously, Beethoven eventually restored Napoleon’s name.

³² Wagner, “Ein Glücklicher Abend,” *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen*, 1:147.

³³ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, 83–85. Such great men of history include Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and, significantly, Napoleon. For Hegel, their universal actions demand a certain indifference to immediate needs—a blanking out of their particularity in order to activate their freedom to act greatly.

³⁴ Lenz, *Beethoven: Eine Kunststudie*, 3:291. Also see Chua, *Absolute Music*, 235.

³⁵ Marx, *Ludwig van Beethoven*, 1:261.

³⁶ Various philosophical notions of freedom in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries posit some form of blankness: Locke’s empiricism begins with the mind as a blank slate, endowing the individual with the freedom to author their own lives; Rousseau’s general will is a totality that cannot be represented; the Kantian subject is founded on a freedom that is inaccessible to knowledge; Schiller’s play-drive is an aestheticized freedom where opposing forces cancel each other out to form a blank state that is simultaneously empty and full; Friedrich Schlegel’s shorthand for the absolute from which the subject freely determines itself is “0”.

³⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Ak, 5:275. Translation slightly modified.

FIGURE 5a. Making the noumenon sensible—the aesthetic intuition of a rational concept

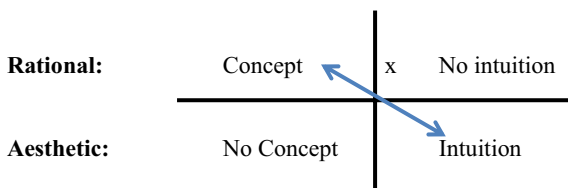
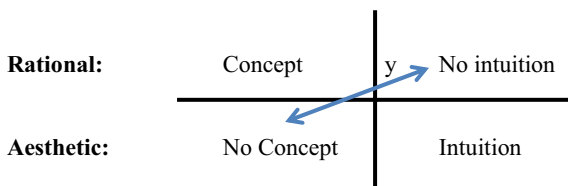


FIGURE 5b. Making the noumenon sensible—the representation of the unrepresentable



Since this idea transcends the possibility of experience, it follows that freedom is inaccessible to knowledge.³⁸ It can be thought but not known. Given this dilemma, the German idealists looked to the aesthetic for an intimation of the noumenal sphere, hoping to catch a glimpse of freedom in sensible form. Kant had inadvertently laid the path for such speculation by stating that such noumenal ideas can reside in either of two realms: in the rational realm where an idea is “a concept (of the supersensible) for which no suitable intuition [sense perception] can ever be given”; and in the aesthetic realm where an idea is “an intuition (of the imagination) for which a concept can never be found adequate.”³⁹ To translate the idea of freedom from the rational to the aesthetic realm could result in the sensible intuition of a rational concept (fig. 5a), but it could equally mean that a concept for which there is no intuition is given an intuition devoid of concepts (fig. 5b). It becomes purely empty—which, in a sense, is precisely what happens with the subsequent development of German philosophy after Kant. Both Johann Fichte and F. W. J. Schelling conceived of the “absolute I” as an agency for which neither sensible intuitions nor concepts can correspond: the

³⁸ On the contentless metaphysics of Kant, see John Milbank, “A Critique of the Theology of the Right,” in idem, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford; Blackwell, 1997), 7–35.

³⁹ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Ak 5:342

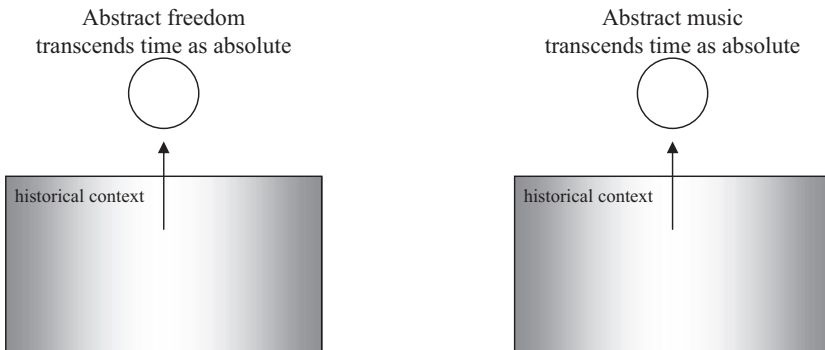
founding principle of philosophy required the paradox of rational insight or intellectual intuition that, as Schelling writes, “can become objective only through a second intuition. This second intuition is the aesthetic.”⁴⁰

