

# Irony and Incomprehensibility: Beethoven's "Serioso" String Quartet in F Minor, Op. 95, and the Path to the Late Style

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The String Quartet in F Minor, op. 95—marked “Quartetto serioso” in the autograph score<sup>1</sup>—occupies a curious position in Beethoven's output. He completed the work in October 1810 but seems to have made no attempt to publish it for more than six years, and we have no reliable account of any public performance during that time.<sup>2</sup> It was among the several compositions he gave to the English pianist, cellist, and composer Charles Neate in February 1816 to perform and eventually place with a London publisher.<sup>3</sup> But Neate did nothing with the quartet, and when Beethoven turned instead to the composer-conductor Sir George Smart later that same year, he characterized it in these terms: “N. B. The Quartett

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1. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Musiksammlung, Mus. Hs. 16531.

2. On the compositional history of opus 95, see Ong, “Aspects of the Genesis” and “On the String Quartet, Op. 95.” William Drabkin calls the genesis and chronology of opus 95 “one of the thorniest dating problems in Beethoven's *œuvre*” and points out that “the big question remains unanswered: why was its publication delayed by more than six years?”: Drabkin, “Brought to Book?,” 89. The work was first published in parts by Steiner of Vienna in December 1816. The lone report of an early public performance, in Vienna's Augarten in May 1814, first appeared in the third edition (1860) of Anton Schindler's *Biographie von Ludwig van Beethoven* (1:197); it is unclear on what basis Schindler made this very late assertion. Although Beethoven delayed publishing other works of this period by as many as four or even five years (opp. 92, 93, 96, 97), all received public premieres within a customary time span after their completion.

3. See Beethoven's letter to Charles Neate of ca. February 6, 1816, in Beethoven, *Briefwechsel: Gesamtausgabe* (hereafter *BGA*), no. 896 (3:221); also in Beethoven, *Letters*, no. 606a (2:557).

is written for a small circle of connoisseurs and is never to be performed in public. Should you wish for some Quartetts for public performance I would compose them to this purpose occasionally. I mention here that I should like to receive regular orders from England for great compositions.”<sup>4</sup>

The notion of a substantial work to be published but “never to be performed in public” is striking. Beethoven wanted to promote his reputation in England but recognized that the F minor string quartet was unlikely to win broad approval, at least through performance.<sup>5</sup> More important still, the notion of writing for only “a small circle of connoisseurs” anticipates the way in which subsequent generations would come to think of the composer’s late string quartets. And indeed, opus 95 has long been recognized as a harbinger of the composer’s late style: it is full of the disruptions, harmonic oddities, and formal surprises that characterize so many works of his last decade.

Opus 95 thus offers an unusual window onto Beethoven’s path to his late style. His use of the term “serioso,” as I shall argue, points to the work’s inherently ironic nature, which was shaped at least in part by the intense debate about the nature of irony taking place in the early nineteenth century throughout German-speaking lands, and particularly in Vienna. Irony, when unrecognized—and it often goes unrecognized—has the capacity to generate confusion and a consequent sense of incomprehensibility; yet it was precisely this sort of provocative obscurity that was being promoted by Beethoven’s philosophical contemporaries as a way of creating a more active mode of engagement with readers. In opus 95 we can hear Beethoven applying these same principles to the realm of purely instrumental music in ways that anticipate the kinds of challenges he would pose to listeners repeatedly in the works of his final decade. From this perspective, Beethoven’s late style, long regarded as the consequence of a turn toward subjective interiority, can be understood instead as a conscious and systematic attempt to engage listeners in a way that was fundamentally new to music, even if its precedents in poetry, literature, and criticism had been established several decades earlier. The late style, in other words, reflects Beethoven’s reconceptualization of the fundamental relationship between composer and listener, by which music moved from being understood as an art based on the parameters of rhetoric, with the composer bearing the responsibility of constructing an intelligible and moving whole, to being understood as an art based on the

4. Letter to George Smart of ca. October 7, 1816, in *BGA*, no. 983 (3:306); also in Beethoven, *Letters*, no. 664 (2:606). The original letter, in English, is signed by Beethoven but is in the hand of Johann Baptist von Häring, a banker, amateur violinist, and friend of the composer.

5. Beethoven’s injunction that the quartet “is never to be performed in public” should be understood as an acknowledgment of its unusual nature and not taken too literally: this was an admonition to Smart, whose assistance Beethoven was seeking in efforts to perform or arrange for performances and for the publication of the other works the composer had given him—the Symphony in A Major, op. 92, *Der glorreiche Augenblick*, op. 136, *Fidelio*, op. 72, *Meeresstille und glückliche Fahrt*, op. 112, and the two Cello Sonatas, op. 102.

principles of hermeneutics, with the listener assuming the burden of responding to—and thereby completing, as it were—the aesthetic challenges put forward by the composer.

### Seriously?

Just how serious is Beethoven's "Quartetto serioso"? In many respects the title seems entirely fitting, for an air of urgency permeates most of the work, including a rhythmically propulsive third-movement scherzo marked "Allegro assai vivace ma serioso." Yet this tone is repeatedly undermined, most strikingly at the beginning of the first movement and at the end of the fourth. The quartet opens with a furious unison turn, followed by a series of harmonized octave leaps that together establish a mood of serious intensity firmly grounded in the key of F minor (see Example 1).<sup>6</sup> After a brief pause the turning figure resumes in the cello alone (m. 6), but launching now from the unexpected pitch of Gb. The more lyrical idea that plays out above fails to take hold, however, and the insistent turning figure, now in the viola (mm. 13–17), soon leads to a reiteration of the opening unison turn in the tonic. Similar interruptions, unexpected returns, and unmediated juxtapositions of contrasting musical ideas continue throughout this and all subsequent movements.<sup>7</sup>

Nowhere are these unprepared shifts more evident than in the finale, which begins with a portentous slow introduction (*Larghetto espressivo*, 2/4) that segues into a minor-mode rondo (*Allegretto agitato*, 6/8; see Example 2a). The episodes (beginning at measures 44, 55, and 94) provide thematic variety but no relief from the sense of urgency established by the principal theme. Not until a brief transition (mm. 123–32) does the relentless drive of the music begin to abate, and when the coda begins (m. 133) we hear an entirely new theme: the mood has shifted from serious to comic, the style from high to low, the tempo from *Allegretto* to *Allegro* in  $\text{♩}$ , and the entire coda—most of it played *piano*—ends after a mere forty-three measures (see Example 2b).

This coda, as Lewis Lockwood has observed, has "baffled many a dedicated Beethovenian."<sup>8</sup> It certainly has elicited a remarkable variety of responses. Uniquely among Beethoven's early- and middle-period quartets, opus 95 was never reviewed during the composer's lifetime, and it was not until 1863 that Adolf Bernhard Marx, a dedicated Beethovenian if ever there was one, became the first to address it in any detail. He had avoided discussing the work altogether in the first edition (1859) of his life-and-works study of the composer, only to confess in the second edition (1863) that he could gain no "clear idea of the whole, or even merely a sense of unified psychological development."

6. Music examples from opus 95 are reductions prepared from Beethoven, *Streichquartette II*.

7. For a close reading of these opening measures, see Maus, "Music as Drama," esp. 60–66.

8. Lockwood, *Beethoven*, 329.

**Example 1** Beethoven, String Quartet in F Minor (“Serioso”), op. 95, mvt. 1, mm. 1–21.  
A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the **Journal**.

**Allegro con brio**

The musical score is presented in five systems, each with a treble and bass staff. The key signature is F minor (three flats) and the time signature is 2/4. The tempo is marked **Allegro con brio**. The first system (mm. 1-3) begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The second system (mm. 4-6) features sforzando (*sf*) markings. The third system (mm. 7-11) is marked piano (*p*). The fourth system (mm. 12-15) includes a triplet in the first violin. The fifth system (mm. 16-21) includes tenuto (*ten.*) markings in the first and second violins, a crescendo (*cresc.*) in the first violin, and a forte (*f*) dynamic in the first violin.

## Example 1 continued

He deemed the final forty-three measures an entirely separate, fifth movement and refused to call it a coda on the grounds that it lacked any recognizable connection to the preceding *Allegretto agitato*. In the end, however, Marx accepted responsibility for his failure to understand it and gave Beethoven the benefit of the doubt: “we will gladly assume that the fault lies in us.”<sup>9</sup> Almost fifty years later Vincent d’Indy was far less forgiving. For him, the finale’s coda was “without interest or utility of any sort,” the movement as a whole perhaps at best an example of how *not* to compose.<sup>10</sup> Walter Willson Cobbett, writing in 1930, was equally dismissive: “One might imagine it some light Rossinian operatic finale which had strayed into this atmosphere of sustained beauty, and we think that no interpretation could palliate this error of a genius.”<sup>11</sup>

Nineteenth-century critics were particularly inclined to interpret this coda through the lens of biography, hearing in it a turning point in the composer’s life. Ludwig Nohl and Joseph von Wasielewski both perceived the shift from darkness to light as a reflection of the composer’s resolve to move on from his rejected marriage proposals to either Therese Malfatti (Nohl) or Therese von Brunswick (Wasielewski). Nohl called the quartet a “Faust monologue, serious and melancholy,” very much like the “*Appassionata*” Sonata (also in F minor) in its “grumbling against fate, which is why we do not hesitate to seek the deeper sources of the work’s being, its very pulse,” in “the lived experience of its creator, and not merely in his artistic imagination.” The finale’s coda brings “reconciliation and peace.”<sup>12</sup> Wasielewski

9. Marx, *Ludwig van Beethoven*, 2:317: “So müssen wir doch gestehen, eine bestimmte Idee des Ganzen, oder auch nur einheitvolle psychologische Entwicklung nicht gefunden zu haben; gern wollen wir annehmen, dass die Schuld in uns liegt.” All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

10. Indy, *Cours de composition musicale*, vol. 2, part 2, 241: “une Coda ☿ en FA, sans intérêt ni utilité d’aucune sorte . . . un exemple de ‘ce qu’il ne faut pas faire?’”

11. Cobbett, *Cobbett’s Cyclopedic Survey*, 1:97.

12. Nohl, *Beethoven’s Leben*, 2:333–34: “Es ist auch dies so ein Faustmonolog, ernst und düster. . . . Es steht gleich der *Appassionata* in F-moll und ist gleich dieser fast wie ein Murren gegen das Geschick, weshalb wir nicht anstehen, die tiefern Quellen seines Daseins, seinen eigentlichen Pulsschlag in dem eigensten Erleben seines Erschaffers und nicht blos in dessen künstlerischer Phantasie zu suchen. . . . Jedoch . . . in dem *Allegretto agitato* des Finales, Ver-söhnung und Ruhe ward auch diesmal gewonnen.”

**Example 2a** Beethoven, String Quartet in F Minor (“Serioso”), op. 95, mvt. 4, mm. 1–18. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the **Journal**.

**Larghetto espressivo**

*cresc.*

4

*dim.* *cresc.* *p* *cresc.*

**Allegretto agitato**

7

*p* *cresc.*

10

*p*

## Example 2a continued

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system covers measures 13 and 14. The second system covers measures 15 and 16. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The key signature has two flats (F minor). Measure 13 starts with a dynamic marking of  $\text{mf}$ . A crescendo line begins in measure 15 and continues through measure 16, where the dynamic is marked  $f$ . The bass line in measure 16 features a complex, rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth notes.

likewise heard the quartet's ending as a reflection of Beethoven's ability to overcome his "painful anguish" and turn "with manly resolve toward the sunlight of life."<sup>13</sup> Hugo Riemann pointed to the coda as evidence that the composer had by this point in his life "found himself again."<sup>14</sup> These interpretations, and others like them, are of course part of a long tradition that perceives Beethoven's personal suffering—be it because of love, deafness, physical pain, or any other kind of affliction—as a principal stimulus of his creative strength.<sup>15</sup>

A number of observers have acknowledged the contradictory nature of this coda without proposing any particular rationale for it. Theodor Helm,

13. Wasielewski, *Ludwig van Beethoven*, 1:363: "Überwunden ist nun das schmerzvolle Weh", und mit männlicher Entschlossenheit wendet sich der Meister wieder dem Sonnenschein des Lebens zu."

14. Riemann, in his edition of Thayer, *Ludwig van Beethovens Leben*, 3:246: "Beethoven hat sich wiedergefunden."

15. See Eggebrecht, *Zur Geschichte der Beethoven-Rezeption*, and the first chapter of Dahlhaus, *Ludwig van Beethoven und seine Zeit*, 29–73 (translated in Dahlhaus, *Ludwig van Beethoven: Approaches to His Music*, 1–42).

**Example 2b** Beethoven, String Quartet in F Minor (“Serioso”), op. 95, mvt. 4, mm. 133–75. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the *Journal*.

133 *Allegro* *molto leggiermente*

*sempre piano*

136

*sempre pp*

139

*sempre piano*

142



Example 2b continued

145

*cresc.*

148

*f*

151

155

*fp*

*sempre piano*

*p*

(continued)

Example 2b continued

158

Musical score for measures 158-160. The system consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It contains a melody of quarter notes: G4, A4, Bb4, C5, Bb4, A4, G4. The lower staff is in bass clef and contains a bass line of eighth notes: G3, A3, Bb3, C4, Bb3, A3, G3. A dynamic marking of *p* (piano) is placed below the first measure of the upper staff.

161

Musical score for measures 161-163. The system consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It contains a melody of quarter notes: G4, A4, Bb4, C5, Bb4, A4, G4. The lower staff is in bass clef and contains a bass line of eighth notes: G3, A3, Bb3, C4, Bb3, A3, G3. A dynamic marking of *p* (piano) is placed below the first measure of the upper staff.

164

Musical score for measures 164-166. The system consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It contains a melody of quarter notes: G4, A4, Bb4, C5, Bb4, A4, G4. The lower staff is in bass clef and contains a bass line of eighth notes: G3, A3, Bb3, C4, Bb3, A3, G3. A dynamic marking of *cresc.* (crescendo) is placed below the first measure of the upper staff.

167

Musical score for measures 167-169. The system consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It contains a melody of quarter notes: G4, A4, Bb4, C5, Bb4, A4, G4. The lower staff is in bass clef and contains a bass line of eighth notes: G3, A3, Bb3, C4, Bb3, A3, G3. A dynamic marking of *f* (forte) is placed below the first measure of the upper staff.

## Example 2b continued

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a string quartet. The first system, starting at measure 170, shows a piano (*p*) dynamic. The second system, starting at measure 173, shows a crescendo leading to a forte (*f*) dynamic. The notation includes treble and bass staves for both systems, with various rhythmic patterns and articulations.

writing in 1885, was the first of many to point out the similarities between the quartet's finale and the overture to *Egmont*, composed around the same time: the latter also begins in F minor and ends with a fast, triumphant coda in F major.<sup>16</sup> But Helm offered no explanation for the differences between the two works: the trumpet-and-drums ending of *Egmont* is driven by Goethe's drama, and specifically by its demand for a closing "symphony of victory" ("Siegessymphonie"), whereas the quartet's ending lacks any comparable external motivation, so far as we can tell. Joseph de Marliave found the finale's "epilogue" to be "marked by a certain air of irresponsibility."<sup>17</sup> Basil Lam called it a "comic-opera coda, absurdly and deliberately unrelated" to the work as a whole, "the Shakespearian touch that provides the final confirmation of the truth of the rest."<sup>18</sup> David Wyn Jones observes that the last movement "almost defies comprehension," particularly "the final move in the coda to an exhilarating F major. . . . The self-avowed difficulty of the quartet as a whole invites comparison with the late quartets, but the later works find a cohesion that is more satisfying than that evident in

16. Helm, *Beethoven's Streichquartette*, 161.

17. Marliave, *Beethoven's Quartets*, 192.

18. Lam, *Beethoven String Quartets 2*, 10–11.

Op. 95.”<sup>19</sup> For Michael Talbot, the “finale of the ‘Quartetto serio’ . . . seems planned to cock a snook at this august designation,” while along the same lines Jürgen Heidrich considers the coda an incongruous “last dance [*Kerhaus*]” that “exhibits absolutely no connection to what precedes it” and that comes across as a “cynical *Abgesang* to the emotional abyss of the Quartetto serio.”<sup>20</sup>

Both in spite of and because of such obvious surface ruptures, several more recent commentators have pointed to the thematic, harmonic, and formal devices that link the coda to the finale and to the quartet as a whole. These critics invariably relate the chromatic figure at the beginning of the coda to the turning figure of the first movement’s opening and emphasize the prevalence of disjuncture throughout the work, beginning with the disruptive feint toward the Neapolitan  $G\flat$  in measure 6 of the first movement. The composer Randall Thompson was the first to argue that the unexpectedly bright nature of the coda is in its own way consistent with the extreme and abrupt contrasts of many kinds throughout opus 95. His verdict on the quartet’s ending was that “No bottle of champagne was ever uncorked at a better time.”<sup>21</sup> Ernest Livingstone and Reinhard Wiesend have since shown in detail how the numerous discontinuities across all four movements can be reconciled through intervallic relationships among the work’s various themes.<sup>22</sup> While these analyses make a strong case for the underlying coherence of opus 95 as a whole, they do not suggest any particular motivation for the more obvious and extreme contradictions of tone in the coda. Hermann Danuser, for one, is careful to point out that for all the technical elements that link it to the rest of the quartet, the coda ultimately manifests “the buffa device of ‘smiling through tears.’”<sup>23</sup>

Yet another interpretative approach has emphasized a sense of compositional disengagement in the finale’s coda. Paul Bekker, in his Beethoven monograph of 1911, maintained that it is only in the final forty-three measures that Beethoven lets fall the “mask” he has been wearing throughout the work. He likened the coda to the ending of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*:

At that moment when the storm becomes most violent, it suddenly seems to disappear. . . . A gently resonating F major chord proclaims a profound peace and there—suddenly Ariel flutters in, the light, airy bringer of joy, who announces liberation in delicate, fairy-like sounds. Prospero the punitive judge

19. Jones, “Beethoven and the Viennese Legacy,” 221.

20. Talbot, *Finale in Western Instrumental Music*, 160; Heidrich, “Die Streichquartette,” 198: “Doch fügt Beethoven noch einen aberwitzig-scherzhaften, mit dem Vorgehenden keinerlei Zusammenhang aufweisenden virtuosen Kehraus in F-Dur an (‘Allegro’), der wie ein zynischer Abgesang auf die emotionalen Abgründe des *Quartetto serio* anmutet.” Robert Simpson also points to the contradictory nature of the coda in “Chamber Music for Strings,” 264.