The common claim among German idealists that “art is reason in sensuous appearance,”⁴¹ simply meant that the aesthetic made sensible the image of blankness. The solution was to represent diagonal x by diagonal y (figs. 5a and 5b)—a representation of the unrepresentable. Thus the aesthetic did not make freedom more empirically precise; it made it palpably less concrete. In this state, liberty is not a particular ideology that fills in the musical blank as a partisan slogan; instead, freedom is presented as a blank force. It is, as Kant claims, sublime—immeasurable, inaccessible, ineffable, infinite, negative, and overwhelmingly blank.⁴² Abstraction—the means by which music purifies itself of meaning to transcend history—is the condition of a freedom that preens itself from the empirical world in order to transcend time as a metaphysical notion. Music’s blankness, then, represents a formal freedom, a transcendental freedom, an absolute freedom. So it is not that music is too abstract to specify freedom, rather freedom’s abstraction demands an abstract music (fig. 6).

From this perspective, the political discourses that seem to pull Beethoven’s music in opposing directions are merely the overtones of a fundamental freedom. Or in Ernesto Laclau’s terms, the universal is

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FIGURE 6. Family resemblance—absolute freedom and absolute music



⁴⁰ F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism in German Idealism (1800)*, trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1978), 229n.1.

⁴¹ Marx, “Form in Music,” 60.

⁴² On the sublime, see Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Ak 5:268–69.

always symbolized by an empty signifier in which the political particulars struggle for hegemony; politics is merely a particular cause standing in for an absent absolute that can never be filled.⁴³ Exactly how this freedom realizes itself is immaterial since the impetus of the subject is empty at its core. Thus the empty sign of music is not the excuse for politicians to impose their ideas of freedom on Beethoven; it is the prerequisite. Absolute freedom and absolute music are in a dangerous alliance.

The Fantasy of Freedom

Why should music and freedom collude at the turn of the nineteenth-century? What is at stake in this peculiar alliance is the condition of modernity itself. As Christoph Schwöbel writes, freedom is the “modern universal;” it is “the fundamental principle for what it means to be human in the modern era.”⁴⁴ Beethoven says as much in a letter of 1819 to his patron and pupil Archduke Rudolf: “*freedom* [and] *progress*,” he writes, “are the aims in the world of art as in the whole great universe.” Modern music, he continues to argue, is committed to the configuration of new possibilities rather than the mastery of old techniques.⁴⁵ It was less perfect but more progressive in its yearning for perfection. So in the same way as Kant envisaged “the final destiny of the human race . . . [as] moral perfection . . . accomplished through freedom,” composition for Beethoven is about future transformation—an act of liberty in the progress of history.⁴⁶ There is a conscious alignment in Beethoven’s thought between his compositional intent and the conditions of modernity. What unites art and the “whole great universe” is a liberty that is both the ground for moral action and the goal for which humanity strives. “Freedom [and] progress,” then, are Beethoven’s modern universals, a bid for autonomy that forms the defining act of humanity and the measure of its future. Or as Hegel puts it more succinctly, “Freedom is the highest destiny of Spirit.”⁴⁷

⁴³ Ernesto Laclau, “The Time is Out of Joint,” in *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), 66–83; Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 176–77.

⁴⁴ Christoph Schwöbel, “Imago Libertatis: Human and Divine Freedom,” in *God and Freedom*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1995), 57; Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 318.

⁴⁵ Beethoven, Letter to Archduke Rudolph written in Mödling, dated 29 July 1819; see Alexander Wheelock Thayer, *Thayer’s Life of Beethoven*, rev. and ed. Elliot Forbes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 741–42.

⁴⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Moral Philosophy: Collins’s Lecture Notes in Lectures on Ethics*, ed. Peter Heath and J. B. Schneewind, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997/2001), Ak 27:470.

⁴⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (New York: Hacker, 1975), 1:97.

In 1808 on a chilly December evening at the Theater-an-der-Wien, Beethoven unleashed this very “Spirit” on his audience. Or, at least, he tried to do so. This “Spirit” turned out to be something of a fiasco, with its freedom hampered by a lack of rehearsal and its progress stunted by a communication breakdown between Beethoven and the orchestra, bringing the concert to a temporary halt. The *Fantasy in C minor for Piano, Chorus and Orchestra*, Op. 80, was designed to conclude a benefit concert for the composer. It was specifically composed for the occasion as the crowning commentary of a four-hour, all-Beethoven program that included the Fifth Symphony, the *Pastoral Symphony*, the Fourth Piano Concerto and excerpts of the C major Mass. Conceived in haste, the Choral *Fantasy* is not so much a work as a “meta-work.” It functioned as a gloss that not only combines all the forces and genres displayed to the long-suffering audience on that cold December evening,⁴⁸ but also explicitly comments on the moral purpose of Beethoven’s art. The idea, it seems, was to end the concert with a work that transcended the program as a reflective glance. But this higher consciousness also functioned as a placard; the *Choral Fantasy* was a rousing mission statement for Beethoven’s supporters to affirm with their final applause. They needed to grasp that the benefit of the concert was not just for Beethoven’s pocket but for the greater good of art. So, as the culmination of the composer’s own *Akademie*, the *Choral Fantasy* functions as an allegory of what Beethoven believed his music to exemplify—the spirit of freedom and progress.