21. Randall Thompson, undated correspondence with Daniel Gregory Mason, quoted in Mason, *Quartets of Beethoven*, 159.

22. Livingstone, “Final Coda”; Wiesend, “Bemerkungen zum Streichquartett Op. 95.”

23. Danuser, “Streichquartett f-Moll,” 85: “die Buffa-Devisse ‘unter Tränen Lächeln.’”

has disappeared; Prospero the joyful Prince of Spirits reveals himself. Beethoven discards his "serioso" mask. In battling the seriousness of life he has not perished in the maelstrom of passions. Precisely the immersion in the seemingly impenetrable gloom of F minor images has freed his vision and made him receptive toward the far more impenetrable humor of life's play. This internal liberation, this transformation from lamenting and persecuted warrior to a superior, smiling observer, is reflected in the F minor quartet with its surprising turn at the end. With this, the solution to the problems of life is found. The way is now open—the way to the Eighth Symphony.<sup>24</sup>

Joseph Kerman, in his landmark 1967 book on the string quartets, noted that everything about this coda is "effortless and amusing and trite. . . . The agitation and pathos and tautness and violence of the quartet seem to fly up and be lost like dust in the sunlight." By 1810, Kerman proposed, Beethoven "had reached a stage of compositional virtuosity . . . that allowed him to gloss over doubts with great ease and with a certain impressive show of *sang-froid*."<sup>25</sup> For William Kinderman, the coda is "problematic" because it "blithely ignores the dramatic tensions of the work up to that point," and those tensions, rather than being resolved, "are forgotten and seemingly transcended."<sup>26</sup> Daniel Chua has similarly argued that this ending is full of "clichés so incongruous to everything else in the quartet that the situation is one of *aporia* rather than humour." The coda as a whole reflects what Chua calls "a creative refusal to respond to the struggle" that has gone on up to this point in the finale.<sup>27</sup>

## Irony

Save perhaps for the finale of the Ninth Symphony, no other movement by Beethoven has provoked such a wide range of sharply contrasting interpretations. This in itself is an indicator of the movement's radical nature, and

24. Bekker, *Beethoven*, 409: "Und gerade in dem Augenblick, wo die Kraft des Sturms am heftigsten ausbricht, scheint sie plötzlich wieder zu erlöschen. . . . Ein zart verhallender F-dur-Akkord verkündet tiefe Ruhe, und da—plötzlich schwirrt Ariel heran, der leichte, luftige Glücksbote, in elfenhaft feinen Klängen die Befreiung ankündigend. Prospero der strafende Richter ist verschwunden, Prospero der heitere Fürst der Geister offenbart sich. Beethoven wirft die Serioso-Maske ab. Er ist nicht untergegangen im Gewühl der Leidenschaften, im Kampf mit dem Ernst des Lebens. Gerade die Versenkung in die scheinbar unergründliche Düsterteit der f-moll-Bilder hat sein Auge frei und seinen Blick empfänglich gemacht für den noch viel unergründlicheren Humor des Lebensspieles. Dieses innere Freiwerden, diese Wandlung vom klagenden und anklagenden Kämpfer zum überlegen lächelnden Betrachter spiegelt das f-moll-Quartett mit seiner überraschenden Schlußwendung. Damit ist die Lösung der Probleme des Lebens gefunden. Der Weg ist frei—der Weg zur Achten Symphonie." The corresponding passage in the English translation of Bekker's monograph by M. M. Bozman (319) is considerably reduced.

25. Kerman, *Beethoven Quartets*, 182–83.

26. Kinderman, *Beethoven*, 316, 171.

27. Chua, "*Galitzin*" *Quartets*, 108.

over the last half century a number of commentators have pointed to irony as a way of making sense of this quartet's deeply enigmatic ending. Rey Longyear, writing in 1970, was the first to apply the term specifically to the finale's coda, which he characterized as a paradigm of Romantic irony, by which a work of art calls attention to its own artifice by undermining the sense of aesthetic illusion. For Longyear, the "opera buffa-like" coda "destroys the illusion of seriousness" and incorporates "paradox, self-annihilation, parody, eternal agility, and the appearance of the fortuitous and unusual."<sup>28</sup> A number of subsequent scholars have built on this insight. Kurt von Fischer called the coda "neither *amusing* nor *victorious*, but rather both an ironic and a utopian contradiction of what has gone before. . . . The resolution of conflicts is apparently possible neither as victory nor as synthesis, but rather only in contradiction."<sup>29</sup> More recently, Robert Hatten has argued that Longyear's interpretation did not go far enough, maintaining that the coda shifts the "level of discourse" in a way that suggests both negation *and* disengagement, a rising above the surface-level tragic tone of the music.<sup>30</sup> Tamara Balter, in turn, hears the coda as an "annihilation" of the "grief and pathos conveyed in the four movements," a move that is "prototypically Romantic-ironic."<sup>31</sup> Nancy November agrees with Longyear that the coda enacts an "ironic reversal," but she hears its overall effect not as a contradiction but rather as a reinforcement of the "serious nature of the discourse" as a whole.<sup>32</sup>

It is ironic—and altogether fitting—that accounts of irony in opus 95 have differed so sharply. Irony is, after all, about contradiction, and it operates on many different levels. The enormous scholarly literature on it includes multiple competing taxonomies that testify to its inherently slippery nature.<sup>33</sup> In its simplest form, irony is saying one thing and meaning the exact opposite. From context and tone of voice we know perfectly well when "Yes, of course" means "No, not at all." On a higher level, irony allows for genuine ambiguity, in which a statement and its exact opposite are perceived as equally plausible. In such instances we might well ask a speaker, "Are you being ironic?" Or as we are more likely to say colloquially, "Are you serious?" And even then, can we believe the response we receive? Again: Just how serious is Beethoven's quartet? Irony in its most sophisticated form is

28. Longyear, "Beethoven and Romantic Irony," 649.

29. Fischer, "Never to Be Performed in Public," 95: "Ihr Sinn aber ist weder *amusing*, noch *sieghaft*, sondern vielmehr zugleich ironischer als auch utopischer Widerspruch zum Vorangegangenen. . . . Die Lösung der Konflikte ist offenbar weder als Sieg noch als Synthese, sondern nur noch im Widerspruch möglich" (Fischer's italics).

30. Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*, 187–88.

31. Balter, "Theory of Irony," 165.

32. November, *Beethoven's Theatrical Quartets*, 226.

33. See, for example, Muecke, *Compass of Irony*; Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony*; and Strohschneider-Kohrs, *Die romantische Ironie*. Particularly helpful on issues of historiography is Dane, *Critical Mythology of Irony*. For an excellent recent overview of irony in music, see Johnson, "Irony."

a hall of mirrors: there is no fixed point, nothing is stable, and perceptions can vary enormously. In irony's most refined manifestations we cannot distinguish between "real" and "feigned" meanings, and the very binary of "real" and "feigned" becomes not only irrelevant but misleading.

But how does irony relate to purely instrumental music? The mechanisms of verbal irony—a rhetorical trope—cannot be mapped onto instrumental music in any direct or detailed fashion, because instrumental music's "meaning" is hopelessly contested from the very start. We cannot simply assume that the semantic or performative conventions of verbal irony operate within a medium incapable of "saying" anything, much less "meaning" its opposite. The broader parameters of rhetoric, on the other hand, can be readily applied to music. Throughout the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth, composers, performers, and listeners alike operated within a rhetorical framework, a set of mutually understood premises by which a composer attempts not only to delight listeners but also to move ("persuade") them emotionally.<sup>34</sup> A composer might certainly "fool" or even mislead listeners from time to time—we routinely speak of deceptive cadences or false recapitulations, and Haydn's music is full of such passages<sup>35</sup>—but these are essentially local events, limited both in musical and verbal rhetoric to specific moments, not entire works.

Mark Antony's funeral oration in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* illustrates both the power and the limits of rhetorical irony: with his refrain of "For Brutus is an honourable man" he leaves no room for doubt about his true feelings. But like any good orator Mark Antony knew that he could use irony only sparingly, for rhetoric, in order to be effective, depends on the audience's perception of a speaker's fundamental sincerity, and it is for this reason that he concludes his oration in an entirely different manner. He breaks off abruptly, overwhelmed by emotion: "My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar, / And I must pause till it come back to me."<sup>36</sup> The irony that permeates his oration is redeemed by the sincerity of its summing up: listeners cannot be left at the end thinking that the speaker has been deceiving them all along. An orator operating within the venerable traditions of rhetoric would never end a speech by revealing to his audience that not a word of what he has said is true.

Yet this is precisely what Beethoven seems to be doing in opus 95: toward the end of four very serious movements he suddenly shifts tone and leaves us to wonder if we have had the wool pulled over our ears throughout. Hugh Macdonald, like Bekker before him, uses the image of

34. See Bonds, *Wordless Rhetoric*.

35. See Bonds, "Haydn, Laurence Sterne"; Wheelock, *Haydn's Ingenious Jesting*; and Burnham, "Haydn and Humor."

36. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, act 3, scene 2, 179.

a compositional “mask” to explain opus 95’s ending in just this way. The coda, he maintains, is

not an apology or a sop or a mere gesture towards the world of smiles and laughter, but a deliberate slap in the face. . . . Is Beethoven simply removing the tragic mask to reveal the cackling smile underneath? For most of the work he holds us in the hollow of his hand utterly convinced that the music means what it seems to mean. Then at the last possible moment he reveals the disturbing truth that it was all a horrible joke, mere sleight of hand. . . .

. . . Every time we think we have the measure of his mind, he steps deftly sideways, or he removes the mask. . . . For all Beethoven’s clear desire to write music of power and beauty, there is a cruel streak in his make-up of the kind that finds it amusing to beckon you closer and closer until you are near enough to receive a heavy punch on the nose.<sup>37</sup>

Macdonald goes on to relate the finale of opus 95 to Carl Czerny’s account of Beethoven’s unusual behavior after improvising at the keyboard. As Czerny recalled in 1852,

His improvisation was most brilliant and striking. In whatever company he might chance to be, he knew how to produce such an effect upon every hearer that frequently not an eye remained dry, while many would break out into loud sobs; for there was something wonderful in his expression in addition to the beauty and originality of his ideas and his spirited style of rendering them. After ending an improvisation of this kind he would burst into loud laughter and banter his hearers on the emotion he had caused in them. “You are fools!” he would say. Sometimes he would feel himself insulted by these indications of sympathy. “Who can live among such spoiled children?” he would cry.<sup>38</sup>

It would be easy to dismiss this report as yet one more entertaining but probably apocryphal anecdote were it not supported by certain moments in music that Beethoven committed to paper, including the coda of opus 95’s finale.

What would motivate such a compositional strategy? Even if we accept the premise of Romantic irony as the destruction of aesthetic illusion, why introduce it at this juncture, at the very end of a multimovement work? What is the point of exposing art’s underpinnings? The notion of a compositional mask is problematic in this particular instance, and it is revealing that Edward T. Cone chose not to invoke his own image of the “composer’s

37. Macdonald, “Beethoven’s Game,” 14. Macdonald does not cite Bekker’s comments on a compositional mask, nor does he cite George Bernard Shaw’s relevant observation about Beethoven in general: “No other composer has ever melted his hearers into complete sentimentality by the tender beauty of his music, and then suddenly turned on them and mocked them with derisive trumpet blasts for being such fools”: Shaw, “Beethoven’s Centenary,” 18.

38. Czerny, “Further Recollections of Beethoven,” quoted in Thayer, *Thayer’s Life of Beethoven*, 1:185. The German version in Czerny’s *Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben*, 44–47, cannot be traced back to Czerny himself and is presumably a translation from the English.



voice" in his commentary on the finale of opus 95.<sup>39</sup> For if we interpret the coda of opus 95's finale as the moment when the music—or Beethoven, or Beethoven's compositional persona—removes a metaphorical "mask" to reveal a "true self," we are assuming that there *is* some true self, a stable compositional "voice" in the music, as Cone would have it. Cone would have been the first to insist that we need not equate any particular persona with Beethoven himself; but how do we reconcile the presence of more than one "voice" in the work? How can we accept both as equally valid? "Once a face is revealed to be a mask," as Julian Johnson has noted in connection with the music of Gustav Mahler, "all identities are suspect."<sup>40</sup> It was this unmediated juxtaposition of voices that made the music of Mahler and other later composers (such as Satie, Ravel, and Shostakovich) so jarring for their contemporaries.<sup>41</sup>

The notion of multiple voices in Beethoven's music is scarcely a new idea. Karol Berger has called attention to Beethoven's predilection for shifting quite suddenly "from one ontological level to another," even in the early piano sonatas, and Nicholas Mathew has pointed out that "Beethoven's voice is unavoidably plural," not only across the composer's oeuvre as a whole but even at times within individual movements.<sup>42</sup> A number of prominent scholars have, moreover, noted more specific parallels between elements of irony in Beethoven's music and the writings on this subject by such figures as Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel.<sup>43</sup> Yet such accounts have tended on the whole to emphasize only one side of irony: its capacity to negate or subvert.<sup>44</sup> Early Romantic philosophers such as Novalis and Schlegel were more inclined to treat irony as the driving force behind an epistemological

39. On Cone's theory of the "compositional persona," see his *Composer's Voice*. On opus 95 specifically, see Cone, "Twelfth Night," 154. Cone cautioned against rationalizing the strange ending of opus 95, calling it "beyond analysis—and very likely beyond conjecture." Finding no "compelling formal reason" to justify the nature of the coda, he speculated that the finale as a whole might be, among other things, a "message" that "life is never entirely predictable, that there is always the possibility of good fortune or of disaster."

40. Johnson, *Mahler's Voices*, 272.

41. In addition to Johnson's *Mahler's Voices*, see, for example, Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian*; Zank, *Irony and Sound*; and Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody*.

42. Berger, "Beethoven and the Aesthetic State," 18; Mathew, "Beethoven and His Others," 184.

43. In addition to Longyear, "Beethoven and Romantic Irony," and Mathew, "Beethoven and His Others," see Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*, 78, 174; Hinton, "Not Which Tones?," esp. 75–77; Chua, *Absolute Music*; Liddle, "Irony and Ambiguity" (my thanks to Dr. Liddle for sharing a copy of his work with me); Mathew, *Political Beethoven*, esp. 186–87; November, *Beethoven's Theatrical Quartets*, 84; Johnson, "Very Much of This World," esp. 274–76; and Johnson, *Out of Time*, esp. 259–71.

44. See, for example, Longyear's general treatment of Romantic irony ("Beethoven and Romantic Irony"); Florian Kraemer's emphasis on irony as "disenchantment" (*Entzauberung der Musik*); and Nicholas Cook's injunction to "keep before us . . . the image of a Beethoven who was both earnest and ironical" (*Beethoven: Symphony No. 9*, 105).

perspective that privileged neither the positive nor the negative but insisted on the simultaneous necessity of both.

### The Discourse on Irony in Beethoven's Vienna

The particular strand of irony to be considered here is one with which Beethoven himself would have been familiar in the first decade of the nineteenth century, the years leading up to the composition of this quartet. It was around 1800 that irony began to be understood not simply as a local rhetorical device but as an instrument of knowledge.<sup>45</sup> Known variously as “cosmic,” “infinite,” or “epistemological” irony, this conception of irony rejects the idea that any one perspective by itself can suffice to make sense of the universe. Or to put this in more positive terms: this conception of irony insists that multiple perspectives are *essential* in any attempt to come to terms with the universe in all its complexity and chaos. In the case of music, and specifically in the case of opus 95, this would mean hearing the juxtaposition of contrasting voices not as contradictory but as complementary and constructive.

The most important figures in this discourse were Jean Paul (Johann Paul Friedrich Richter, 1763–1825), August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845), Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), Ludwig Tieck (1773–1853), and Adam Müller (1779–1829). With the exception of Jean Paul, all of them spent a substantial amount of time in Vienna at some point during the years 1805–10, and Jean Paul's works were well known there. These writers championed irony not simply as a means of contradiction or subversion but as the primary instrument of an epistemological framework that encouraged the simultaneous accommodation of multiple perspectives toward any given object or idea. By this line of thought, irony's function goes well beyond negation: its broader and higher purpose is to expand the realm of possible perspectives, no matter how contradictory the consequences of those perspectives may seem. Epistemological irony encourages a mode of understanding that moves beyond the limitations of linear, deductive reasoning and beyond the premise that any one perspective might be privileged, much less “correct.” In this context, we can hear the coda to the finale of opus 95 at least in part as a response to the intense discourse on irony taking place in Beethoven's Vienna during the time he was writing this quartet.

Friedrich Schlegel was the leading exponent of epistemological irony—more on him in due course—but when he moved to Vienna in 1810 he joined a group of prominent philosophers, critics, and playwrights there who were already helping to expand the concept's reach. His brother August

45. On the impact of irony on epistemology in the early nineteenth century, see Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*, esp. 73–76, and Oesterreich, *Spielarten der Selbsterfindung*.

Wilhelm had for two years been giving public lectures in Vienna on the history of literature, lectures that were attended by members of the aristocratic families and cultural elite in whose circles Beethoven moved. The list of subscribers includes such names as Lobkowitz, Kinsky, Liechtenstein, Dietrichstein, Schwarzenberg, Fries, Apponyi, Grassalkowitz, Hammer, Odeschali, Pálffy, Pichler, and Seckendorf, together with such literary figures as the Collin brothers, Johann Adam Schmidt, Joseph Sonnleithner, Joseph von Sonnenfels, and Georg August Griesinger.<sup>46</sup> August Wilhelm Schlegel's lectures on Shakespeare coincided with a tremendous wave of enthusiasm for the English playwright in Vienna, an enthusiasm Beethoven is known to have shared. And irony, manifested in Shakespeare's tendency to juxtapose the tragic and the comic, is one of the hallmarks of his style that was repeatedly emphasized by Schlegel and by the Viennese press in general.<sup>47</sup> The French diplomat Louis-Philippe-Joseph Girod de Vienney, Baron de Trémont, said of his visits to Beethoven in the fall of 1809 that the two would "talk philosophy, religion, politics, and especially of Shakespeare, his idol, and always in a language that would have provoked the laughter of anyone who might have been listening in."<sup>48</sup>

Irony in Shakespeare's plays, August Wilhelm Schlegel argued, is not limited to individual characters or scenes but frequently extends to the whole of the drama. Most poets, he observed, are "partisan," in that they "demand blind belief" from their readers. But "the more passionate the rhetoric, the more easily it falls short of its goal," for perceptive readers can become all too aware of being manipulated, and when we see through the artifice, we question our submission to the will of the artist.

If on the other hand by a dexterous maneuver the poet occasionally turns the coin over onto its less shiny side, he thereby places himself in a secret understanding with a select circle of his readers, those who are most perceptive. He shows them that he has anticipated their objections and that he is not a captive

46. For a full list of subscribers to the lectures, see Körner, *Krisenjahre der Frühromantik*, 3:302–6. On the lectures and their reception in Vienna, see Seidler, *Österreichischer Vormärz und Goethezeit*, 117–35. By August Wilhelm Schlegel's own account there were more than two hundred and fifty in the audience, "almost all high nobility, men of the court, ministers of state, generals, eighteen princesses." But what pleased him most was the keen attentiveness of the audience, and that the later lectures in the series were as well attended and received as the early ones. See his letter to David-François de Godot of August 31, 1808, quoted in Körner, *Krisenjahre der Frühromantik*, 3:302: "J'ai eu plus de 250 auditeurs, presque toute la haute noblesse, des hommes de la cour, des ministres d'état, des généraux, dix-huit princesses."

47. See Titcomb, "Beethoven and Shakespeare." Beethoven himself was often compared to Shakespeare; see *ibid.*, 429–30.

48. In Kopitz and Cadenbach, *Beethoven aus der Sicht seiner Zeitgenossen*, 2:1005: "Alors nous causions philosophie, religion, politique, et surtout de Shakespeare, son idole, et toujours dans un langage à faire rire les auditeurs, s'il y en avait eû." For a different translation, see Sonneck, *Beethoven: Impressions of Contemporaries*, 72.

of the objects being presented, but rather hovers freely above them, and that he if wanted to do things differently he could utterly annihilate that which he himself had magically conjured up.<sup>49</sup>

This twofold approach of the artist—to move an audience and yet at the same time demonstrate a certain emotional remove from the material at hand—is characteristic of early nineteenth-century attitudes toward irony as an artistic device that could at once be both engaged and distant.

Another figure active in this Viennese discourse was the playwright Ludwig Tieck, who was in personal contact with Beethoven on multiple occasions between early August and mid-October 1808. He witnessed the curious episode in which the composer smashed a bust of Prince Karl Lichnowsky in a fit of rage over a perceived slight from his erstwhile patron.<sup>50</sup> Tieck was already famous by this time for writing plays in which all pretense of aesthetic illusion is shattered, the actors stepping out of their roles and producers coming on stage to address audiences directly. “Dear Reader,” he interjects into his reworking of Charles Perrault’s tale of Bluebeard, “you speak so much of unity, of coherence in books. Look for once into your own breast and examine yourself; in the end you live exactly as—or worse than—I write.”<sup>51</sup> On the grounds of such moments of parabasis, Friedrich Schlegel called Tieck a modern-day Aristophanes, and a more recent critic has noted that Tieck’s works are precursors of later anti-illusionist dramas by Brecht, Genet, and Beckett.<sup>52</sup> Tieck distinguished irony from “mockery, ridicule, or persiflage,” with which it was too often associated; he preferred to align it instead with the “deep seriousness that is simultaneously bound to jest and true levity. It is not something that is merely negative, but is rather thoroughly positive. It is the power that preserves the poet’s command over his material; he should not

49. August Wilhelm Schlegel, *Ueber dramatische Kunst und Litteratur*, vol. 2, no. 2, 71–72: “Die Ironie bezieht sich aber beyhm Shak[e]speare nicht bloß auf die einzelnen Charakter, sondern häufig auf das Ganze der Handlung. Die meisten Dichter . . . nehmen Parthey, und verlangen von den Lesern blinden Glauben. . . . Je eifriger diese Rhetorik ist, desto leichter verfehlt sie ihren Zweck. Auf jeden Fall werden wir gewahr, daß wir die Sache nicht unmittelbar, sondern durch das Medium einer fremden Denkart erblicken. Wenn hingegen der Dichter zuweilen durch eine geschickte Wendung die weniger glänzende Kehrseite der Münze nach vorne dreht, so setzt er sich mit dem auserlesenen Kreis der Einsichtsvollen unter seinen Lesern oder Zuschauern in ein verstohlnes Einverständnis; er zeigt ihnen, daß er ihre Einwendungen vorhergesehen und im voraus zugegeben habe; daß er nicht selbst in dem dargestellten Gegenstande befangen sey, sonder frey über ihm schwebt, und daß er den schönen, unwiderstehlich anziehenden Schein, den er selbst hervorgezaubert, wenn er anders wollte, unerbittlich vernichten könnte.”

50. See Kopitz, “Das Beethoven-Erlebnis Ludwig Tiecks.”

51. Tieck, *Die sieben Weiber des Blaubart* (1797), 220: “Lieber Leser, Du sprichst so viel von der Einheit, vom Zusammenhange in den Büchern, greife einmal in Deinen Busen, und frage Dich selber; am Ende lebst Du ganz so, oder noch schlimmer, als ich schreibe.”

52. Friedrich Schlegel, *Geschichte der europäischen Literatur*, 94; Handwerk, “Romantic Irony,” 216–17. On the reception of Aristophanes in German-speaking lands, see Holtermann, *Der deutsche Aristophanes*. On Tieck’s use of irony in general, see Ohmer, *Ludwig Tieck*.

lose himself in it but rather stand above it. Irony thus protects him from one-sidedness and empty idealizing."<sup>53</sup>

Aristophanes was of particular interest to the publicist and literary critic Adam Müller, who had converted to Catholicism during an extended stay in Vienna in 1805. Müller and Friedrich Schlegel together played a central role in reviving the ancient playwright's comedies, which until that time had been all but forgotten, at least in the public mind.<sup>54</sup> Like Tieck, Müller saw irony as a source of artistic freedom: by allowing the artist to distance himself from his own work, irony expressed "the entire secret of artistic life in its true and original form. If you desire a German translation of the word [*Ironie*], I know of none better than this: *Revelation of the freedom of the artist or of the individual.*"<sup>55</sup>

Not present in Vienna but widely discussed there at the time was the novelist and critic Jean Paul, whose *Vorschule der Ästhetik* (1804) placed humor—a broadly encompassing term that for him included irony—at the center of his own writings and aesthetics. He reserved "irony" for a more specifically destructive sort of humor, maintaining that humor is subjective, irony objective.<sup>56</sup> Jean Paul's taxonomy of various devices, including humor ("Laune," "Humor"), wit ("Witz"), and irony itself ("Ironie"), was part of an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to bring conceptual order to a range of related but unruly concepts. Terminology among the early Romantics was decidedly inconsistent. Novalis, for example, noted that "Schlegel's irony seems to me to be genuine humor," though he did not find the terminological difference a bad thing in itself. To the contrary: "for an idea, multiple names are advantageous."<sup>57</sup>

53. Tieck, *Erinnerungen*, 2:238–39: "Die Ironie, von der ich spreche, ist ja nicht Spott, Hohn, Persiflage, oder was man sonst der Art gewöhnlich darunter zu verstehn pflegt, es ist vielmehr der tiefste Ernst, der zugleich mit Scherz und wahrer Heiterkeit verbunden ist. Sie ist nicht bloß negativ, sondern etwas durchaus Positives. Sie ist die Kraft, die dem Dichter die Herrschaft über den Stoff erhält; er soll sich nicht an denselben verlieren, sondern über ihm stehen. So bewahrt ihn die Ironie vor Einseitigkeiten und leerem Idealisiren." On Tieck's attitude toward his public, see Lussy, *Tieck's Romantic Irony*, 200–14.

54. On Schlegel's importance in the rehabilitation of Aristophanes, even before Müller, see Holtermann, *Der deutsche Aristophanes*.

55. Müller, "Ironie, Lustspiel, Aristophanes," 234: "das ganze Geheimnis des künstlerischen Lebens in seiner wahren ursprünglichen Gestalt ausdrückt, den Begriff der *Ironie*. Verlangen Sie eine deutsche Übersetzung des Worts, so weiß ich Ihnen keine bessere zu geben als: *Offenbarung der Freiheit des Künstlers oder des Menschen*" (Müller's emphasis). Originally published in *Phöbus* 1 (April–May 1808): 56–67, this essay was republished in Vienna in Müller's *Vermischte Schriften*, vol. 2 (Vienna: Camesina, 1812), 165–90. *Phöbus* itself, although published in Dresden, was distributed in Vienna by the Kunst- und Industrie-Comptoir; see the critical commentary to Müller's *Kritische, ästhetische und philosophische Schriften*, 2:560. On Müller's concept of irony, see Stroh Schneider-Kohrs, *Die romantische Ironie*, 162–85, and Dane, *Critical Mythology of Irony*, 122–26.

56. On the centrality of humor in Jean Paul's aesthetics, see Fleming, *Pleasures of Abandonment*. On Jean Paul's distinction between humor and irony, see Behler, "Theory of Irony," 67–68.

57. Novalis, *Vermischte Bemerkungen und Blütenstaub*, 428: "Schlegels Ironie scheint mir ächter Humor zu seyn. Mehrere Namen sind einer Idee vortheilhaft."

Jean Paul's argument for the centrality of such devices in the literary arts was in any case enormously influential. Humor in all its manifestations ultimately revolves around the quality of multivalence, by which a passage of prose or music could be read or heard in more than one way at the same time. Humor, Jean Paul maintained, is the "inverted sublime" ("das umgekehrte Erhabene"), which

annihilates not the individual but the finite through its contrast with the idea. It recognizes no individual foolishness, no fools, but only folly and a mad world. Unlike the common joker with his innuendoes, humor does not elevate individual imbecility but lowers the great . . . thereby annihilating both great and small, because before infinity everything is equal and nothing.<sup>58</sup>

Jean Paul then proceeded to draw a specific parallel between the music of Haydn and the prose of the English humorist Laurence Sterne, who

repeatedly speaks at length and weightily about certain phenomena before finally concluding that not a single word of it all, in any case, has been true. One can sense something similar to the audacity of annihilating humor, and at the same time an expression of disdain for the world, in certain music—for example, Haydn's, which annihilates entire passages through one that is foreign, and which storms along between *pianissimo* and *fortissimo*, Presto and Andante.<sup>59</sup>

Beethoven would go on to juxtapose incongruous elements in his music to an even more extreme degree and as a result earned repeated approbation during his lifetime as a "musical Jean Paul."<sup>60</sup>

We cannot know to what extent Beethoven's thought was shaped by any one or more of these individuals; beyond his documented contacts with Tieck there is no evidence directly linking the composer to any of these figures. But it is implausible that he had no inkling of the contemporary discourse about irony, for the Viennese press was full of discussions of it, and his circle of acquaintances and business associates included numerous

58. Jean Paul, *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, 125 (§32): "Der Humor, als das umgekehrte Erhabene, vernichtet nicht das Einzelne, sondern das Endliche durch den Kontrast mit der Idee. Es gibt für ihn keine einzelne Torheit, keine Toren, sondern nur Torheit und eine tolle Welt; er hebt—ungleich dem gemeinen Spaßmacher mit seinen Seitenhieben—keine einzelne Narrheit heraus, sondern er erniedrigt das Große . . . um ihm das Große an die Seite zu setzen und so beide zu vernichten, weil vor der Unendlichkeit alles gleich ist und nichts." Translation slightly modified from that by Margaret R. Hale in Jean Paul, *Horn of Oberon*, 88–89.

59. Jean Paul, *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, 131–32 (§33): "So spricht z. B. Sterne mehrmals lang und erwägend über gewisse Begebenheiten, bis er endlich entscheidet: es sei ohnehin kein Wort davon wahr. Etwas der Keckheit des vernichtenden Humors Ähnliches, gleichsam einen Ausdruck der Welt-Verachtung kann man bei mancher Musik, z. B. der Haydn'schen, vernemen, welche ganze Tonreihen durch eine fremde vernichtet und zwischen Pianissimo und Fortissimo, Presto und Andante wechselnd stürmt." The comments on Haydn appeared in the first edition of the *Vorschule* (1804); those on Sterne were added for the second edition (1813).

60. See Bonds, "Haydn, Laurence Sterne," and Bauer, "Beethoven—unser musikalischer Jean Paul."

participants in this debate.<sup>61</sup> Joseph Schreyvogel, for example, directed the Kunst- und Industrie-Comptoir—Beethoven's primary publisher in the first decade of the nineteenth century—from 1807 until 1813 and also published and edited the *Sonntagsblatt*, a journal that reported extensively on August Wilhelm Schlegel's Vienna lectures and published a number of Friedrich Schlegel's aphorisms. These included one that reads "Irony is the form of paradox. Paradox is everything that is at once good and great."<sup>62</sup> Schreyvogel (who worked under the pseudonyms "Thomas West" and "August West") hailed Friedrich Schlegel as "the true champion of the new aesthetics," noting that "his seriousness is irony; his irony appears to be the most bitter seriousness."<sup>63</sup> Throughout its three-year run (1806–9) the *Sonntagsblatt* routinely delivered its position on various topics with large doses of its own irony. One reviewer, possibly Schreyvogel himself, asserted that wit must have no other purpose than to evoke laughter, and that by this measure Lucian, Juvenal, Cervantes, and Swift were mere "ordinary minds," whereas "Eulenspiegel, Hasenhut, and a pair of young jokers with whom I am acquainted" are "the most ingenious talents who ever aspired to wit."<sup>64</sup> On another occasion, and in a more sober vein, Schreyvogel evoked some of the same names to illustrate the serious nature of jest:

But the jest [*Scherz*] must have a purpose, and something that serves reason must come out of the play of imagination if that purpose is not to be perceived by a serious spirit with indifference or even revulsion. We know of Socrates's tendency toward irony and the use he made of it. A sense of deep seriousness lies at the base of all truly great products of comic literature. Lucian, Cervantes, Swift, are without doubt of more serious natures than a large number of moral-philosophical writers, who make a profession of seriousness and morality.<sup>65</sup>

61. In his *Vertraute Briefe*, 2:153, the composer Johann Friedrich Reichardt tantalizingly mentions Friedrich Schlegel and Beethoven in the same list of personalities he was able to meet at social events around this time: "Frank, Sonnenfels, Collin, Schlegel, Hammer, Füger, Be[e]-thoven u. a. m. in Gesellschaften angetroffen."

62. Friedrich Schlegel, "Axiomata und Postulate," 332. This is the Lyceums-Fragment 48 (*KFSA*, 2:153), which Schlegel himself repeated in his essay "Über die Unverständlichkeit," 368: "Ironie ist die Form des Paradoxen. Paradox ist alles was zugleich gut und groß ist."

63. West, "Dramaturgische Briefe," 324–25: "Hr. Friedrich Schlegel ist der eigentliche Champion der neuen Aesthetik"; "Sein Ernst ist Ironie; seine Ironie scheint der bitterste Ernst zu seyn."

64. West?, "Ernst und Scherz," 227–28: "An diesen Maßstab gehalten, scheinen mir Lucian, Juvenal, Cervantes und Swift nur alltägliche Köpfe; Eulenspiegel, Hasenhut, und ein Paar junge Schalksnarren meiner Bekanntschaft hingegen die sinnreichsten Talente, die jemahls auf Witz Anspruch machten." Anton Hasenhut (1766–1841) was a popular Viennese comedic actor at the Theater an der Wien at the time.

65. West, "Ernst (Zu Palmers Wörterbuch)," 370: "Nur muß der Scherz eine Absicht haben, und aus dem Spiele der Einbildungskraft ein Resultat für die Vernunft hervorgehen, wenn sie einem ernsten Geiste nicht gleichgültig, ja verächtlich werden sollen. Man kennt den Hang des Sokrates zur Ironie, und den Gebrauch, den er davon machte. Allen wahrhaft großen

Beethoven was also in direct contact with two other figures closely connected to the Schlegel brothers: Joseph Stoll (1778–1815) and Leo von Seckendorf (1775–1809), coeditors of the short-lived *Prometheus*. In its brief run from January through September 1808 this journal published numerous pieces both about and by the Schlegels, including poetry, aphorisms, and essays; Beethoven published the first of his four settings of Goethe's "Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt" ("Sehnsucht," WoO 134, no. 1) in the third number of the journal.<sup>66</sup> The final issue of *Prometheus* includes an extended essay on humor by the historian and playwright Gottlob Heinrich Adolph Wagner, who called irony the "soul and life-principle" of the ancient world because of its ability to separate and unravel that which appears united; the humor of the modern world, by contrast, unites that which would seem to be separated and unbound. Both approaches, Wagner argued, are nevertheless devoted to distancing the self from the object and in so doing create alternative perspectives on the world.<sup>67</sup>

### The Perception of Irony in Beethoven's Music

Beethoven's contemporaries certainly recognized the tendency of his music to juxtapose incongruous elements, though not necessarily to unite them. References to "bizarre" passages recur often in the earliest reviews of his music, and the first of many comparisons to Jean Paul appeared in 1807 in connection with the *Eroica* Symphony.<sup>68</sup> Other literary figures to whom Beethoven was repeatedly compared include Cervantes, Shakespeare, and Byron, each closely linked to the aesthetics of irony.<sup>69</sup> A French critic writing in 1811, after hearing a portion of an unidentified symphony by Beethoven, gave us this memorable image: "Having penetrated the listener's spirit with a sweet melancholy, he immediately shreds it with a mass of

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Producten der comischen Literatur liegt ein tiefer Ernst zum Grunde. Lucian, Cervantes, Swift sind ohne Zweifel ernsthaftere Naturen, als eine große Anzahl moralisch-philosophischer Schriftsteller, die von Ernst und Sittlichkeit Profession machen." "Palmer" was the pseudonym of one of Schreyvogel's collaborators. On Schreyvogel's polemics, see Krieglleder, "Die Romantik in Österreich."

66. On *Prometheus*, see Michael Grus's commentary in Seckendorf, *Korrespondenzen der Goethezeit*, 1:142–86. The dramatist Heinrich Joseph von Collin and Johann Adam Schmidt, Beethoven's personal physician from 1801 to 1809, also belonged to Seckendorf's circle in Vienna.

67. Wagner, "Der Scherz," 65: "Seele und Lebensprinzip." Seidler, *Österreichischer Vormärz und Goethezeit*, 114, attributes the essay to the philosopher Johann Jakob Wagner, but it is listed among Gottlob Heinrich Adolph Wagner's writings in *Das gelehrte Teutschland*: see "Wagner, Gottlob Heinrich Adolph," 309. The uncle of Richard Wagner, historian and playwright Gottlob Heinrich Adolph Wagner (1774–1835) attended the Thomasschule in Leipzig and later heard Fichte lecture in Jena.

68. See Bauer, "Beethoven—unser musikalischer Jean Paul," 83.

69. On Byron, see Garber, *Self, Text, and Romantic Irony*.



barbarous chords. It is as if we were seeing doves and crocodiles penned up together."<sup>70</sup> The nineteen-year-old Franz Schubert noted in his diary in June 1816 that the "Bizzarrie" of much modern-day music was traceable "almost exclusively" to "one of our greatest German artists"—Schubert almost certainly had Beethoven in mind here—"who unites, confuses, and makes no distinction between the tragic and the comic, the agreeable and the repulsive, the heroic and the howling, the most holy and the harlequin."<sup>71</sup>

The first explicit use of the term "irony" in connection with Beethoven's music appears in a notice from 1814 by the Berlin-based critic, actor, librettist, and composer Carl Blum (1786–1844). Blum's comments are particularly rich in that they touch on two of the most important qualities consistently associated with the aesthetics of irony in the early nineteenth century. First, irony is something that *hovers* over the artwork as a whole and only occasionally imposes itself with force. It is subtle. Second, irony is perceptible not to all but only to some—whether August Wilhelm Schlegel's "select circle of readers" or, for that matter, Beethoven's "small circle of connoisseurs":

In the works of the greatest poets there is often an irony that hovers gently above the whole but that breaks through incisively at times; it is easily perceived by thoughtful observers. I would adduce here, among many, Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Goethe. Beethoven's compositions have not been considered nearly enough from this perspective; yet only in this way will that which is *seemingly* unpleasant and alien be recognized as exquisite and necessary. Genuine poetic irony hovers over many of his most outstanding works, at times gently, but also at times incisively and frightfully.<sup>72</sup>

Blum also identifies the three authors whom critics of Beethoven's time associated with irony more often than any others. If Shakespeare and Cervantes

70. A. G., "Conservatoire Impérial de Musique," 310–11: "Après avoir pénétré l'âme d'une douce mélancolie, il la déchire aussi-tôt par un amas d'accords barbares. Il me semble voir renfermer ensemble des colombes et des crocodilles." Though often attributed to the composer Giuseppe Cambini, this notice is signed simply "A. G."