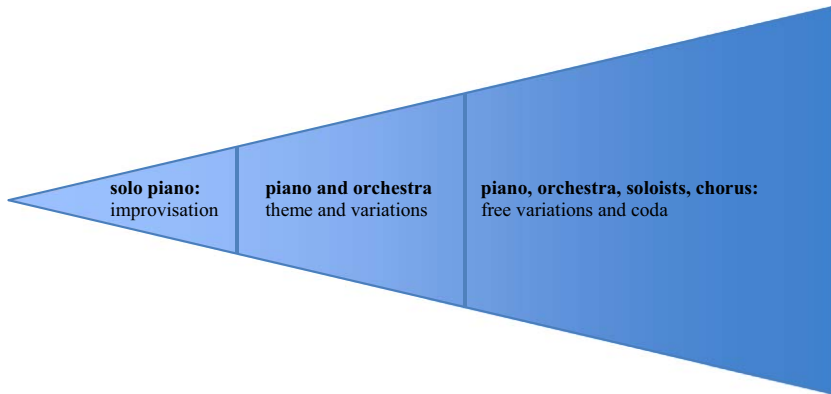
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With regard to progress, Beethoven’s message was deliberately blunt. The audience could literally visualize progress on stage since the work involved the aggregation of every musician employed that evening by Beethoven into a totality. Amassed together, the musicians provided the teleological focus that could embrace the disparate program as a purposeful event. This is progress as sheer volume. And this allegory for the eyes was matched by an increase in volume for the ears. The formal trajectory of the *Choral Fantasy* is shaped as an accumulation of sound—first the piano, followed by the orchestra, then solo singers, and finally the chorus. The form of the work is therefore like a “wedge,” fanning out from a single point to the voluminous textures that punctuate the end (fig. 7).

Moreover, this progressive shape is animated by a cumulative process. The main substance of the work consists of a set of variations that grows by accretion, adding layer after layer of thematic matter. Through this additive process, the variations enact the intent of the theme itself,

⁴⁸ See Stephen Moore Whiting “‘Hört ihr wohl’: zu Funktion und Programm von Beethovens ‘Chorfantasie’,” *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 45 (1988): 139.

FIGURE 7. The wedge of progress



for the tune, recycled from an earlier song of 1794–1795 titled “Gegenliebe” (woO 118), is of a type designed to enlist people to sing along, signing them up for the cause (ex. 1).⁴⁹ As Nicholas Mathew states, this folk-like theme evokes a “collectivist aesthetic” of civic unity. It elicits public participation with a tune so simple that it already sounds familiar on first hearing as if the tune “already constitutes their voice.”⁵⁰ Progress, then, comes in the form of an earworm that wriggles its way into public consciousness, stringing everyone along from variation to variation. Although this is literally portrayed by the entry of the chorus, ideally it is the audience in the Theater-an-der-Wien who are ultimately enlisted by the song. The solidarity demanded by the theme leaves no one out,

⁴⁹ The earlier song from which Beethoven recycles the choral melody is the latter half of a two-part aria setting poems by Gottfried August Bürger—“Seufzer eines Ungeliebten” and “Gegenliebe.” The first concerns the sighs of unrequited love; the second the imagined happiness of requited love. It may appear curious that Beethoven would turn the private sentiment of the earlier song into a public statement in the *Choral Fantasy* but, as Jürgen Habermas has pointed out, the eighteenth-century public sphere was a projection of the interiority of the conjugal family; private ethos was the basis for a communal ethic. This is most explicitly explored in Beethoven’s opera, *Fidelio*, where domestic love and public politics are intertwined. By turning “Gegenliebe” into a public song, the *Choral Fantasy* acts as the bridge between early and late Beethoven, with its choral melody resembling the “Ode to Joy” of the Ninth Symphony—the ultimate celebration of the private and public in the form of universal brotherhood. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. T. Burger (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 43–51.

⁵⁰ Nicholas Mathew, “Joining in and Joining up: Military Attention, Active Listening, and Beethoven’s Public Music,” paper given at the American Musicological Society conference, San Francisco 2011. Also see Nicholas Mathew, *Political Beethoven* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 136–75, which sets the *Choral Fantasy* within the larger context of Beethoven’s public oeuvre and the listening practices of the Napoleonic era in Austria.