71. Diary entry of June 16, 1816, in Schubert, *Die Dokumente seines Lebens*, 45: "[die] Bizzarrie . . . welche bey den meisten Tonsetzern jetzt zu herrschen pflegt, u. einem unserer größten deutschen Künstler beynahe allein zu verdanken ist, von dieser Bizzarrie, welche das Tragische mit dem Komischen, das Angenehme mit dem Widrigen, das Heroische mit Heulerrey, das Heiligste mit dem Harlequin vereint, verwechselt, nicht unterscheidet." See also Parsons, "Pour the Sweet Milk."

72. B[lum], "Miscellen. 3": "In den Werken der grössten Dichter ist eine, oft nur leise über dem Ganzen schwebende, oft aber auch schneidend hervorbrechende Ironie, dem sinnig Aufmerkamen leicht bemerkbar. Ich erinnere hier, statt aller Andern, nur an Shak[e]speare, Cervantes und Göthe. Beethovens Compositionen sind, auch von dieser Seite, noch lange nicht genug beachtet; und doch wird eben nur hieraus manches *scheinbar* Herbe und Fremdartige bey ihm, als köstlich und nothwendig erkannt. Ueber vielen seiner vortrefflichsten Productionen schwebt, bald leise, bald aber auch schneidend und fürchtbar, diese echt poetische Ironie." The attribution to Blum is from Kunze, *Beethoven*, 673.

would seem to be predictable choices, Goethe might come as a surprise. Yet Goethe's contemporaries repeatedly noted the presence of irony in his writings. The most famous instance was Friedrich Schlegel's widely circulated and much-discussed essay of 1798 on *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, in which Schlegel praised the "irony hovering above the entire work," even while noting that not every reader would perceive it.<sup>73</sup> "Schweben"—to hover, to be in suspension between two points—is the word Blum would later use, and it is a word often invoked in connection with irony. Schlegel lauded the novel's "aura of dignity and momentousness" that could nevertheless "smile at itself."<sup>74</sup> Goethe's air of detachment, he maintained, gave the novel an aura that was at once both serious and humorous, weighty and light: "One should not let oneself be fooled when the poet treats persons and events in such a light and humorous way, when he almost never mentions his hero without irony, and when he seems to smile down from the heights of his spirit upon his masterwork, as if this were not for him the most solemn seriousness."<sup>75</sup> For Adam Müller, Goethe had no equal in "the art of contradiction, the reflective exchange of algebraic signs, the form in which any possible contradiction can manifest itself, thus in rooted motion, in true irony, in universality."<sup>76</sup> Jean Paul similarly saw Goethe as one of the great "humorists," together with Cervantes, Sterne, Voltaire, Rabelais, and Shakespeare—in short, with those authors widely perceived at the time as ironists.<sup>77</sup>

Goethe himself used the term in a strikingly broad, epistemological sense. In his *Farbenlehre* of 1810, he maintained that

the mere viewing of a thing can do little for us. Every act of seeing develops into an observation, every observation into a reflection, every reflection into an association, and thus one can say that with every attentive view of the world we theorize. But to undertake and do this self-consciously, with an awareness

73. Friedrich Schlegel, "Über Goethes Meister," 137–38, here 137: "die Ironie, die über dem ganzen Werke schwebt."

74. *Ibid.*, 138: "Dieser sich selbst belächelnde Schein von Würde und Bedeutsamkeit."

75. *Ibid.*, 133: "Man lasse sich also dadurch, daß der Dichter selbst die Personen und die Begebenheiten so leicht und so launig zu nehmen, den Helden fast nie ohne Ironie zu erwähnen, und auf sein Meisterwerk selbst von der Höhe seines Geistes herabzulächeln scheint, nicht täuschen, als sei es ihm nicht der heiligste Ernst." On the widespread perception of *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* as ironic, see Behler, *Studien zur Romantik*, 57–58.

76. Müller, "Die Lehre vom Gegensatz," 238: "An gegensätzlicher Kunst, an der besonnenen Umwechslung der algebraischen Zeichen, in der Gestalt welches möglichen Gegensatzes sie auch auftreten können, also an fester Beweglichkeit, an wahrer Ironie, an Weltreichtum wissen wir ihm [Goethe] keinen Meister an die Seite zu setzen."

77. Jean Paul cites these figures in his *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, §32, 125–29 ("Humoristische Totalität"), and Goethe in §38, 154–56 ("Der ironische Stoff"). On irony in the works of Goethe, see Hass, "Über die Ironie bei Goethe," and Dye, *Love and Death in Goethe*, esp. ch. 11 ("Truth. Paradox. Irony").

of self, with freedom, and—to allow ourselves the use of a bold word—with irony, a particular skill is necessary if . . . the desired result of our experience is to become vibrant and useful.<sup>78</sup>

Irony may seem an odd methodological aspiration for a scientific treatise, but Goethe's use of it here is consistent with the prevailing notion of the concept during his lifetime as a hallmark of detachment and reflection. As literary critic John A. McCarthy puts it, irony for Goethe "designates a bifocal view of the world" that arises from "the simultaneous awareness of subject and object."<sup>79</sup>

This conscious exercise of authorial detachment—carried to the extent of ostentatious distancing—is a quality that Friedrich Schlegel and Jean Paul alike associated with the figure of Socrates, who in Plato's dialogues famously professes ignorance so as to expose the faulty logic of others. Socratic irony is decidedly not local: it focuses not on the import of any given assertion but on the premises it implies. As Schlegel describes it,

Socratic irony is the only dissimulation that is completely involuntary and yet completely calculated. It is as impossible to feign it as it is to reveal it. It will remain a riddle to anyone who does not possess it, even after the most open avowal. It is intended to deceive no one, save those who consider it deceptive. . . . In it, everything should be playfulness and everything should be seriousness, everything should be candidly open and everything should be deeply disguised. It springs from the union of *savoir vivre* and the scientific spirit, from the fusion of a complete philosophy of nature and a complete philosophy of art. It comprises and arouses a feeling of the insoluble conflict between the unconditional and the conditional, and of the impossibility and necessity of a complete articulation of the same. It is the freest of all licenses, for through it one transcends oneself; and yet it is the most law-bound as well, for it is absolutely necessary. It is a very good sign if those who are attuned quite simply have no idea how to take this constant self-parody; they believe and disbelieve over and over again until they become dizzy and consider the joke as something serious and the serious as a joke.<sup>80</sup>

78. Goethe, *Zur Farbenlehre: Didaktischer Teil*, 317: "Denn das bloße Anblicken einer Sache kann uns nicht fördern. Jedes Ansehen geht über in ein Betrachten, jedes Betrachten in ein Sinnen, jedes Sinnen in ein Verknüpfen, und so kann man sagen, daß wir schon bei jedem aufmerksamen Blick in die Welt theoretisieren. Dieses aber mit Bewußtsein, mit Selbstkenntnis, mit Freiheit und, um uns eines gewagten Wortes zu bedienen, mit Ironie zu tun und vorzunehmen, eine solche Gewandtheit ist nötig, wenn . . . das Erfahrungsergebnis, das wir hoffen, recht lebendig und nützlich werden soll."

79. McCarthy, *Crossing Boundaries*, 270.

80. Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA*, 2:160 (Lyceums-Fragment 108): "Die Sokratische Ironie ist die einzige durchaus unwillkürliche, und doch durchaus besonnene Verstellung. Es ist gleich unmöglich sie zu erkünsteln, und sie zu verraten. Wer sie nicht hat, dem bleibt sie auch nach dem offensten Geständnis ein Rätsel. Sie soll niemanden täuschen, als die, welche sie für Täuschung halten. . . . In ihr soll alles Scherz und alles Ernst sein, alles treuherzig offen, und alles tief verstellt. Sie entspringt aus der Vereinigung von Lebenskunstsinne und wissenschaftlichem Geist, aus dem Zusammentreffen vollendeter Naturphilosophie und vollendeter

This fragment does more than merely describe Socratic irony: it enacts Schlegel's own conception of irony, oscillating as it does between opposites and in the process embracing both. The binaries come in rapid succession here: Socratic irony is at once involuntary and calculated, entirely serious and entirely playful, open and disguised; it fuses art and nature; it captures the impossibility of reconciling the unconditional and the conditional, the absolute and the relative; it is both the freest and the most law-bound of all licenses.

With its emphasis on the mutually productive tension between opposites, this type of irony can be understood as a form of dialectic, as indeed it was by Schlegel and his contemporaries.<sup>81</sup> Schlegel defined an idea as a "concept perfected to the point of irony . . . a constantly self-producing fluctuation of two conflicting thoughts."<sup>82</sup> The key word here is "constantly." Irony may begin with negation but it does not end there. In fact, it never ends—hence the occasional designation "infinite irony." For Schlegel, irony is by its very nature always in flux, a "constant alternation of self-creation and self-destruction."<sup>83</sup> Synthesis, such as it is, is necessarily provisional and temporary. Irony was to his mind not merely a fallback, but rather the best epistemological approach available, the only position honest enough to accommodate the chaotic universe on its own chaotic terms and embrace—not overcome, but embrace—the irreconcilable differences between subject and object through a perpetual state of oscillation, of hovering, of *Schweben*.

Schlegel's theory of irony owes much to Johann Gottlieb Fichte's notion of the self. Fichte (1762–1814) rejected the idea of the self as a fully integrated entity, asserting instead its processual nature in a constant hovering or oscillation (*Schweben*) between an active, positing self (the "I") and the boundaries inherent in that positing (the "Not-I"), or that which delimits the "I." "The nature of the 'I' is a drive," he declared.<sup>84</sup> The self is thus both

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Kunstphilosophie. Sie enthält und erregt ein Gefühl von dem unauflöselichen Widerstreit des Unbedingten und des Bedingten, der Unmöglichkeit und Notwendigkeit einer vollständigen Mitteilung. Sie ist die freieste aller Lizenzen, denn durch sie setzt man sich über sich selbst weg; und doch auch die gesetzlichste, denn sie ist unbedingt notwendig. Es ist ein sehr gutes Zeichen, wenn die harmonisch Platten gar nicht wissen, wie sie diese stete Selbstparodie zu nehmen haben, immer wieder von neuem glauben und mißglauben, bis sie schwindlich werden, den Scherz grade für Ernst, und den Ernst für Scherz halten." Schlegel quoted this passage again in slightly altered form in his essay "Über die Unverständlichkeit," 368.

81. See, for example, Steck, *Die Geschichte der Philosophie*, 179–82; Behler, "Theory of Irony," esp. 62–67 ("Irony and Dialectics"); and Schulz, *Metaphysik des Schwebens*.

82. Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA*, 2:184 (Athenäums-Fragment 121): "Eine Idee ist ein bis zur Ironie vollendeter Begriff . . . der stete sich selbst erzeugende Wechsel zwei streitender Gedanken." Translation from Dane, *Critical Mythology of Irony*, 109. On irony in Schlegel's aphorisms, see Maack, *Ironie und Autorschaft*.

83. Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA*, 2:172 (Athenäums-Fragment 51): "steten Wechsel von Selbstschöpfung und Selbstvernichtung."

84. Fichte, *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, 79: "Die Natur des Ich ist ein Trieb." (Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* is translated by Daniel Breazeale as *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy*.)

an action and its corollary, the product of the reflection that lies at the heart of that action. Schlegel's epistemological irony is in effect an application of the very oscillation by which the self can recognize its own existence.<sup>85</sup> Fichte's sense of the self not as a substance but as a perpetual process also influenced Friedrich Schiller's notion that the human spirit is constantly driven by the tension between the sensuous ("Sinntrieb") and the abstract ("Formtrieb"), a tension that can be reconciled only through art—that is, through a "Spieltrieb," or "play-drive."<sup>86</sup> Novalis, too, was strongly influenced by Fichte's conception of the self, noting at one point that "all being, and being in general, is nothing other than freedom—an *oscillation* between extremes that must be united and must be separated. It is from this perspective of oscillation that all reality derives; everything is incorporated in it. . . . For oscillation . . . is the source, the mother of all reality, reality itself."<sup>87</sup>

Schlegel called this ongoing process a "Wechselerweis," an "alternating proof" or "alternating demonstration." Such an approach conjures up the specter of circularity and violates one of the most basic principles of logic, the Aristotelian principle of noncontradiction, that "opposite assertions cannot be true at the same time."<sup>88</sup> But circularity and contradiction are abhorrent only if one accepts the singularity of outcomes as a desired goal and if one begins from a point of departure that could itself be demonstrated as true. Schlegel and his cohorts were convinced that the search for a single starting point in philosophy was futile, and that philosophy really had to "begin in the middle, like an epic poem," as he put it, in motion and not at any arbitrary, fixed point.<sup>89</sup> This outlook has since come to be called "anti-foundationalist." Philosophy, Schlegel maintained, is for this reason "the true home of irony" and could achieve its aims only by merging with other modes

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On the importance of *Schweben* in Fichte's thought, see Janke, *Vom Bilde des Absoluten*, 308–34. On Fichte and Schlegel, see Beiser, *Romantic Imperative*, 119–23.

85. On Fichte's philosophy as an inspiration for Friedrich Schlegel, see Behler, "Theory of Irony," 56–62, and Hühn, "Das Schweben der Einbildungskraft." On the importance of irony in Fichte's philosophy, see Oesterreich, *Spielarten der Selbsterfindung*, 19–22.

86. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. On the question of Schiller's influence on Friedrich Schlegel, see Beiser, *Romantic Imperative*, 116–19.

87. Novalis, *Philosophische Studien*, 266: "Alles Seyn, Seyn überhaupt ist nichts als Freyseyn—*Schweben* zwischen Extremen, die nothwendig zu vereinigen und nothwendig zu trennen sind. Aus diesem Lichtpunct des Schwebens strömt alle Realität aus—in ihm ist alles enthalten. . . . [D]as Schweben . . . ist der Quell, die Mater aller Realität, die Realität selbst" (Novalis's emphasis).

88. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV 6, 1011b13–20. Translation from *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, 76.

89. Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA*, 2:178 (Athenäums-Fragment 84): "Subjektiv betrachtet, fängt die Philosophie doch immer in der Mitte an, wie das epische Gedicht." On Schlegel's antifoundationalism, see Frank, *Unendliche Annäherung*, esp. ch. 11 (which is included in the portion of that work translated by Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert as *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*). See also Rockmore, "Hegel, German Idealism, and Antifoundationalism."

of thought: "All art should become science, and all science should become art; poetry and philosophy should be united."<sup>90</sup>

This was a radical new way of thinking about thinking. Kant had rejected any hint of circular thought, but later philosophers, beginning with Fichte, recognized that one possible way—perhaps the only way—out of the dilemma of subjectivity was a conceptual system that was antifoundational, circular rather than linear. In Schlegel's theory of irony, as Daniel Dahlstrom succinctly puts it, "there can be no pretension to an endgame of some harmonious totality."<sup>91</sup> This mode of thought is basic to early Romantic philosophy and helps to explain both why it fell from favor later in the nineteenth century and why it has enjoyed renewed respect more recently in the twentieth and twenty-first.<sup>92</sup>

Among later writers on Beethoven, Theodor Adorno in particular was drawn to the idea of *Schweben* as a foundational element of epistemology.<sup>93</sup> Lydia Goehr has shown just how central this concept was for both Adorno and Schoenberg, tracing its roots back to the writings of the early Romantic philosophers, including Fichte, Novalis, Schelling, and Friedrich Schlegel. She notes Adorno's distinctive transformation of this philosophical principle, however, and rightly emphasizes the differences between earlier and later applications of the concept:

Between the German Idealists and Adorno lay a course of history that had moved from a still living society to a dead one. Life, he would write after Auschwitz and at the extreme, can no longer be led to death, for life is already dead. The historical difference was crucial: if Adorno was to use *das Schwebende* effectively in his own philosophical writing, he would have to do so by using the concept in the service of a modernist negative dialectics, and that meant in deep historical recognition of the metaphysical impossibility of reaching a harmonized state within an idealist construction of the world.<sup>94</sup>

In this sense, Adorno emphasized the tearing down rather than the building up inherent in Friedrich Schlegel's notion of a constant cycle of creation and destruction. Still, there are many points of contact with earlier perspectives on *das Schwebende*. Adorno called the sign of truth in Beethoven's music its

90. Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA*, 2:152 (Lyceums-Fragment 42): "Die Philosophie ist die eigentliche Heimat der Ironie"; and *KFSA*, 2:161 (Lyceums-Fragment 115): "Alle Kunst soll Wissenschaft, und alle Wissenschaft soll Kunst werden; Poesie und Philosophie sollen vereint sein."

91. Dahlstrom, "Play and Irony," 127.

92. On connections between early Romantic aesthetic theory and more recent philosophy, see Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *L'absolu littéraire* (translated by Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester as *The Literary Absolute*); Peter, "Friedrich Schlegel und Adorno"; and Schumacher, *Die Ironie der Unverständlichkeit*.

93. On the role of hovering or oscillation in philosophy in general, see Schulz, *Metaphysik des Schwebens*, and Menninghaus, *Unendliche Verdopplung*.

94. Goehr, "Adorno, Schoenberg," 629.

"Suspension," its transcendence of form, and cites as an example of this the passage that begins at measure 72 of the third (slow) F minor movement of the String Quartet op. 59, no. 1. This new theme, he points out, appears at the moment when a listener would reasonably expect the onset of the recapitulation; what we get instead is formally superfluous, and the theme cannot be related to what has gone before—a description that maps readily onto the coda of the finale of opus 95. A structurally anomalous passage such as this, Adorno maintains, throws light on those more overtly "incomprehensible" moments in Beethoven's music, such as the E minor theme in the development section of the first movement of the *Eroica* Symphony, or the secondary theme in the slow movement of the Piano Sonata in D Minor, op. 31, no. 2 (the "Tempest").<sup>95</sup>

But if irony is a never-ending dialectic, what are we to make of a dialectic that does not begin until the eleventh hour and for which there is no rejoinder? What makes the coda of opus 95's finale particularly problematic is that it seems to serve no structural purpose: it is easy to imagine the quartet without this curious ending, for by the time we reach it there is nothing in the minor-mode section of the finale that seems to be missing, as the rondo has run its course with the requisite main theme and alternating episodes. Nor is there any sense of metamorphosis here at the end. We do not hear a reinterpretation in the major mode of a theme previously presented in the minor, as we do, for example, in the coda of the finale of opus 132; instead, we are presented with a theme that is entirely new. And perhaps most strikingly of all, there is no sense of back-and-forth, as in, say, the finale of opus 135, which alternates several times between a question ("Muss es sein?") and its answer ("Es muss sein!"). Opus 95 offers contrast but no rejoinder, not even the semblance of a gesture toward synthesis.

This coda constitutes the equivalent of the quartet's "last words," and Western culture has a long history of scrutinizing last words for heightened meaning, particularly if they are enigmatic. Because of its seemingly incongruous nature, we can hear certain resonances between the end of opus 95 and the last words of Socrates as reported by Phaedo in the Platonic dialogue that bears his name. Phaedo tells us in some detail how the poison Socrates had consumed began to take effect, body part by body part. And then at the end comes this:

As his belly was getting cold Socrates uncovered his head—he had covered it—and said—these were his last words—"Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; make this offering to him and do not forget."—"It shall be done," said Crito, "tell us if there is anything else." But there was no answer. Shortly afterwards

95. Adorno, *Beethoven: Philosophie der Musik*, 36 (translated in Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, 14). These observations come shortly after Adorno's oft-quoted assertion that "Beethoven's music is Hegelian philosophy, yet at the same time truer" ("Beethovens Musik ist die Hegelsche Philosophie: sie ist aber zugleich wahrer als diese").

Socrates made a movement; the man uncovered him and his eyes were fixed. Seeing this Crito closed his mouth and his eyes.<sup>96</sup>

Like the ending of opus 95, these dying words have evoked both admiration and scorn, both of which are summarized in a brief essay entitled “Irony” by the playwright August von Kotzebue, published in Berlin in 1806:

Irony is in fact a dangerous thing, for among a hundred persons there will always be ninety-nine who do not understand it but rather accept it in full seriousness. “Crito,” Socrates said at the hour of his death, “we owe a cock to Asclepius; pray do not forget to pay the debt.” Voltaire, Racine, and even our own Haller reproached this noblest of men for these words. It is incomprehensible, they say, that Socrates, the sworn enemy of all superstition, could die with such an absurdity on his lips. Other clever people, however, surmise—rightly, it seems to me—that Socrates, who was always a great friend of irony, was merely joking here as well. Whenever anyone had been rescued from grave danger, the Greeks used to use the expression “You owe Asclepius a cock.” . . . Voltaire, Racine, and Haller could have spared themselves their astonishment, for it is precisely this joke that demonstrates that the dying man stayed true to character even in death.<sup>97</sup>

More recent scholars have argued that Socrates’s final words were actually meant quite seriously as a way of saying that death is a cure for the grave danger that is life.<sup>98</sup> It is only fitting that the philosopher’s final statement has been understood as both tragedy and comedy, profound and ludicrous, appropriate and out of place. And so it is with the ending of opus 95. As is true of any last words, there is no opportunity for follow-up. Is Beethoven being serious? To answer this question with “Yes *and* no” is neither evasive nor equivocal. From the perspectives of epistemological irony it can in fact be heard as both at the same time. And buffoonery has its place in this dynamic. As Friedrich Schlegel observed,

96. Plato, *Phaedo* 118a, 100.

97. Kotzebue, “Ironie,” 474: “Es ist in der That eine gefährliche Sache um die Ironie, weil es unter hundert Menschen immer neun und neunzig giebt, die sie nicht verstehn, sondern sie im vollem Ernste nehmen. ‘Crito’ sagte Sokrates in seiner Todesstunde, ‘wir sind dem Aeskulap einen Hahn schuldig.’—Diese Worte machen Voltaire, Racine und sogar unser Haller, dem edelsten Menschen zum Vorwurf. Es ist unbegreiflich, sagen sie, wie Sokrates, der geschworne Feind alles Aberglaubens, mit einer solchen Albernheit auf den Lippen sterben konnte. Andere kluge Leute vermuthen hingegen—und mich dünkt mit Recht,—daß Sokrates, der stets ein großer Freund der Ironie war, auch hier nur gescherzt habe. Wenn Jemand aus einer großen Gefahr errettet wurde, so pflegten die Griechen sprüchwörtlich zu sagen: ‘du bist dem Aeskulap einen Hahn schuldig.’ . . . Voltaire, Racine und Haller hätten also ihre Verwunderung sparen können, denn gerade jener Scherz des Sterbenden beweist, daß er seinem Charakter getreu blieb bis in den Tod.” Albrecht von Haller (1708–77) was a Swiss naturalist and poet. Kotzebue goes on to suggest that Cicero and Machiavelli, among others, exercised large-scale irony, especially Machiavelli, a point convincingly argued by Erica Benner in her *Machiavelli’s Prince*.

98. See, for example, Crooks, “Socrates’ Last Words.” On Socrates and irony in general, see Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*.



There are ancient and modern poems that throughout and at every turn breathe the divine breath of irony. In them there is a truly transcendental buffoonery. Inside: the frame of mind that surveys everything and that elevates itself infinitely above all that is conditional, including its own art, virtue, or ingenuity. Outside: in performance, the mimic manner of a typically good Italian *buffo*.<sup>99</sup>

Schlegel's account of irony in poetry reads uncannily like a description of Beethoven's opus 95, with its *buffo*-like ending, more than a decade before the fact. By these lights, the coda is not a revocation of all that has gone before, a "taking back" of the work in the spirit of Adrian Leverkühn's attempt in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* to revoke Beethoven's Ninth, but rather a broadening of perspectives. Irony, to use Kenneth Burke's memorable phrase, is a "perspective of perspectives," and its premises are "neither true nor false, but *contributory*."<sup>100</sup>

Above and beyond all this, irony is consistent with Beethoven's growing interest around 1810 in Eastern philosophy and religion, a wave that was sweeping across Europe in general and Vienna in particular during the early decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>101</sup> Once again, Friedrich Schlegel played a central role. His *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*, a landmark in Orientalist studies, attracted widespread attention and was well received in Vienna.<sup>102</sup> His treatise includes a chapter on "The Doctrine of Two Principles," which emphasizes the dualism of life in the form of Yin and Yang. He saw in this dualism the historical origins of idealism: "*All reality is the product of contradictory elements. . . . Duality is the character of all principles.*"<sup>103</sup> His account also stresses the need for a certain degree of detachment from the vicissitudes of life. These were sentiments that clearly appealed to Beethoven and that manifest themselves throughout his music, perhaps nowhere more pointedly than in opus 95 and more broadly in his later works in general.<sup>104</sup>

99. Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSa*, 2:152 (Lyceums-Fragment 42): "Es gibt alte und moderne Gedichte, die durchgängig im Ganzen und überall den göttlichen Hauch der Ironie atmen. Es lebt in ihnen eine wirklich transzendente Buffonerie. Im Innern, die Stimmung, welche alles übersieht, und sich über alles Bedingte unendlich erhebt, auch über eigne Kunst, Tugend, oder Genialität: im Äußern, in der Ausführung die mimische Manier eines gewöhnlichen guten italienischen Buffo."

100. Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 513 (Burke's emphasis).

101. See Gérard, *L'orient et la pensée romantique allemande*; Debon, *Daoistisches Denken*; and Herling, *German Gītā*.

102. On the positive reception of this work in Vienna, see Aspalter and Tantner, "Ironieverlust und verleugnete Rezeption," 117n288.

103. Friedrich Schlegel, "Transzendentalphilosophie," 8–9: "*Alle Realität ist das Produkt entgegengesetzter Elemente. . . . Dualität ist der Charakter aller Prinzipien*" (Schlegel's emphasis). On Schlegel's interpretation of the principle of dualism, see Messlin, *Antike und Moderne*, 251–56. Note the similarity of this comment to Novalis's observation in his *Philosophische Studien* that *Schweben* is "the source, the mother of all reality, reality itself" (see page 313 and note 87 above).

104. On the influence of Eastern philosophy and religion on the late works, see Lodes, "So träumte mir."

## “Serio(so)”

This reading of opus 95 as an essay in epistemological irony is supported by Beethoven’s designation of the work as “Quartetto serio.” While he omitted this unusual title for the published edition—perhaps on the grounds that it might discourage sales—he left it intact in the autograph score, and “serioso” is a revealing adjective indeed.

Modern-day Italian dictionaries point to two possible meanings of the word. In most contexts, it is understood as synonymous with “serio,” and at times even as an intensification of that word: extremely serious. But at other times, depending on the context, that intensification can go so far as to become hyperbolic. “Serioso” can thus indicate excessive seriousness, so demonstrative and ostentatious as to call into question the sincerity of its expression. Dictionaries of Beethoven’s time do not transmit this second, less common layer of meaning, but its use in this sense is evident in a fair number of sources from the composer’s era, including at least one in German, *Der Melancholische*, J. F. Jünger’s 1795–96 free translation of Robert Sadler’s *Wanley Pension, or The Melancholy Man*, a widely popular novel of sentiment originally published in London in 1791 (see the Appendix below). The relevant passage is a digression within a long meditation on the art of criticism. Pension is reminded of a scene he had once witnessed in a street involving three jackasses: one of them urinates and the other two linger over the results, taking in the smell at some length and giving the appearance of intense concentration. Pension calls these two “seriosos,” and Jünger’s translation preserves the term while amplifying the aesthetic element implicit in the original. Jünger’s version reads, “With the countenance of connoisseurs, the two seriousness inhaled the fumes of their esteemed colleague’s evacuation. ‘What might lead them to do this?’ I asked myself. ‘What else?’ came the answer: ‘They are criticizing what their companion has done.’”<sup>105</sup>

Another German-language source comes from a calendar published in the 1720s, in which the month of February features “Signor Serioso,” a “famous dancing master and violinist of the Carnival band” (see Figure 1). The idea of a dwarf as dancing master is very much in the spirit of Carnival and its penchant for the mock-serious, role-playing, and the inversion of social hierarchies. The musical associations are especially appropriate here: cooking tools have been turned into a violin and bow, and while the motions

105. [Sadler], *Der Melancholische*, 1:346: “Die beiden Serioso’s sogen mit einer Art von Kennermine die Dünste von der Ausleerung ihres Herrn Kollegen ein. ‘Was mag sie wohl darzu veranlassen?’ fragte ich mich selbst,—‘was anders,’ war die Antwort, ‘als: sie kritisiren was ihr Gefährte gemacht hat—.’” Sadler’s English text (*Wanley Pension*, 1:287) reads, “The two seriousness were inhaling the steam of their companion’s exundation. What can engage them thus intently? thought I. Criticism, whispered fancy.”



Figure 1 An image of "Signor Serioso" in an early eighteenth-century German calendar, exemplar from the Sächsisches Staatsarchiv, Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden, 10006 Oberhofmarschallamt, Lit. G Nr. 21, Bl. 280. Used by permission.

of performance may be true to form, the sounds will be anything but.<sup>106</sup> The figure is not “Signor Serio,” but rather “Signor Serioso.”

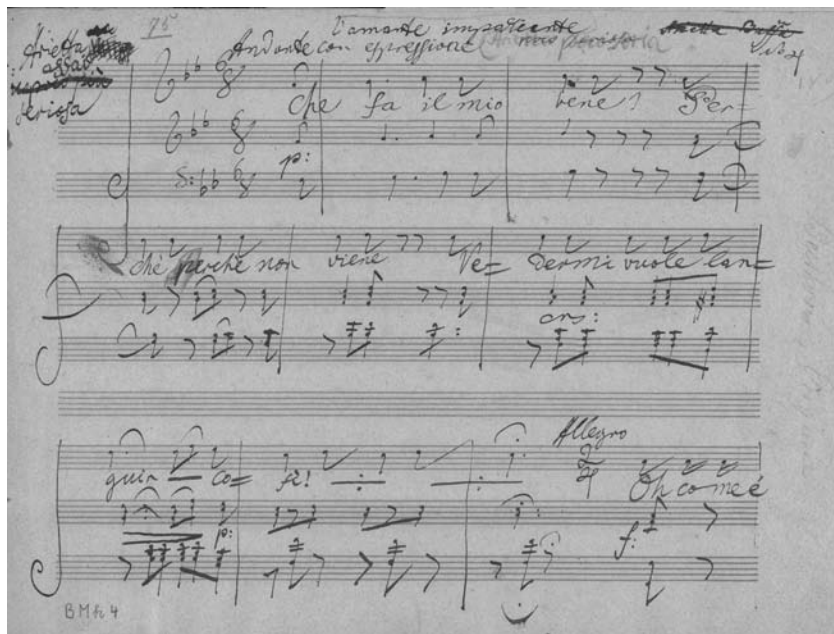
Beethoven appears to have had no precedent for applying this term to a work of music. He could easily have called opus 95 a “Quartetto serio,” using a form parallel to such constructions as “opera seria” and “aria seria,” yet he opted instead for “serioso.” While the composer’s command of Italian is difficult to gauge,<sup>107</sup> his several uses of the term over the course of his career make it clear that he was sensitive to its multiple shades of meaning. On some occasions it seems to have served as a synonym for “serio” (as in opus 95’s third-movement *Allegro assai vivace ma serio*), while on others it appears to have functioned as a marker of ostentatious seriousness. These uses may be summarized as follows:

- 1) In the earliest sketches for the *Eroica* Symphony, found in the Wielhorsky Sketchbook (1802–3), Beethoven labeled some brief incipits, unrelated to the eventual scherzo of the *Eroica*, with the heading “Menuetto serioso.” Both Kurt von Fischer and Lewis Lockwood have suggested that he may have used the term to indicate that this would be a weighty scherzo, without the standard implications of the label “scherzo,” whose root word, like its German equivalent (“Scherz”), means “joke.”<sup>108</sup>
- 2) In 1809 Beethoven made two settings of a text by Metastasio and published them back-to-back under the title “L’amante impaziente” in the five songs of opus 82. The first, op. 82, no. 3, is marked “Arietta buffa,” and the second, op. 82, no. 4, “Arietta assai seriosa.” It is striking that Beethoven should set the same text from two utterly different perspectives and publish the two settings side by side, the first exceedingly light and comic, the second exceedingly heavy and serious—or as he marked it, after much deliberation, “assai seriosa.” “Arietta seria” would have been the conventional choice of label, comparable to “Aria seria” and directly parallel to the preceding “Arietta buffa.” The autograph manuscript shows that Beethoven did in fact begin with the designation “Arietta seria” (see Figure 2). Dissatisfied with this straightforward and conventional designation, however, he labored to find just the right way to suggest a reading of

106. For commentary on this figure and others like it, see Wentz, “Deformity, Delight and Dutch Dancing Dwarfs.”

107. During his stay in Vienna in 1817–18 Cipriani Potter encountered the composer several times and later reported that the two had conversed in Italian: Potter, “Recollections of Beethoven,” 102. Johann Reinhold Schultz, who met Beethoven in Baden in September 1823, was “assured by those who know him well . . . that he is a very tolerable proficient in Italian”: [Schultz], “Memoir of Ludwig van Beethoven,” 156. (The attribution of this essay to Schultz is from Kopitz and Cadenbach, *Beethoven aus der Sicht seiner Zeitgenossen*, 2:862.)

108. Fischer, “Never to Be Performed in Public,” 87; Lockwood, “Beethoven’s Earliest Sketches,” 471–72.



**Figure 2** Beethoven, “L’amante impaziente,” op. 82, no. 4, detail of autograph manuscript. Beethoven-Haus Bonn, Sammlung H. C. Bodmer, HCB BHm 4/44. Used by permission. This figure appears in color in the online version of the *Journal*.

the work that takes the song’s seriousness less than wholly seriously. He altered the heading to “Arietta un poco più seriosa” before finally settling on “Arietta assai seriosa,” with two further variants visible at the top of the page—“poco seriosa” (in ink) and “Arietta poco seria” (in red pencil). What, in the end, does “assai seriosa” mean in this context? “Rather serious”? “Serious enough”? “Very serious”? As Thomas Seedorf observes, the “assai” here points to the “typically ironic exaggeration” that Beethoven resorted to at times.<sup>109</sup> Walter Dürr similarly hears a “dose of irony” in this overly sentimental setting, which seems all the more heavy-handed by virtue of its placement after a particularly clever, lighthearted setting of the same text.<sup>110</sup> The final, waffling designation “Arietta assai seriosa” invites the listener to hear the work as either earnest or mocking—or as both at the same time. Such is the nature of irony: what we hear in this arietta is the same sort of seriousness that allowed some of Laurence Sterne’s contemporaries to acclaim his *Sentimental Journey through*

109. Seedorf, “Vokale Kammermusik,” 557: “Der Zusatz ‘assai’ zum Adjektiv ‘seriosa’ ist wohl als eine für Beethoven typische ironische Übertreibung zu deuten.”

110. Dürr, “Lieder und Gesänge bis 1810,” 354: “mit einem Schuss Ironie.”

*France and Italy* as the *ne plus ultra* of the sentimental novel and others to regard it as a hilarious send-up of the genre.<sup>111</sup>

- 3) Variation 6 of the “Diabelli” Variations, op. 120, is marked “Allegro ma non troppo e serio.” Once again, the music conveys a sense of overexaggeration. There is a gross disparity between energy expended and results achieved. The opening trill and the two-part imitation at the very start portend grandiosity, but the arpeggiated subject is so simple and so brief as to be laughable (see Example 3).<sup>112</sup> The pianist Alfred Brendel, who has proposed an imaginative title for each variation in this set, calls this one “Trill Rhetorics (Demosthenes braving the surf),” which again points to exaggeration. Demosthenes is reported to have practiced his oratory while declaiming into the roaring surf, forcing himself to be heard above the din of the crashing waves.<sup>113</sup> Brendel’s image captures perfectly the sense of overexertion, of intentional excess.
- 4) In sketches for the String Quartet in E-flat Major op. 127, in the pocket sketchbook Artaria 205/4 (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin), p. 24, Beethoven outlined a six-movement structure that included a fifth movement (“5tes Stück”) marked “serioso.” The brief incipit, a downward triadic outline in C major with dotted rhythms, is too brief to suggest possible motivations behind the use of the term in this context.<sup>114</sup>
- 5) In sketches for the String Quartet in A Minor, op. 132, in the sketchbook Autograph 11/2 (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin), fol. 25v, Beethoven marked the incipit of the introduction to an ultimately rejected finale as “marcia serios[a] pathet[ica].” The theme moves in largely downward stepwise motion, with dotted rhythms figuring prominently, as in the incipit for the rejected fifth movement of opus 127. Once again, the material is too brief to support reasonable speculation as to the reasons behind the marking, but the fact that Beethoven was still mulling over the word “serioso” as late as 1824–25 is in itself noteworthy.<sup>115</sup>

For Beethoven, then, “serioso” could cut both ways: serious, or so serious as to be laughable. An incorrigible punster, Beethoven would no doubt have been attracted to the term because of its multiple meanings. To read

111. Goethe’s drama *Der Triumph der Empfindsamkeit* (1778, published 1787), widely perceived as a satire on the reaction to his own *Leiden des jungen Werthers*, also belongs to this category. For an ironic reading of *Werther* itself, see Tantillo, “New Reading of *Werther*.”

112. Example 3 is derived from Beethoven, *Variationen für Klavier*.

113. Brendel, “Must Classical Music Be Entirely Serious?,” 51.

114. For a transcription of the incipit, see Buurman, “Beethoven’s Compositional Approach,” 224. I am grateful to Dr. Buurman for calling my attention to this and the following sketch for opus 132.