EXAMPLE 1. The theme of the *Choral Fantasy*—mm. 60-76

61
dolce

64

68 *tr*

72 *8*

(72) *8* *tr*

73 *dolce* *tr*

and the final variation of the *Choral Fantasy* played at full volume is meant to absorb the audience into the “choir of Spirits” (Geisterchor) that concludes the work. Indeed, it is not just the audience of the *Akademie*, but all potential listeners who are asked to sign up and join in the progress of art, swelling the numbers of participants to infinity and increasing

the volume beyond the physical constraints of reality. By the end of the *Akademie*, the whole adds up to more than the sum of the parts, closing the event with a big metaphysical bang.

Volume, then, shapes the structure of the work as an allegory of progress. What about freedom? If progress is the form—the wedge—then freedom is its content. This is already suggested in the title. Fantasy is the anti-formal genre that parades the creative imagination of the composer as incipient content. And Beethoven made this absolutely clear by staging his own fantasy before the audience that night; the composer himself was at the piano with a score before him. And, aptly, the first page of the score that evening was blank. The *Choral Fantasy* was such a last-minute idea that Beethoven did not have enough time to fix the notes on the staves. But, in a sense, it was not necessary since the improvisatory nature of the opening is a generic statement of creation *ex nihilo* enacted by Beethoven himself for the occasion. The empty page is the precondition of a creative freedom that formulates the materials from nothing, calling forth a theme through a series of improvisatory ruminations. And if the published score is anything to go by, the non-descript C minor triads that open the work are the equivalent of that empty page, providing a material vacancy from which the composition will arise (ex. 2).⁵¹

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EXAMPLE 2. The opening blank chords of the *Choral Fantasy*—mm. 1-2

It is from this blank state of freedom that the music progresses from C minor to C major, beginning with Beethoven's extemporization at the piano, followed by a set of variations with the orchestra and ending with a chorus that sings of the harmonious power of art to fashion a new society. By the end, content and form unite. The escalation from the particular to the universal is an allegory of freedom and progress, a movement from the creative process to the created order, and from the individual subject to the universal law.⁵² It is a simple enough concept—the music gets bigger, louder, and by default better. Yet embedded in this

⁵¹ The introductory improvisation was composed in 1809 for publication.

⁵² The Utopian structure will famously recur in the Ninth Symphony. In a letter of March 1824, Beethoven himself recognised this relationship, describing the finale of the

naive image is Rancière's politics of *dissensus* where the Beethoven withdraws at the piano into an inner realm in order to give voice to new social possibilities. And just in case the blunt audio-visuals that evening were not strong enough, the final message is lit up by the chorus in words. The poem, supposedly written by Christoph Kuffner under the composer's direction, charts the progress of humanity from darkness to light (*Nacht und Stürme werden Licht*), ending with art blessing mankind (Menschen) with a divine grace (Göttergunst).⁵³

Schmeichelnd hold und lieblich klingen
unseres Lebens Harmonien,
und dem Schönheitssinn entschwingen
Blumen sich, die ewig blühn.

Fried und Freude gleiten freundlich
wie der Wellen Wechselspiel.
Was sich drängte rau und feindlich,
ordnet sich zu Hochgefühl.

Wenn der Töne Zauber walten
und des Wortes Weihe spricht,
muss sich Herrliches gestalten,
Nacht und Stürme werden Licht.

Äuss're Ruhe, inn're Wonne
herrschen für den Glücklichen.
Doch der Künste Frühlingssonne
lässt aus beiden Licht entstehn.

Großes, das ins Herz gedrungen,
blüht dann neu und schön empor.
Hat ein Geist sich aufgeschwungen,
hallt ihm stets ein Geisterchor.

Nehmt denn hin, ihr schönen Seelen,
froh die Gaben schöner Kunst.
Wenn sich Lieb und Kraft vermählen,
lohnt den Menschen Göttergunst.

Caressing, fair and lovely sound
the harmonies of our life,
and from the sense of beauty spring
flowers that bloom forever.

Peace and joy flow delightfully,
like the alternating play of waves.
What were harsh and hostile pleasures
Are transmuted into elation.

When music's magic holds sway
and word's devotion speaks,
glorious things must take shape;
Night and storms turn into light.

Outer calm and inner bliss
prevail for the lucky one.
But art's springtime sun
causes light to emanate from both.

Greatness permeates the heart,
then blooms forth, new and lovely;
once a spirit has soared aloft
a chorus of spirits always resounds for
him.