115. For a transcription of the incipit, see *ibid.*, 227.

**Example 3** Beethoven, "Diabelli" Variations, op. 120, Variation 6, mm. 1–16. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the **Journal**.

**Allegro ma non troppo e serio**

*tr* *tr* *tr* *tr*

*ff* *sf* *sf* *tr* *tr*

4 *tr* *tr* *tr* *sf* *tr*

8 *tr* *p* *cresc. poco a poco* *tr*

11 *tr* *tr* *tr*

14 *tr* *tr* *dolce p*

opus 95 as an essay in epistemological irony is certainly consistent with Beethoven's well-documented predilection for sudden shifts of tone between high and low, both in words and in music. In his correspondence this is perhaps nowhere more strikingly evident than in an often-quoted letter of ca. 1798 to the work's eventual dedicatee, Baron Nikolaus von Zmeskall-Domanovecz (1759–1833), a minor Hungarian nobleman whom Beethoven would later call his “earliest friend in Vienna”.<sup>116</sup>

Dearest Baron Muckcart-driver,

*Je vous suis bien obligé pour votre faiblesse de vos yeux*—By the way, I forbid that my happy disposition, which I have from time to time, be taken from me in the future, for yesterday I became quite sad through all your Zmeskall-Domanoveczian blather; the Devil take you, I don't want to hear anything at all about your moral philosophy, Power is the morality of those who stand out from others, and it is mine as well. And if you start in on me again today, I shall pester you quite thoroughly until you find everything I do to be good and praiseworthy (for I am coming to the Swan even though I would prefer the Ox but that of course depends on your Zmeskallian-Domanoveczian decision). (*reponse*)

Adieu Baron Ba . . . . ron r o n nor / orn / rno / onr /

(*Voilà quelque chose* from the pawnshop.)<sup>117</sup>

This letter, together with others like it, testifies to Beethoven's close and easygoing relationship with Zmeskall: it is full of inside jokes whose

116. Beethoven, letter to Zmeskall of December 16, 1816, in *BGA*, no. 1014 (3:335): “denn Sie gehören zu meinen frühesten Freunden in Vien [*sic*]”; also in Beethoven, *Letters*, no. 681 (2:619). This is the letter in which Beethoven presents to Zmeskall the first edition of opus 95, with its dedication to him.

117. *BGA*, no. 35 (1:43): “liebster Baron Dreckfahrer *je vous suis bien obligé* [*sic*] *pour votre faiblesse de vos yeux*.—übrigens verbitte ich mir in's künftige mir meinen frohen Muth, den ich zuweilen habe, nicht zu nehmen, denn gestern durch ihr *Zmeskal-domanovezisches* geschwäz bin ich ganz traurig geworden, hol' sie der Teufel, ich mag nichts von ihrer ganzen Moral wissen, Kraft ist die Moral der Menschen, die sich vor andern auszeichnen, und sie ist auch die meinige, und wenn sie mir heute wider anfangen, so plage ich sie so sehr, bis sie alles gut und löblich finden was ich thue (denn ich komme zum schwanen, im Ochsen wärs mir zwar lieber, doch beruht das auf ihrem *Zmeskalischen-domanovezischen* Entschluß[*]*). (*reponse*) *adieu Baron Ba . . . . ron r o n nor | orn | rno | onr | (voilà quelque chose* aus dem alten versazAmt[*]*).” For a different translation, see Beethoven, *Letters*, no. 30 (1:32). The reference to poor eyesight may relate to the *Duett mit zwei obligaten Augengläsern*, WoO 32, or it may refer to Zmeskall's having recently lent the composer a pair of eyeglasses. The “Ox” and “Swan” were Viennese locales frequented by the two. The reference to a pawnshop (“Versatzamt”) may be connected to the loan of the eyeglasses, and Beethoven's permutations on the last three letters of “Baron” at the end of the letter may be inspired by the alternative spelling of the word as “Versetztamt,” “versetzen” meaning to “transpose” (exchange), as in the sense of transposed type. William Kinderman illuminates further parallels between this text and Beethoven's music in “Beethoven's High Comic Style.” See also Beethoven's canon *Baron, Baron*, WoO 205a, written sometime between early 1798 and the fall of 1799 in another letter to Zmeskall, in *BGA*, no. 39 (1:46); also in Beethoven, *Letters*, no. 29 (1:31–32).



meanings are not at all clear to outsiders. It also reflects the composer's penchant for juxtaposing the serious and the comic. Some critics consider Beethoven's assertion that "Kraft ist die Moral der Menschen, die sich vor andern auszeichnen" (power is the morality of those who stand out from others) as the composer's "Wahlspruch," or "life-motto," while others dismiss it as a meaningless, facetious posturing of the moment.<sup>118</sup> Zmeskall was in any case at the center of the "small circle of connoisseurs" for whom Beethoven had written opus 95. This was no abstract, imagined gathering but an actual circle of friends who met with some regularity to play quartets in the home of Zmeskall, who by all accounts was an outstanding cellist.<sup>119</sup> The banker and violinist Johann Baptist von Häring (ca. 1761–1818), who fashioned the English of Beethoven's letter to Smart in 1816, belonged to this circle as well.<sup>120</sup> Presumably these private soirees included discussions of the music being performed, and it is easy to imagine at least one of the performers in this intimate circle, having played or heard opus 95 for the first time, asking the composer to explain this curious coda. This is, after all, an ending whose obscurity provokes questions.

## Incomprehensibility

In 1810, the year in which Beethoven wrote his "Serioso" quartet, Ignaz Theodor Ferdinand Arnold published his "Gallery of the Most Famous Musicians of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," which ignores Beethoven but has this to say about the music of Haydn:

There is no musical idea, be it ever so simple or ornate, that would not become interesting through inversion, fragmentation, transposition, and similar such devices. Sureness and facility in the arts of counterpoint, supported by an inexhaustible imagination, lead the ear unexpectedly into wildernesses and depths, where it gladly follows such sure guidance and for which it is always richly rewarded. Haydn does this like a clever orator, who, when he wants to convince us of something, proceeds from the basis of a statement that is universally recognized to be true, one with which everyone agrees, one that

118. Alfred Kalischer, for example, in his edition of the composer's letters, called the assertion a "passing matter" ("ein Augenblicksfall") and dismissed as "entirely erroneous" ("gänzlich verfehlt") attempts to read into it the essence of Beethoven's ethical worldview: Beethoven, *Beethovens sämtliche Briefe*, 1:27.

119. On Zmeskall, see Vörös, "Beiträge zur Lebensgeschichte"; Ullrich, "Nikolaus Zmeskall von Domanowetz"; Indorf, *Beethovens Streichquartette*, 51–57; Schirlbauer, "Das Testament Nicolaus Zmeskalls"; and Schirlbauer, "Nicolaus Zmeskall." As a member of the minor nobility and a *Hofsekretär*, Zmeskall was ideally positioned to help Beethoven make important connections with key members of the aristocracy in Vienna in the 1790s. According to Schirlbauer ("Nicolaus Zmeskall," 257), Zmeskall was hosting quartet soirees at his residence as early as the 1780s and as late as 1816.

120. See Reichardt, *Vertraute Briefe*, 2:119–20.

everyone must be able to understand; but he knows so cunningly just how to use this statement that he can soon convince us of anything he wishes, even if it is the very opposite of the statement originally proposed.

Haydn's music enters our ears quite smoothly, for we have a sense that we are hearing something that is easily grasped and already familiar to us. But we soon find that it is not, nor is becoming, what we thought it was or what we thought it should become. We hear something new, and we marvel at the master who knew so cleverly how to offer us, under the guise of the well known, something never heard before. Precisely this endearing popularity gives his compositions—for all the richness of their harmony and instrumentation—an inexhaustible clarity, general intelligibility, and comprehensibility so that we grasp the most difficult things with ease.<sup>121</sup>

No one ever talked about Beethoven's music in this way. A Viennese reviewer writing in 1806 expressed disappointment that the composer's more recent works for piano did not live up to the expectations established by such earlier publications as the Piano Trios op. 1: "In his conspicuous eagerness to be entirely novel, Beethoven is not infrequently incomprehensible, incoherent, and opaque."<sup>122</sup> "Artful popularity" and "popular artfulness," by contrast, were constants in the reception of Haydn's music. Even when he thwarted listeners' expectations—as he often did—Haydn operated within the traditional parameters of rhetoric, taking care to resolve moments of ambiguity or potential confusion. The finale of the String Quartet in E-flat Major op. 33, no. 2, for example, famously plays with listeners' assumptions about how pieces end. The crucial difference between this unconventional

121. Arnold, *Galerie der berühmtesten Tonkünstler*, 1:109–10: "Es gibt keinen musikalischen Gedanken, sei er auch noch so einfältig oder bunt, der nicht durch Verkehrungen, Zerteilungen, Versetzungen und Ähnlichkeiten interessant würde. Die Sicherheit und Gewandtheit in den Künsten des Kontrapunkts, von einer nie erschöpften Gedankenquelle unterhalten, führen das Ohr unvermutet in Wildnisse und Tiefen, wohin es einer so sichern Leitung gern folgt und immer dafür reichlich belohnt wird. Haydn macht es wie ein schlauer Redner, der, wenn er uns zu etwas überreden will, von einem allgemein als wahr anerkannten Satze ausgeht, den jeder einsieht, jeder begreifen muß, bald aber diesen Satz so geschickt zu wenden versteht, daß er uns zu allen überreden kann, wozu er will, und wärs zum Gegenteil des aufgestellten Satzes. Seine Musik geht dem Gehöre glatt ein, weil wir wählen etwas Leichtfaßliches, schon Vernommenes zu vernehmen; allein bald finden wir, daß es nicht das wird, nicht das ist, was wir glaubten, daß es sei, daß es werden sollte; wir hören etwas neues und staunen über den Meister, der so schlau Unerhörtes uns unter dem Anstrich des Allbekannten zu bieten wußte. Eben diese lebenswürdige Popularität gibt seinen Kompositionen bei aller Fülle von Harmonieaufwand und Instrumentation eine so unendliche Klarheit, Allgemeinfäßlichkeit und Verständlichkeit, daß wir mit Leichtigkeit das Schwerste vernehmen." Archaic spellings in this source have been modernized. This trope of Haydn's music as both sophisticated and accessible, learned and popular, had already been in play for at least several decades; see note 125 below.

122. *Wiener Journal für Theater, Musik und Mode* 1 (1806), quoted in Kunze, *Beethoven*, 13: "Aus sichtbarer Begierde ganz neu zu werden, ist Bn. nicht selten unverständlich, abgerissen und dunkel geworden."

ending and Beethoven's in opus 95 is that while Haydn's listeners are left feeling amused (or not), they are not left feeling puzzled. Haydn gives us the whole joke, punch line and all, and we understand it. There is no conundrum here, at least not on the surface. Haydn engages his listeners without mystifying them.<sup>123</sup>

Beethoven's critics, on the other hand, repeatedly called what we now think of as his early- and middle-period works difficult to understand if not incomprehensible.<sup>124</sup> Whereas Haydn won praise for his synthesis of "artful popularity" and "popular artfulness," Beethoven had been rebuked as early as 1798 for his "obscure artfulness or artful obscurity."<sup>125</sup> He recognized early on that many listeners found his music difficult, yet he accepted this verdict. As he wrote to the piano maker Andreas Streicher in 1796, "I am satisfied even if only a few understand me."<sup>126</sup>

E. T. A. Hoffmann confronted Beethoven's reputed incomprehensibility in a radically new way—at least for the field of music—in 1813:

Beethoven's powerful genius oppresses the musical rabble, which vainly seeks to rebel against it. . . . But what if it is simply *your* weak perception that causes the deep inner coherence of every Beethovenian composition to escape you? What if it is entirely because of *you* that you do not understand the language of the master, which is intelligible to the initiated but which leaves the portals of the innermost sanctuary closed to you?<sup>127</sup>

123. The only truly enigmatic, head-scratching ending in Haydn's output is the finale of the Symphony no. 45 in F-sharp Minor (the "Farewell," 1772), in which the performing musicians gradually diminish in number, leaving only two solo violinists in the closing measures. Later accounts agree that this finale was a quasi-pantomimic response to various circumstances at the Esterházy court, and while these reports differ in their details, the "meaning" of this ending would presumably have been understood by the work's original audience and above all by Haydn's patron, Prince Nicholas; see Webster, *Haydn's "Farewell" Symphony*.

124. Examples of Beethoven's early- and middle-period works that critics considered difficult to understand (with page references to Kunze's *Beethoven*) include the opus 10 piano sonatas (1799: Kunze, 16), the opus 12 violin sonatas (1799: Kunze, 18), the opus 47 violin sonata (1805: Kunze, 43), the Third Symphony (1805: Kunze, 50), the Fourth Symphony (1816: Kunze, 74), and the Fifth Symphony (1826: Kunze, 95).

125. "Kunstvolle Popularität" and "populäre . . . Kunstfülle" appear side by side in Triest, "Bemerkungen über die Ausbildung der Tonkunst," 407. The phrase "eine dunkle Künstlichkeit oder eine künstliche Dunkelheit" appears in an anonymous review of the opus 10 piano sonatas in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 2 (October 9, 1799): 25, reproduced in Kunze, *Beethoven*, 16 (but incorrectly transcribed and dated 1798). For further commentary on Triest's remarks about Haydn, see Bonds, "Rhetoric versus Truth."

126. Letter of July–September 1796, in *BGA*, no. 22 (1:32): "[W]enn mich auch nur einige verstehen, so bin ich zufrieden"; also in Beethoven, *Letters*, no. 18 (1:25).

127. Hoffmann, "Beethovens Instrumentalmusik," 54–55: "Den musikalischen Pöbel drückt Beethovens mächtiger Genius; er will sich vergebens dagegen auflehnen. . . . Wie ist es aber, wenn nur *Eurem* schwachen Blick der innere tiefe Zusammenhang jeder Beethovenschen Komposition entgeht? Wenn es nur an *Euch* liegt, daß Ihr des Meisters, dem Geweihten verständliche Sprache nicht versteht, wenn Euch die Pforte des innersten Heiligtums verschlossen blieb?" (Hoffmann's emphasis). Although this essay incorporates, with revisions, large portions

Hoffmann incorporated similar comments into his 1813 review of the opus 70 piano trios, noting near the end of his long account that “many not altogether bad musicians complain about the incomprehensibility of Beethoven’s compositions, and even of Mozart’s; but this is due to a subjective imbecility that does not permit them to grasp and retain the whole in its parts. For this reason they always praise in weak compositions their great *clarity*.”<sup>128</sup> The issue here is not simply the competency of critics (easy enough to disparage), for Hoffmann goes out of his way to point out that those who find Beethoven’s music incomprehensible include musicians who are “not altogether bad.” The problem, rather, is the framework within which such critics approach music in general: it is only those who listen with presumptions of clarity and intelligibility who find Beethoven’s music incomprehensible.

Two years later Amadeus Wendt (1783–1836), a professor of philosophy at the University of Leipzig, addressed “charges of difficulty and incomprehensibility” at greater length in an essay entitled “New Music, and Beethoven’s Music, Particularly his *Fidelio*.”<sup>129</sup> Wendt was not an unabashed admirer of Beethoven, in no small part because of the challenging nature of his music; he nevertheless concluded his comments on the matter with the following: “For it is the true indicator of great works that they satisfy us even more when enjoyed repeatedly, and that they furnish ever richer enjoyment through contemplation of the infinite beauty that encompasses the whole, just as the observant eye always finds and discovers multiple worlds in the cloudless sky.”<sup>130</sup> Later generations would find such an assertion unremarkable, yet for its time, together with Hoffmann’s more dramatic formulation of 1813 (“what if it is simply *your* weak perception that causes the deep inner coherence of every Beethovenian composition to escape you?”), Wendt’s position on incomprehensibility points to a sea change in the aesthetics of

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of Hoffmann’s earlier (1810) review of the Fifth Symphony, which had appeared in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, the comments on incomprehensibility are new in the 1813 essay and come from the pen of Hoffmann’s fictional Johannes Kreisler.

128. Hoffmann, “Recension,” 154: “Auch manche nicht gänzlich schlechte Musiker klagen über die Unverständlichkeit Beethovenscher, selbst Mozartscher Compositionen: es liegt da aber an der subjectiven Imbecillität, die es nicht zulässt, das Ganze in seinen Theilen zusammen zu fassen und zu halten. Sie rühmen daher immer an schwachen Compositionen die grosse *Klarheit*” (Hoffmann’s emphasis).

129. Wendt, “Gedanken über die neuere Tonkunst,” 365–66: “Vorwürfe der Schwierigkeit und Unverständlichkeit.” On Wendt as a critic of Beethoven, see Wallace, *Beethoven’s Critics*, 27–35.

130. Wendt, “Gedanken über die neuere Tonkunst,” 366: “Denn das ist das wahrhafte Kennzeichen grosser Werke, dass sie wiederholt genossen, immer mehr befriedigen, und durch Betrachtung der unendlichen Schönheit, welche das Ganze umschliesst, immer reichern Genuss gewähren, so wie das aufmerksame Auge am unbewölkten Himmel immer mehrere Welten findet und entdeckt.”

listening. The idea that some works cannot be judged until they have been heard multiple times was by no means self-evident in Beethoven's lifetime. Not until the second decade of the nineteenth century do we begin to sense the first signs of what would eventually amount to a fundamental shift in critical attitudes toward the broader phenomenon of incomprehensibility in music. Whereas earlier critics had seen it as a defect, at least some were now prepared to concede that what seemed at first unfathomable might, with repeated listenings, make more sense.

## From Rhetoric to Hermeneutics

What Hoffmann and Wendt were describing reflects the beginnings of a paradigm shift in assumptions about the relationship between composers and listeners. Under the paradigm of rhetoric, the burden of intelligibility fell on the composer. Under the paradigm of hermeneutics, the burden of comprehension fell on the listener.

These contrasting paradigms fostered very different modes of listening. Both are implicit in Ignaz Seyfried's account of the piano "duel" between Beethoven and Joseph Wöfl that took place in Vienna in 1799. Even in his improvisations, as Seyfried recounts, Beethoven compelled listeners to rise to his level, for his "language" was that of "mystical Sanskrit . . . whose hieroglyphs can be read only by the initiated." Wöfl, by contrast, "trained in the school of Mozart, was always equable; never superficial but always clear and thus more accessible to the multitude. . . . He always enlisted the interest of his hearers and inevitably compelled them to follow the progression of his well-ordered ideas."<sup>131</sup> Seyfried's account appeared more than thirty years after the event and thus may not be as reliable as we might wish in issues of detail, but the salient point here is his categorical distinction between techniques of improvisation that are readily comprehensible (Wöfl's) and those that are not (Beethoven's).