Therefore, ye lovely souls,
seize with joy the gifts of fine arts.
When love and strength are united,
Divine grace rewards humankind.⁵⁴

Ninth as akin to the *Choral Fantasy* "but on a far grander scale." See *The Letters of Beethoven*, ed. Emily Anderson, vol. 3 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961), 1114.

⁵³ Carl Czerny indicates that Christoph Kuffner was the author of the text of Op. 80 in his account of the first performance: see his report in Carl Czerny, *Die Erinnerungen an Beethoven*, ed. Friedrich Kerst (Stuttgart: Julius Hoffmann, 1913), 1:51. On the claim, first made by Gustav Nottenbohm, that Kuffner was not the author, see Georg Kinsky and Hans Helm, *Das Werk Beethovens: Thematisch-bibliographisches Verzeichnis seiner sämtlichen vollendeten Kompositionen* (Munich: G. Henle Verlag, 1955), 212.

⁵⁴ The translation is from Ryan Minor, *Choral Fantasies: Music, Festivity, and Nationhood in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 10–11.

As the voices resounded that evening, Beethoven himself must have seemed like the very incarnation of the words; he was that gifted individual celebrated by the poem, “the lucky one” (den Glücklichen) who soars musically into the heavens with the “Geisterchor” surrounding him with praise. In this resounding hymn, the singular agent (Beethoven) and the collective spirit (chorus) join together in one voice;⁵⁵ and in their oneness, freedom finds its universal expression, with the composer functioning like Hegel’s “world historical individual” leading mankind in the march of history towards divine grace—“Lohnt dem Menschen Göttergunst.”⁵⁶ This declaration, as the final benediction of Beethoven’s concert, is designed to bestow favor upon the audience, elevating each soul in the entire assembly at the Theater-an-der-Wien into the freedom of the aesthetic realm. With the *Choral Fantasy* as the concert’s final destination, the eclectic program, the disgruntled musicians, and the semi-frozen audience are drawn into a totality that embodies Hegel’s statement of liberty and progress: “Freedom is the highest destiny of Spirit.”

Given the teleological pressure of the form, the very end of the *Choral Fantasy* has to deliver freedom as its destiny. And in true Hegelian fashion, freedom does, indeed, arrive, although it comes not so much “in Spirit” as in the form of a slogan that hammers home the message of the final stanza:

Nehmt denn hin, ihr schönen Seelen,
froh die Gaben schöner Kunst.
Wenn sich Lieb’ und Kraft vermählen
lohnt dem Menschen Göttergunst.

Beethoven detaches this stanza from the strictures of variation form so that it can circulate as a *free* variation that spirals with increasing energy toward the apotheosis of the work. “Divine grace” (Göttergunst) is the culminating concept trumpeted by Beethoven in his teleology for a new society. Theologically, grace is the condition for human freedom—a gift (Gunst) that enables an enslaved humanity to freely receive its salvation. But the coda should not be mistaken as the expression of religious

⁵⁵ On the relationship between the embodied individual and the disembodied spirit of a social order in political theory after the French Revolution see Michael Gamper and Peter Schnyder’s introduction in their edited volume, *Kollektive Gespenster: Die Masse, Der Zeitgeist und Andere Unfassbare Körper* (Freiburg i.Br/Berlin: Rombach Verlag KG, 2006), 7–28.

⁵⁶ Ryan Minor highlights the singular in the text to refute a collectivist reading of the chorus as some kind of political state. While it is prudent not to exaggerate a political or nationalist reading, the poem’s focus on the heroic particular is entirely in line with the collective freedom embodied in Hegel’s world historical individual. Gathered like an audience, hymning the praise of “the One,” the collective joins in the universal song as the many. Thus the particular becomes the universal; the individual is the collective; the freedom of the one is the freedom of the many. Minor, *Choral Fantasies*, 10–13.

sentiment. The *Choral Fantasy* ends with a secular deification of “Menschen,” a gift awarded by the gods through aesthetic rather than religious illumination.⁵⁷ Kuffner’s poem makes this clear by echoing a concept of grace advocated by Schiller: “Grace [Anmut]” writes Schiller, “is always solely the beauty of the form moved by freedom.”⁵⁸ This condition of aesthetic freedom is the result of opposing elements balancing each other out, such as the “beautiful and the sublime,” “sense and reason” or, in the case of the *Choral Fantasy*, “love and force” (Lieb’ und Kraft).⁵⁹

Kant, in fact, derided Schiller’s notion of grace as superfluous and far too beautiful for the sublime power of freedom; the majesty of its law was supposed to instill a sense of awe and respect, not elegance and ease. Force, not love, was Kant’s moral position.⁶⁰ And it seems that Beethoven agreed with Kant despite Kuffner’s text; Beethoven’s folkish tune with its spontaneous and unreflective ease may bear the marks of grace, but it is insufficient to deliver freedom as the destiny of the *Choral Fantasy*.⁶¹ So, for all the intent at equilibrium in the poem, the music seems bent on “force” rather than “love,” emitting its message of liberty with loud and seemingly endless cadential formulas that are a trademark of Beethoven’s heroic style. Indeed, in a letter to his publisher Breitkopf und Härtel Beethoven suggested that the hastily written text could be replaced if

⁵⁷ On the secularization of the word Menschen see Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 180–91, esp. 182–85. As Koselleck points out, by the Enlightenment the term Menschen “had lost its Christian connotations pertaining to man’s pilgrimage with his creator; rather, the old usage had been usurped by a political concept of Menschen, which embraces all-mankind as an autonomous body that makes its own history against the divine rights of kings, priests, and even God. On the secularization of the concept of progress see Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–1965*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 147–52. Similarly, Göttergunst translates literally as the gift of the gods; it has little, if any, direct Christian content.

⁵⁸ See Friedrich Schiller, “On Grace and Dignity” (Über Anmut und Würde, 1793), in *Friedrich Schiller, Poet of Freedom*, vol. 2, trans. George Gregory (The Schiller Institute, 1988), 350.

⁵⁹ See Schiller, “On Grace and Dignity,” 363.

⁶⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, in idem, *Religion and Rational Theology*, eds. and trans. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Ak 6:23. Indeed, Hegel in *The Spirit of Christianity* denounced Kant for exactly this divorce of love and freedom, claiming that Kant reinscribed the Old Testament law without the grace that transcends the law in the New Testament; the subject becomes his own slave, bound to duty. The de-coupling of freedom from love in Kant, and indeed in the *Choral Fantasy*, means that grace is hardly a gift at all. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Spirit of Christianity*, in idem, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 210–18.

⁶¹ As Beethoven himself wrote: “Power [Kraft] is the morality of the men who stand out from others, and it is mine.” It should be noted, however, that this often quoted line is taken from a humorous letter of protestation to Nikolaus Zmeskall von Domanovecz, written in 1798; see *Thayer’s Life of Beethoven*, 221.

needed as long as he could retain one word—"Kraft."⁶² As far as the *Choral Fantasy* is concerned, force is the means to freedom, for "Kraft" is the only word that gets special treatment in the coda. It is given its own reiterative emphasis with the repetitions "und Kraft, und Kraft, und Kraft" (mm. 505–515 and 565–575). And whereas other words are treated with perfunctory C major progressions, "Kraft" gets to inhabit its own harmonic space as the music suddenly veers off into E-flat major. Loud, shrill, and seemingly immovable, this harmonic shift ushers in the high-point and still-point of the entire *Choral Fantasy* (ex. 3).

What does this moment mean? It alludes to two forms of transcendence. First, as Stephen Rumph rightly claims, this E-flat gesture is a recurring motif of the sublime in Beethoven's oeuvre, referring particularly to the moral law of freedom in the philosophy of Kant.⁶³ "Kraft" for Beethoven then signifies the force of the sublime, an excess that overwhelms our senses and gestures to a noumenal realm where the autonomy of reason is revealed. Secondly, this E-flat chord is also a precursor to what William Kinderman calls "Beethoven's symbol for the Deity" in the late works such as the Ninth Symphony and the *Missa solemnis*; clearly the gods made an early appearance in 1808 bestowing their divine grace on the audience in a work that foreshadows the finale of the Ninth.⁶⁴ So "Kraft" in Beethoven's formulation is both sublime and divine. It is the sonic equivalent to the concluding lines of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* that Beethoven scribbled in his notebook, connecting the subject to its divine calling: "Two things fill the mind with . . . admiration and awe: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me."⁶⁵ The chord on "Kraft," then, represents the power of an art religion that tears us away from the phenomenal world toward the glorious reign of liberty.

⁶² Beethoven's letter to Breitkopf & Härtel, dated 21 August 1810, *Briefwechsel Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Sieghard Brandenburg (Munich: G. Henle Verlag, 1996) vol. 2, letter no. 465, 148–52. Theodore Albrecht suggests that "Kraft" also may have acted as a Beethovenian pun, since there were three musicians in the orchestra bearing that name. Whether the pun was intended or not, it is clear from the musical and poetic context that the meaning of Kraft points beyond such historical trivia. Theodore Albrecht, "Beethoven's Portrait of the Theater an der Wien's Orchestra in His Choral Fantasy, op. 80," *Beiträge zu Biographie und Schaffensprozess bei Beethoven: Rainer Cadenbach zum Gedenken*, ed. Jürgen May (Bonn: Verlag Beethoven-Haus, 2011), 1–26, esp. 15.