Beethoven's approach to improvisation carried over into his notated music, as witnessed by the repeated charges of obscurity and incomprehensibility. Old habits of listening died hard: a year after the composer's death the critic Ernst Woldemar challenged the editors of *Cäcilia* to acknowledge that Beethoven's last works were the product of a declining imagination,

131. Seyfried, *Ludwig van Beethoven's Studien*, "Anhang," 7: "Es war die geheimnißreiche Sanscrittsprache, deren Hieroglyphen nur der Eingeweihte zu lösen ermächtigt ist!—Wöfl hingegen, in Mozart's Schule gebildet, blieb immerdar sich gleich; nie flach, aber stets klar, und eben deßwegen der Mehrzahl zugänglicher . . . stets wußte er Antheil zu erregen, und diesen unwandelbar an den Reihengang seiner wohlgeordneten Ideen zu bannen." Translation from Thayer, *Thayer's Life of Beethoven*, 1:207.

accelerated by growing deafness. Drawing on the standards of classical oratory, Woldemar maintained that

Beethoven, in his last compositions, has no longer given even the slightest consideration to the Horatian law “sit quodvis, simplex duntaxat et unum” (what you undertake to create should at the very least be simple and whole), which applies to all the fine arts; he writes . . . into the wide blue beyond, without concern for what or how it will all turn out.<sup>132</sup>

Woldemar’s appeal to the dictates of Horace is revealing, for it highlights the presumed coupling of clarity with effect and contrasts sharply with the approach of a growing number of his contemporaries, who by the late 1820s were willing to grant the benefit of the doubt to composers of works that were less than immediately clear and intelligible.

Nowhere is this new paradigm of listening more striking than in the often-cited anonymous review of a performance of the String Quartet in B-flat Major op. 130 that appeared in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* in May 1826. Well disposed toward the quartet as a whole, the critic called the work’s finale (later published separately as the *Große Fuge*, op. 133) “incomprehensible, like Chinese,” noting, “When the instruments have to struggle with enormous difficulties in the regions of the South and North Poles, when each of them presents a different figuration and crosses the others *per transitum irregularem* amid countless dissonances, when the players, suspicious of each other, do not attack entirely cleanly: then truly the Babylonian confusion has been consummated.”<sup>133</sup> Yet this same critic, having accused Beethoven of writing in what amounts to a foreign language, goes on to concede that “we do not want to dismiss things too hastily. Perhaps the time will come when that which at first sight seemed to us opaque and muddled will be recognized as clear and pleasing forms.”<sup>134</sup>

By the late 1820s a new relationship between composers and listeners had become the norm rather than being the exception. Critics were now open to

132. Woldemar, “Aufforderung an die Redaktion,” 37: “Beethoven hat aber von dem Horazischen Kanon: ‘sit, quodvis, simplex duntaxat et unum’ (Was du dir zu schaffen vornimmst, sey wenigstens einfach und ein Ganzes) der für alle schöne Künste gilt, in seinen letzten Compositionen auch nicht das Mindeste mehr geahnet; er schreibt . . . in das weite Blaue hinein, unbekümmert, was, oder wie es wird?” The Latin phrase is from Horace’s *De arte poetica*, book 23, and was frequently quoted throughout the Enlightenment and into the nineteenth century. On Woldemar’s criticism, see Kirchmeyer, “Der Fall Woldemar,” and Wallace, *Beethoven’s Critics*, 66–69.

133. “Nachrichten: Wien” (1826), 310–11: “unverständlich, wie Chinesisch. Wenn die Instrumente in den Regionen des Süd- und Nordpols mit ungeheuern Schwierigkeiten zu kämpfen haben, wenn jedes derselben anders figurirt und sie sich *per transitum irregularem* unter einer Unzahl von Dissonanzen durchkreuzen, wenn die Spieler, gegen sich selbst misstrauisch, wohl auch nicht ganz rein greifen, freylich, dann ist die babilonische Verwirrung fertig.”

134. *Ibid.*, 311: “Doch wollen wir damit nicht voreilig absprechen: vielleicht kommt noch die Zeit, wo das, was uns bey dem ersten Blicke trüb und verworren erschien, klar und wohlgefälligen Formen erkannt wird.”

the idea that incomprehensibility could no longer be dismissed outright as a defect. "The *incomprehensible*," as the critic (Johann Friedrich?) von Weiler noted in an essay on Beethoven's music in 1828, is rooted in the "*infinity* of poetic genius."<sup>135</sup> And after a performance of the Ninth Symphony in Vienna in February 1828 an anonymous reviewer observed that

We are gradually beginning to learn how to disentangle the threads of this artful musical fabric; its miraculous outlines step forth ever more clearly, and scarcely a couple of short years will have passed before this gigantic work will be as generally known and understood as its predecessors [i.e., Beethoven's earlier symphonies], which at the time of their appearance were also decried as the equivalent of Egyptian hieroglyphs.<sup>136</sup>

Within a few years of Beethoven's death, then, the assumed relationship between composers and listeners had changed in fundamental ways. For the first time in the history of music, listeners were expected to work. It was no longer enough to be merely attentive ("aufmerksam"): listeners now had to engage their own imaginations and meet composers on a higher level of thought.<sup>137</sup>

This new way of thinking about the relationship between composers and listeners owes much to a corresponding reconfiguration of the relationship between authors and readers that had been advocated some two decades earlier by a number of prominent philosophers and critics, most notably, once again, Friedrich Schlegel, who identified two types of author, one "analytic," the other "synthetic":

The analytic author observes the reader as he is and makes his assessment accordingly, applying his machinery to produce the requisite effect. The synthetic author constructs and creates for himself a reader as he should be; he imagines him not as static and dead, but as alive and reciprocating. He allows that which he has created to appear step-by-step before the reader's eyes, or he entices him to create it himself. He has no wish to create a specific effect on him, but rather joins with him in the holy relationship of the innermost *Symphilosophie* or *Sympoesie*.<sup>138</sup>

135. Weiler, "Über den Geist und das Auffassen," 46: "das *Unbegreifliche* . . . hat seine Begründung in der *Unendlichkeit* des dichterischen Genius" (Weiler's emphasis).

136. "Nachrichten: Wien" (1828), 107–8: "Allmählig fangen wir nun an, den Faden dieses kunstreichen Tongewebes entwirren zu lernen; immer deutlicher treten die wundersamen Umrisse hervor, und kaum dürften ein paar Jährchen ins Land gegangen seyn, so wird dieses Riesenwerk eben so allgemein erkannt und verstanden werden, wie seine Vorgänger, die auch bey ihrem Entstehen gleich ägyptischen Hieroglyphen verschrien waren."

137. See Riley, *Musical Listening*, and Bonds, *Music as Thought*.

138. Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA*, 2:161 (Lyceums-Fragment 112): "Der analytische Schriftsteller beobachtet den Leser, wie er ist; danach macht er seinen Kalkül, legt seine Maschinen an, um den gehörigen Effekt auf ihn zu machen. Der synthetische Schriftsteller konstruiert und schafft sich einen Leser, wie er sein soll; er denkt sich denselben nicht ruhend und tot, sondern lebendig und entgegenwirkend. Er läßt das, was er erfunden hat, vor seinen Augen stufenweise werden, oder er lockt ihn es selbst zu erfinden. Er will keine bestimmte Wirkung auf ihn

For Schlegel, the “analytic” author operates within what we can recognize as a rhetorical framework, taking into account the capacities of an anticipated audience within the parameters of rhetorical decorum.<sup>139</sup> The “synthetic” author, by contrast, operates within an oracular framework and creates a work with the expectation that the reader must actively engage with the proffered text in order not only to make sense of it but to extend its potential. Author and reader together thereby enter into a “holy relationship” based on a process of reciprocal philosophizing or poeticizing. From the reader’s perspective, this goes beyond what we would today call hermeneutics. *Symphilosophie* creates an even more fluid dynamic, an ongoing dialogue of creative spirits in which criticism becomes a creative enterprise in its own right, one that includes readers as well as authors, and by extension listeners as well as composers.<sup>140</sup> “The true reader,” Novalis asserted, “must be the extended author.”<sup>141</sup> Or as Friedrich Schlegel put it, “True criticism is an author raised to the second power.”<sup>142</sup>

To paraphrase Schlegel, we might well say that Beethoven was seeking to create for himself listeners as they should be, to set in motion an experience in which the listener is “alive and reciprocating,” not merely passive and receptive, or “static and dead,” to use Schlegel’s even more graphic formulation. In this way, Beethoven was moving in step with those literary figures of his generation who perceived it as their duty to engage with and elevate those who might be open to such an approach.<sup>143</sup> They accomplished this at least in part by presenting texts that made immediate and substantial demands on their readers, and irony was an important means of creating such demands.<sup>144</sup> Literary critic Gary Handwerk has pointed to numerous works of this period that “utilize an interruptive structure similar to parabasis in their abrupt shifts from one narrative level to another, from fairy tale or fantasy or dream to realism and back again,” citing as examples Friedrich Schlegel’s novel *Lucinde*, Novalis’s *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, Brentano’s fairy tales, and

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machen, sondern er tritt mit ihm in das heilige Verhältnis der innigsten Symphilosophie oder Sympoesie.”

139. Hariman (“Decorum,” 202) calls this “positional decorum,” a consideration that “tilts the composition of a text toward the social context supplied by the audience.”

140. On the concept of *Symphilosophie*, see Izenberg, *Impossible Individuality*, 65–66, 113–15, and Forster and Gjesdal, *Oxford Handbook of German Philosophy*, 29–33. Terry Pinkard, in his *German Philosophy, 1760–1860*, 147, deftly translates the term as “sympathetic communal philosophizing.”

141. Novalis, *Vermischte Bemerkungen und Blütenstaub*, 470: “Der wahre Leser muß der erweiterte Autor seyn.”

142. Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophische Lehrjahre*, 106: “Die wahre Kritik ein Autor in der 2<sup>ten</sup> Potenz.”

143. See McCarthy, “Forms and Objectives,” 110–14.

144. On the close relationship between irony and incomprehensibility from the Enlightenment to the present, see Schumacher, *Die Ironie der Unverständlichkeit*.



E. T. A. Hoffmann's novellas and short stories.<sup>145</sup> Beethoven's late works reflect a corresponding development in music. Irony—often misunderstood—and its correlative, incomprehensibility, played major roles in this aesthetic.

Critics and scholars have routinely interpreted the increasingly difficult nature of Beethoven's late music as a reflection of his growing indifference toward listeners and a turn inward. Whatever their merits, such accounts ignore the newfound prestige of incomprehensibility in the aesthetics of his time and place. Within the parameters of the rhetorical tradition, incomprehensibility (*obscuritas*) had long been regarded as a defect. But over time a growing number of critics, including Lessing, Herder, and Friedrich Schlegel, came to regard artful incomprehensibility as a hermeneutic provocation, a challenge to interpretation, an incitement to readers to engage purposefully with difficult texts.<sup>146</sup> By these lights, clarity was no longer a quality to be embraced without reservation, and incomprehensibility—*Unverständlichkeit*—no longer one to be avoided at all costs.

Friedrich Schlegel's widely discussed (and widely misunderstood) essay "On Incomprehensibility" ("Über die Unverständlichkeit"), of 1800, served as the manifesto of this new outlook. It was in effect the coda to a literary finale, the last salvo in what the Schlegel brothers had determined would be the final issue of *Athenäum*, the journal they had founded, coedited, and to a great extent coauthored over the previous three years. The essay defies easy description or characterization: it embodies Schlegel's ideal of the synthetic author, for it challenges readers to make sense of its difficult prose and sometimes dizzying line of argumentation. It enacts its own subject, claiming at times not to be ironic when seemingly full of irony, and at other times to be ironic when seemingly straightforward. "Comprehensibility" and "incomprehensibility," as Schlegel both argues and demonstrates, are relative terms, and our understanding of the universe rests on the incomprehensibility of its chaos. *Unverständlichkeit* is not a product of *Unverstand*—a lack of understanding—but rather an index of deeper insight into the shallowness of what is too often perceived as clarity. The prose takes surprising twists and turns and ends with a poem of Schlegel's own—a gloss on Goethe's poem "Beherzigung"—that he hopes "one of our outstanding composers will find worthy of providing with a musical accompaniment." For "there is nothing more beautiful on earth," he concludes in an apparent non sequitur (for music had up to this point not been mentioned at all), than "poetry and music working together in beloved union to ennoble mankind."<sup>147</sup>

145. Handwerk, "Romantic Irony," 217.

146. For a detailed account of this development, see Leventhal, *Disciplines of Interpretation*. On Schlegel's forerunners in this area, see McCarthy, *Crossing Boundaries*, esp. ch. 8 ("The Dialectic Muse Soars I: Essayistic Prose 1750–1790").

147. Friedrich Schlegel, "Über die Unverständlichkeit," 371–72: "und es bleibt nun nichts zu wünschen übrig, als daß einer unsrer vortrefflichen Komponisten die meinige würdig finden

Schlegel was not alone in recognizing the chimeric nature of clarity and the depths revealed by the incomprehensible. His brother August Wilhelm had identified nature itself as the paradigm of unfathomability (“Unergründlichkeit”) and the artistic genius as an “image in miniature” of *natura naturans*, of nature in its most creative state.<sup>148</sup> As he observed on another occasion, “it is precisely from obscurity that the magic of life derives,” an obscurity “in which the root of our being becomes lost” and that produces an “inexhaustible secret. This is the soul of all poetry.”<sup>149</sup> Schiller famously called Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* “calm and deep, clear and yet incomprehensible, like nature itself.”<sup>150</sup> And Novalis’s unfinished *Die Lehrlinge zu Sais*, brought to press posthumously by Tieck and Schlegel in 1802, opens with an extended meditation on acceptance of the incomprehensible as the means by which to gain a deeper understanding of the universe. Adam Müller’s 1808 essay on Aristophanes likewise endorsed the value of incomprehensibility as an engine of insight. All these writers distinguished between incomprehensibility as a product of mere authorial incompetence, and incomprehensibility as a product of authorial imagination, depth, and agility.<sup>151</sup> In Brian Tucker’s memorable phrase, it is in early German Romanticism that the riddle moves “from an irritant to an ideal.”<sup>152</sup>

It is thus not surprising that literary hermeneutics should enjoy its first modern flowering in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Hermeneutics was by no means a new discipline at the time, but Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768–1834) was instrumental in establishing it in its modern form. He insisted that all texts—not just difficult ones—are susceptible to misunderstanding and thus in need of interpretation, and in his interpretation of biblical texts he established a methodology by which to examine the matrix of the capacities of language, the historical position of the author, and the relationship between the parts and the whole of the text at hand.

Hermeneutics presumes a quality of depth in the object of contemplation; it assumes categorically that there is more to any given work than what

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mag, ihr eine musikalische Begleitung zu geben. Schöneres gibt es nichts auf der Erde, als wenn Poesie und Musik in holder Eintracht zur Veredlung der Menschheit wirken.” For an English translation of the complete essay, see Friedrich Schlegel, *Friedrich Schlegel’s “Lucinde,”* 259–71. On Schlegel’s essay, see Comstock, “Transcendental Buffoonery”; Finlay, *Romantic Irony of Semiotics*, 183–259; Millán-Zaibert, *Friedrich Schlegel*, 165–70; and Podewski, “Konzeptionen des Unverständlichen.”

148. August Wilhelm Schlegel, “Etwas über William Shakespeare,” 66: “die Unergründlichkeit der schaffenden Natur, deren Ebenbild er im Kleinen ist.”

149. August Wilhelm Schlegel, “Allgemeine Übersicht,” 65: “Eben auf dem Dunkel, worin sich die Wurzel unseres Daseins verliert, auf dem unauslöschlichen Geheimnis beruht der Zauber des Lebens, dies ist die Seele aller Poesie.”

150. Letter to Goethe of July 2, 1796, in Schiller, *Der Briefwechsel*, 1:180: “Ruhig und tief, klar und doch unbegreiflich wie die Natur.”

151. See Beisler, “Die Unergründlichkeit des Werks,” esp. 232.

152. Tucker, *Reading Riddles*, 27. See also Brunemeier, *Vieldeutigkeit und Rätselhaftigkeit*.

appears on its surface. The application of these assumptions to music in the first half of the nineteenth century, above all to instrumental music and particularly in German-speaking lands, reflects a major shift in thought about the very nature of the art.<sup>153</sup> Schleiermacher's methodology could be—and was—applied to texts of all kinds, including music, as Ian Bent has demonstrated in his examination of E. T. A. Hoffmann's lengthy 1810 review of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.<sup>154</sup> The range and detail of Hoffmann's analysis were without precedent at the time, but the demand for such accounts had been growing over the previous decades. Periodicals aimed at music lovers had begun to proliferate in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, but it was not until the early nineteenth century that one of them, the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* of Leipzig, established in 1799, was able to succeed as a long-running venture. This is a testimony in part to the quality of the journal, in part to the market conditions of a readership that had reached critical mass. Hoffmann's account may be the most sophisticated and extensive review of its kind published during Beethoven's lifetime, but it is by no means an anomaly, for it is one of many responses to the public's growing acceptance of the idea that listeners have an obligation to come to terms with the new music they are hearing. The challenge was all the greater when it came to instrumental music, as vocal works offered a ready-made point of access in their texts, whereas untexted music could not be so readily deciphered. And it is around 1800 that the phrase "understanding music" ("Musik verstehen") first appears in connection with listeners.<sup>155</sup>

It was incomprehensibility, as literary critic Robert S. Leventhal has argued, that proved to be the "hinge of hermeneutics," for it is "precisely through the provocation and failure of hermeneutics" that "the interpretive task is most pressing."<sup>156</sup> Two distinctly different critical approaches toward incomprehensibility arose in the early years of the nineteenth century. Schleiermacher's hermeneutics—continued by Wilhelm Dilthey, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and others—assumed the integrity of a text as an integrated whole and sought to eliminate incomprehensibility to the fullest extent possible.<sup>157</sup> Friedrich Schlegel's destabilizing, disintegrative hermeneutics, by contrast, considered the incomprehensible a spur to interpretation but saw it as ultimately inescapable, insurmountable, and immune to any totalizing "answer" or "solution." This approach went largely underground in the nineteenth century (with the exception of Nietzsche) and for a good part of the twentieth but reemerged in the work of such diverse critics as Walter Benjamin, Adorno, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, and Stanley Fish.

153. See Watkins, *Metaphors of Depth*.

154. Bent, general introduction to *Music Analysis in the Nineteenth Century* and "Plato—Beethoven."

155. See Zaminer, "Über die Herkunft des Ausdrucks 'Musik verstehen.'"

156. Leventhal, *Disciplines of Interpretation*, 30–31.

157. See *ibid.*, 14, and Kurz, "Alte, neue, altneue Hermeneutik."

## The Path to the Late Style

Epistemological irony and incomprehensibility together offer an alternative to the Hegelian dialectics so often invoked in analyses of Beethoven's music, particularly the late works, in which surface ruptures and contrasts of tone become increasingly prevalent. By approaching Beethoven's late music from this perspective we can understand its often jarring juxtapositions not as a self-critique of his earlier styles but rather as a means of provoking us to listen in a way that encourages a perpetual oscillation between opposites.