⁶³ Stephen Rumph, "The Heroic Sublime," in *Beethoven after Napoleon: Political Romanticism in the Late Works* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 35–57.

⁶⁴ William Kinderman, "Beethoven's Symbol for the Deity in the 'Missa solemnis' and the Ninth Symphony," *Nineteenth-Century Music* 9, no. 2 (Autumn, 1985): 102–18.

⁶⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in idem, *Practical Philosophy*, Ak 5:161–62. Beethoven made the following entry in a conversation book in February 1820: "das Moralische Gesetz in uns, u. der gestirnte Himmel über uns' Kant!!!" *Ludwig van Beethoven Konversationshefte*, ed. Karl-Heinz Köhler and Grita Herre (Leipzig: Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1972), 1:235.

EXAMPLE 3. "Kraft" in the *Choral Fantasy*—mm 565-578

566

Fl. *piu f*

Ob. *piu f*

Cl. (C) *piu f*

Bsn. *piu f*

Cor. (C) *piu f*

Tr. (C) *piu f*

Timp.

Pf.

Vln. I *piu f*

Vln. II *piu f*

Vla. *piu f*

Cho. *piu f*
 und Kraft, und Kraft, und Kraft

Vc. Cb. *piu f*

EXAMPLE 3. (Continued)

Musical score for Example 3 (Continued), starting at measure 572. The score includes parts for Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet in C (Cl. (C)), Bassoon (Bsn.), Cor in C (Cor. (C)), Trumpet in C (Tr. (C)), Timpani (Timp.), Piano (Pf.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), Chorus (Cho.), and Violoncello/Double Bass (Vc. Cb.).

The score is marked with a forte (*ff*) dynamic. The Chorus part includes the lyrics: ver - mäh - len, ver - mäh - len, ver - mäh - len, ver - mäh - len.

Key musical features include:

- Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon, and Cor parts featuring sustained chords and melodic lines.
- Timpani playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with a trill-like texture.
- Violin I and II playing a complex rhythmic accompaniment with sixteenth notes.
- Viola playing a steady eighth-note accompaniment.
- Chorus parts with long, sustained notes.
- Violoncello/Double Bass playing a rhythmic accompaniment with sixteenth notes and triplets.

Beethoven's attempt at musical transcendence is palpable. The music pushes the repetition of "und Kraft" semitonally upward to sharpen the harmonic trajectory only to have its arrival on the dominant short circuited with a massive flatward disjuncture. Suddenly the music is untethered from the stock progressions that have been grounding the harmonies; the bass line vanishes, allowing the E-flat chord to soar stratospherically to the higher registers. Everything seems to stop; no rhythm, no progression, no theme, no motif, just one massive E-flat major sonority prolonged for seven measures with a rumble of the timpani at the end to bring the sonority back to earth. To be in this moment is to be temporarily suspended in a sublime-divine force field (Kraftfeld), where humanity can reflect on its true identity and final destiny: freedom.

So what does freedom sound like? It sounds blank. As if to recall the blankness of the opening chords, this moment of suspension is a withdrawal from particularity. But what seemed vacant at the start is now oversaturated to the point of blankness. We have advanced toward the musical noumenon, a supersensible world of abstract universality. Here, freedom is pure E-flatness. It is a musical abstraction—a disconnected dyad of E-flat and G. It is sheer volume—or, as the score puts it, *più forte*. It is elemental excess—freedom as pure force. It is the paradox of the blank itself, for this moment of human identity has no thematic identity; and this moment of human destiny has no harmonic destiny. Freedom and progress can only be expressed as an inaccessible blank. In this respect, the music is literally sublime, for the sublime, according to Kant, is a disclosure that can only be experienced as a radical withdrawal, a recoiling of the mind when confronted with an excess of signification. To represent the sublime is to present what is unrepresentable; and so in the *Choral Fantasy* Beethoven pictures liberty as a monumental negation—a blinding whiteness. In fact, this was Beethoven's initial idea for his *Akademie*. At the end of the program, the audience was supposed to be overwhelmed by a sublime light. But this light was not originally to be that of the *Choral Fantasy*. At first, the finale of the Fifth Symphony was meant to accomplish this task with its C-major blaze of glory, but Beethoven deemed that this would require too much concentration from a beleaguered audience.⁶⁶ Another C minor to C major work was necessary to re-enforce the drama of darkness to light.⁶⁷ So the task fell to the less complex and more cheerful aesthetic of the *Choral Fantasy* to send the weary home glowing with the noumenal halo of freedom. With the

⁶⁶ See Thayer, *Thayer's Life of Beethoven*, 448.

⁶⁷ The *Choral Fantasy*'s recycled material also follows a C minor to C major trajectory; as with the extemporized opening of the *Choral Fantasy*, Gegenliebe is introduced by a song ("Seufzer eines Ungeliebten"), which begins with a brief C minor recitative, acting as foil for the moment of imagined happiness in C major.

luminous E-flat sonority soaring above the rest of the work like a flag, Beethoven blesses his audience with the divine countenance of pure blankness: “May the force be with you.”⁶⁸

Conclusion

This article began with the notion that freedom in Beethoven’s music is represented as a blank sign. The *Choral Fantasy* bears this out: freedom is portrayed as a blank. And, as stated at the start, going blank is a strategy. Underneath the surface, the sign operates tactically, creating a specific and complex set of meanings. So what does the *Choral Fantasy*’s blankness mean? The chord on “Kraft” represents the maximum as a minimum. It is a paradox of humanism—the more universal its claims, the greater its reduction of humanity. As Costas Douzinas writes, “A minimum of humanity is what allows man to claim autonomy, moral responsibility and legal subjectivity.”⁶⁹ The “Kraft” chord is precisely this minimally maximum sign of human freedom. But to grasp this paradoxical extreme, Beethoven’s blank cannot be explained as a static representation, as if it were some eighteenth-century topic. Going blank is not a picture but a process. Thus in the *Choral Fantasy*, the high point of freedom is not a still image, as if any E-flat chord on the word “Kraft” would suffice as a *topos* of liberty; rather, it is a progression from the creative process that emerges from the vacancy of the opening chords on the piano to the created order that embraces everyone as the totality of progress. The power chords at either end of the *Choral Fantasy* are the Alpha and Omega of liberty—an autonomous act of genesis and completion that is the result of a process in which the particular becomes universal. They form the minimum and the maximum of humanity, or, as the early romantics would put it, they conflate “nothing and everything” as the be all and end all of the subject, simultaneously origin (creation *ex nihilo*) and totality (absolute being). In short, the process signifies the self-generated fullness of a subject that will unite humanity toward moral perfection.

But for all its charms, the *Choral Fantasy* is a performative contradiction that cannot live up to the aspiration of the text. What the music does and what it says can never quite coincide. This is simply the result of the work’s function. As a meta-work that comments on music, its content is more message than “Music.” It can only talk about blankness; it cannot

⁶⁸ Perhaps Romain Rolland’s portrayal of Beethoven as a Nietzschean superman joyfully declaring “Kraft über alles!” is not too much of an exaggeration; Romain Rolland, *Beethoven the Creator: The Great Creative Epochs: from the Eroica to the Appassionata*, trans. Ernest Newman (New York: Dover Publications, 1964), 8–12, citation at 8.

⁶⁹ Costas Douzinas, “The Many Faces of Humanitarianism,” MRZine, 20.05.09, at <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2009/douzinas290509.html> (accessed 4 June 2014).

actually embody it. So despite all the noumenal gestures, the *Choral Fantasy* merely paints a naïve picture of an aesthetic of blankness and can only speak of an organic totality but can never deliver that aesthetic in the same way as the Fifth Symphony or the *Eroica* Symphony. It is destined to fail in the reception history of Beethoven's heroic works. In doing so, however, the *Choral Fantasy* succeeds as a way of understanding these works. It declares that liberty, in its noumenal form, is a musical blank in Beethoven's heroic style; that freedom in Beethoven's absolute music is absolutely nothing; and that going blank is the strategy to explore if freedom is to be understood. Perhaps this is the final gift that the *Choral Fantasy* rewards its audience—not the destiny of divine grace but the task of further analysis. How Beethoven's aesthetics of freedom feigns its death, conceals its trauma and preserves its life in the abstract procedures of his symphonic works is the central question the *Choral Fantasy* raises.⁷⁰ And in this sense, the *Choral Fantasy* continues to carry out the function it was designed for in 1808—as a commentator on Beethoven's program, not just in the Theater-an-der-Wien but of his entire heroic oeuvre.

Hong Kong University

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ABSTRACT

A key signifier of freedom in Beethoven's music is the "blank sign." This sign assumes various forms. This article traces these blanks both musically and philosophically to explore how they work and what they mean. In particular, it focuses on Beethoven's *Choral Fantasy* as a commentator on the composer's own usage of this sign as a representation of freedom and progress.

Keywords: absolute music, Ludwig van Beethoven, *Choral Fantasy*, Op. 80, freedom, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Immanuel Kant

⁷⁰ Chua, "The Promise of Nothing."