The driving forces behind the changes in Beethoven's music from about 1817 onward are numerous and complex and need not be rehearsed here. Leaving aside the fraught issue of the very concept of "late style," there can be no question that many factors contributed directly or indirectly to those features that we now consider characteristic of the works written in the composer's final decade.<sup>158</sup> These include his growing deafness and declining health, his sense of impending death, his increasing social isolation, his disillusionment with the political scene, the legal and personal turmoils associated with the guardianship of his nephew, and his growing interest in earlier compositional styles and in counterpoint. What gets lost in narratives of this period, however, is an even more fundamental shift in attitude, one whereby Beethoven moved farther and farther away from the long-standing premise of music as a rhetorical art, an art, that is, in which it is the responsibility of the composer to reach the listener. What we find in the later years, adumbrated in the coda of opus 95, is an approach that confronted listeners increasingly with music they perceived to be ironic, incomprehensible, or both.

It is in the late style that the principles of rhetoric give way to the principles of hermeneutics: rhetoric is the work of the composer, hermeneutics the work of the listener, and it was now up to listeners to interpret what the composer had put before them. By the last decade of his life Beethoven was himself oscillating across works, across movements of a work, and at times even within a single movement of a work between two different compositional approaches, one rhetorical, the other oracular, opaque, enigmatic, open to—indeed, demanding—interpretation.

Recent attempts to come to grips with Beethoven's late style almost invariably center on issues of coherence and dissociation, on the relationship between what Dahlhaus called the "rhapsodic laceration of the surface" and

158. On the difficulties of defining and isolating any composer's "late" style, see, for example, Straus, "Disability and 'Late Style,'" and Hutcheon and Hutcheon, "Late Style(s)." Among the many examinations of Beethoven's late works, see Cooper, *Beethoven: The Last Decade*; Solomon, *Late Beethoven*; Rumph, *Beethoven after Napoleon*; and the relevant portions of more general studies, most notably those by Adorno and Dahlhaus cited above, as well as Spitzer, *Music as Philosophy*.

a presumed "network of latent relationships."<sup>159</sup> And while principles such as organicism and unity no longer enjoy the prestige they once did, they remain basic to analysis. As Kofi Agawu points out, "to fail to advance an explanation for coherence is tantamount to listing ingredients without indicating how they are to be mixed." At the same time, while "few analysts have taken it upon themselves to prove that a piece of tonal music is unified[,] fewer still have attempted to demonstrate the absence of unity in a tonal piece."<sup>160</sup>

How, then, do we explain the internal contradictions in Beethoven's late works? Adorno heard them as gestures of self-critique, a reflection of the composer's realization that the synthesizing forces of his earlier works were no longer sustainable:

The late Beethoven's demand for truth rejects the illusory appearance of the unity of subjective and objective, a concept practically at one with the classicist idea. A polarization results. Unity transcends into the fragmentary. In the last quartets this takes place by means of the rough, unmediated juxtaposition of callow aphoristic motifs and polyphonic complexes. The gap between the two becomes obvious and makes the impossibility of aesthetic harmony into the aesthetic content of the work; makes failure in the highest sense a measure of success.<sup>161</sup>

Edward Said, building on Adorno's readings, observed that the late works represent "a moment when the artist who is fully in command of his medium nevertheless abandons communication with the established social order of which he is a part and achieves a contradictory, alienated relationship with it. His late works constitute a form of exile."<sup>162</sup> Julian Johnson, in turn, has noted that

The late works are not concerned with forging a new style, construed in a shallowly modernistic fashion, but precisely with questioning the propositions of an older one. The result, in the late sonatas and late quartets, is a kind of linguistic self-consciousness that constantly interrogates and tests its own assumptions. This music advances musical propositions only to instantly negate

159. Dahlhaus, *Ludwig van Beethoven: Approaches to His Music*, 206.

160. Agawu, *Playing with Signs*, 126. For a critique of theories of unity, see Street, "Superior Myths, Dogmatic Allegories."

161. Adorno, *Beethoven: Philosophie der Musik*, 220: "Der Wahrheitsanspruch des letzten Beethoven verwirft den Schein jener Identität des Subjektiven und Objektiven, der fast eins ist mit der klassizistischen Idee. Es erfolgt eine Polarisierung. Einheit transzendiert zum Fragmentarischen. In den letzten Quartetten geschieht das durch das schroffe, unvermittelte Nebeneinanderrücken kahler, spruchähnlicher Motive und polyphoner Komplexe. Der Riß zwischen beidem, der sich einbekennt, macht die Unmöglichkeit ästhetischer Harmonie zum ästhetischen Gehalt, das Mißlingen in einem obersten Sinn zum Maß des Gelingens." Translation slightly modified from Adorno, *Essays on Music*, 581. The passage in question is from his essay "Verfremdetes Hauptwerk: Zur Missa Solemnis," first published in 1959.

162. Said, *On Late Style*, 8.

them and presents musical materials only to reveal their conventionality. It mixes up the trivial and the profound, the serious and the humorous, the highly complex and the utterly simple, the logical and the contingent. Above all, it undermines the grammar of linear and directed motion on which the Classical style is predicated, unfolding movements in a kind of plural logic marked by frequent caesurae and apparently arbitrary changes of direction. Such a radically self-critical music goes to the heart of modernity.<sup>163</sup>

Alienation, fragmentation, inwardness, isolation, autonomy: all of these reinforce the need for hermeneutics and play a deservedly important role in our attempts to understand this strange and difficult music. Yet we lose something if we view the last decade of Beethoven's life as one in which he was essentially in communion only with himself. Beethoven was too deeply steeped in the rhetorical tradition to have abandoned decorum altogether within a few short years, and perceptions of incomprehensibility in his music were proliferating long before the advent of what we now think of as his late style.

Beethoven's outlook during his final decade, in other words, was not entirely inward. He lived in a period of transition between two eras of musical production and consumption governed by the fundamentally different principles of rhetoric and hermeneutics. The latter has since dictated the default manner of listening: it grants deference and accords agency and autonomy to the creative artist. This at any rate is how we tend to distinguish "serious" composers from those who continue to take their audiences into account and (as Adorno would have it) pander to the culture industry. Beethoven is known to have done just this from time to time (for example, in *Wellingtons Sieg*, op. 91), and it is this portion of his output that critics have deplored so roundly and for so long. By this line of reasoning, the "true" Beethoven emerges in the late works when he writes, in effect, for himself.<sup>164</sup>

But the idea of the late works as music turned inward upon itself—"radically self-critical"—although valid enough in one sense, discourages thinking about this repertory as one still based at least in part on the older premises of rhetoric, a tradition deeply embedded not only in Beethoven's own personal education and profession but in the musical enterprise of his entire generation, which relied to an unprecedented degree on the sale of music on the open market. To the extent that Beethoven took into account the competencies and expectations of listeners in opus 95 and in other "incomprehensible" works or passages of later years, he did so in order to move them beyond those competencies and expectations. The rhetorical principle of decorum as applied to anticipated listeners is, after all, impossible to avoid entirely: even the "synthetic" composer observes it by taking into account what those listeners—at least those beyond "a small circle of

163. Johnson, *Out of Time*, 270.

164. On the deeply problematic implications of this attitude, see Cook, "Other Beethoven"; Mathew, *Political Beethoven*; and Wilson, "Beethoven's Popular Style."

connoisseurs"—will *not* understand. In his late works, then, it is not so much his own earlier style that Beethoven is criticizing as the traditional framework within which he had written those works—which is to say, the framework of rhetoric, whereby it is the composer's responsibility to make his ideas comprehensible. Through repeated and increasingly frequent juxtapositions of the profound and the trivial, the serious and the slapstick, Beethoven in effect moved from writing within a framework oriented toward rhetoric to writing within one oriented toward hermeneutics, though neither is wholly absent at any given moment in his output. In this sense, the works of his final decade intensify and extend techniques that critics had been hearing in Beethoven's music almost from the start.

Friedrich Schlegel's epistemological irony and destabilizing approach to hermeneutics thus provide a contemporaneous philosophical basis for Agawu's insights that "an aesthetic rooted in conflict holds the greatest potential for unraveling the secrets of late Beethoven" and that the late works uphold a fundamental "dissonance between . . . domains," retaining contrast as a premise. Agawu suggests that

we might modify a formulation of Adorno's, and say that the late style is concerned with the irreconcilability of dialectical opposites (in contrast to their reconcilability in the second-style period). But we could also conclude that the analytically perceived dissonance is, in fact, a conceptual consonance. This last formulation would satisfy a certain aesthetic bias for unity and higher-level consonances. At that level of the discussion, however, the subject would no longer be music, but words.<sup>165</sup>

While Schlegel would have resisted the notion of "conceptual consonance," he would surely have welcomed the critical response—in words—provoked by Beethoven's music. It is this sort of move from perception to contemplation to critique that gave Schlegel reason to believe that all the arts, including music, could in their own way articulate philosophical issues not accessible through language. By altering the focus of our critical engagement from the text to our response to that text, Schlegel's hermeneutics provide a basis not only for his beloved notion of *Symphilosophie* but also for the broader early Romantic agenda of critique as a means of progressive thought.

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165. Agawu, *Playing with Signs*, 125–26.

By the 1820s enthusiasm for irony and incomprehensibility in the arts had largely passed.<sup>166</sup> In the wake of the Restoration the aesthetic aspirations of an earlier time now struck many as overly idealistic if not naive. Friedrich Schlegel himself had become a diplomat and publicist in the service of Metternich's regime and was no longer producing provocative new theories of literature, while August Wilhelm Schlegel had decamped to the court of the crown prince of Sweden and from there to the University of Bonn. Even Fichte had moved away from his antifoundationalist stance by the time of his death in 1814.<sup>167</sup> Hegel, who in the meantime had emerged as Germany's preeminent philosopher, dismissed irony altogether in the introduction to his lectures on aesthetics, identifying Friedrich Schlegel by name and berating him at some length in a tone of thinly veiled personal hostility.<sup>168</sup> "Irony," Hegel declared on another occasion, "is a play with everything. . . . Every high and divine truth disintegrates into nothingness (vulgarity); everything that is serious is at the same time a joke."<sup>169</sup>

The intense discourse on irony and incomprehensibility in the first decade of the nineteenth century in Vienna had nevertheless left its mark on Beethoven. His music reflects an aesthetic that embraces these qualities and their attendant impact on the relationship between authors and readers, composers and listeners. He began his career as an analytic composer; more than any other composer of his generation he became a synthetic one. Both tendencies are evident to varying degrees throughout his career, but the increasing move toward the synthetic helps explain many of the more puzzling anomalies of his later works, including the *Missa solennis*, which Adorno famously called an "Alienated *Magnum Opus*" and struggled to integrate into his understanding of the late style.<sup>170</sup> What the *Missa solennis* lacks is precisely those qualities related to irony that are basic to so many of the later works. Beethoven's unusual note at the head of a manuscript of the Kyrie—"From the heart, may it go to the heart"<sup>171</sup>—can be read as a notice that the *Missa solennis* is in effect an irony-free zone.

166. This is not to say that the aesthetic disappeared entirely. John Daverio, for example, makes a convincing case for the influence of Jean Paul and Friedrich Schlegel on the early works of Robert Schumann in particular; see his *Nineteenth-Century Music* and *Robert Schumann*. See also Dill, "Romantic Irony." But even Schumann abandoned this perspective later in his career, and it would not resurface until the closing decades of the nineteenth century in the works of such composers as Mahler and Satie.

167. See Comstock, "Transcendental Buffoonery," 462–63, and Rockmore, "Hegel, German Idealism, and Antifoundationalism," 107.

168. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, 1:93–99. On Hegel's rejection of Friedrich Schlegel's theory of irony, see Strohschneider-Kohrs, *Die romantische Ironie*, 215–20, and Dane, *Critical Mythology of Irony*, 83–92.

169. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, 1:460: "Die Ironie ist das Spiel mit allem. . . . Alle hohe und göttliche Wahrheit löst sich in Nichtigkeit (Gemeinheit) auf; aller Ernst ist zugleich nur Scherz."

170. See the editor's preface to Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, viii.

171. "Von Herzen—Möge es wieder—zu Herzen gehn!" Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Musikabteilung, Mus. ms. autogr. Beethoven 1, dating from



Adorno also struggled with the Ninth Symphony, a work in that most public of all instrumental genres. Responding to its triumphant nature, he called the Ninth "not a late work, but a reconstruction of the *classical* Beethoven." To his mind, only portions of the last two movements could be reconciled with the late style.<sup>172</sup> Yet Beethoven's contemporaries clearly heard—and were puzzled by—the frequent contrasts of tone, and most of all in the finale. An anonymous reviewer commenting on a performance in Leipzig in 1826 opined that the last movement "takes place entirely in the unfortunate dwellings of those who have been banished from heaven. It is as if the spirits of the underworld were celebrating a Festival of Mockery aimed at everything that can be called human joy. With enormous strength, the dangerous throng entered to shred the human heart and turn to grey the divine sparks with wildly noisy, monstrous derision."<sup>173</sup> A reviewer in the *Berliner Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, also writing in 1826, observed that the finale sings of joy "in the most bizarre manner" and that the way in which the voices are introduced is "grotesque." "How," this reviewer asks, "could someone who has grasped so profoundly Goethe's spirit in *Egmont* provide such a trivial introduction to Schiller's hymn?"<sup>174</sup>

Nor can we ascribe such responses to poor performances or to the uninformed judgments of the musically unsophisticated. After hearing a performance of the Ninth conducted by her brother in Cologne in 1836, Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel called the work a "colossal tragedy with an ending that should be dithyrambic but that pivots at its peak toward its opposite extreme, burlesque."<sup>175</sup> Her brother concurred, confessing in a letter to Gustav Droysen a year later that although the "instrumental movements belong to the greatest that I know in the art [of music], I, too, do not

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between April–May 1819 and no later than February or March 1820; see Dorf Müller, Gertsch, and Ronge, *Ludwig van Beethoven*, 1:797. As Birgit Lodes has shown, this was a private note directed specifically toward the work's eventual dedicatee, Archduke Rudolph: Lodes, "Von Herzen—möge es wieder—zu Herzen gehn!"

172. Adorno, *Beethoven: Philosophie der Musik*, 146: "Die IX. Symphonie ist kein Spätwerk sondern die Rekonstruktion des *klassischen* Beethoven" (Adorno's emphasis). Translation from Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, 97.

173. "Nachrichten: Leipzig," 853: "Der letzte Satz . . . spielt völlig in den unglückseligen Wohnungen derer, die vom Himmel gestürzt worden sind. Es ist als ob die Geister der Tiefe ein Fest des Hohnes über Alles, was Menschenfreude heisst, feyerten. Riesenstark tritt die gefährliche Schaar auf und zerreist das menschliche Herz und zergraut den Götterfunken mit wildlärmendem ungeheuerem Spott."

174. "Ueber mehrere Musikaufführungen," 215: "um auf die bizarrste Weise auf der Welt das Thema von der Freude zu besingen. . . . [D]ie groteske Art, wie der Gesang eingeleitet wird. . . . Wie konnte ein Mann, der Göthes Geist im *Egmont* so tief erfasst hat, solche Trivialität dem Schillerschen Hymnus zur Einleitung geben?"

175. Hensel, *Die Familie Mendelssohn*, 2:9: "Ein kolossales Trauerspiel, mit einem Schluss, der dithyrambisch sein soll, aber nun auf seiner Höhe umschlägt und in sein Extrem fällt, in's Burleske."

understand it from the point at which the voices enter.”<sup>176</sup> “Isolated flashes of genius” notwithstanding, Louis Spohr considered the work’s first three movements “worse than all the previous eight symphonies,” the finale “monstrous and tasteless,” “trivial” in its treatment of Schiller’s text.<sup>177</sup> By these criteria, the Ninth is indeed a late work.

In short, the paradoxes of the late style are there not to be resolved, at least not in ways that can be considered definitive and final. Rather, they serve as provocations to ongoing critical engagement. Having read repeated accounts of the “incomprehensibility” of his music, Beethoven at some point began to rethink the fundamental nature of the relationship between composers and listeners, and in the finale of opus 95 he pushed the qualities of irony and incomprehensibility to an unprecedented extreme, one he would rarely again approach in such a concentrated fashion. He harbored no illusions about the difficulties that this work—particularly its ending—would pose for listeners. Written for a “small circle of connoisseurs,” it had (and still has) the potential to expand membership in that group, even more than two hundred years after the fact. For if, as Hugh Macdonald suggests, the ending of opus 95 is Beethoven’s way of punching us on the nose, it is not with contempt but with the intention of making us more active, more thoughtful, more responsive listeners. And if in the end we find that the coda remains incomprehensible, we can perhaps imagine that this was a response that Beethoven—channeling the aesthetics of Friedrich Schlegel and his literary compatriots—would have welcomed.

**Appendix** Examples of the term “serioso” used in the sense of overly serious or mock-serious, 1725–1829 (relevant phrases are set in boldface)

### 1725

Antonio Maria Salvini, *Discorsi accademici . . . Parte prima* (Florence), 360. Salvini describes Socrates and Socratic irony: “che un Socrate vero savio, perciocchè quello, che non gli pareva di sapere, conosceva ancora, e professava pubblicamente di non sapere; **colla sua gentilissima inimitabile maniera d’un burlare serio**, fa scorgere chiaramente a questi tali, essere larghe le loro promesse, e l’attender corto, e che però non son degni di trionfare nell’alte sedi.”

176. Letter of December 14, 1837, in Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, *Sämtliche Briefe*, 5:429: “Die Instrumentalsätze gehören zum Größten, was ich in der Kunst kenne; von da an, wo die Stimmen eintreten, verstehe auch ich es nicht.”

177. Spohr, *Selbstbiographie*, 1:202: “Ja, schon die viel bewunderte neunte Symphonie . . . deren drei erste Sätze mir, trotz einzelner Genie-Blitze, schlechter vorkommen, als sämtliche der acht früheren Symphonien, deren vierter Satz mir aber so monströs und geschmacklos und in seiner Auffassung der Schiller’schen Ode so trivial erscheint.”

1753 (and republished repeatedly for decades thereafter)

Carlo Goldoni, *Il cavaliere di buon gusto*, in *Le commedie* (Pesaro), 3:177 (act 1, scene 7).

Ottavio, as part of an elaborate ruse, says he will make himself appear to be busy around the house: "Lo distribuisco all'economia della casa, allo studio, al carteggio, alla lettura de' buoni libri, **al maneggio di qualche affare serio**, alla tavola, alla conversazione, e qualche volta a far un poco all'amore."

1785

Stefano [Esteban] Arteaga, *Le rivoluzioni del teatro musicale italiano*, 2nd ed. (Venice), 1:129–30.

A description of a Feast of Fools ("Festa dei Pazzi"): "Nel giorno in cui si presentava in pubblico per la prima volta, il suo elemosiniere conferiva agli ascoltanti le indulgenze a nome del padrone **pronunziando in tuono grave e serio certi versi**, il cui senso era il seguente: *Da parte di Monsignor Arcivescovo che Domenedio mandi a tutti voi un malanno al fegato con un panier colmo di perdoni, e due dita di rognà sotto il mento.*"

1791

[Robert Sadler], *Wanley Penson, or The Melancholy Man: A Miscellaneous History* (London), 1:287; translated by J. F. Jünger in 1795–96 as *Der Melancholische: Eine Geschichte* (Berlin and Leipzig), 1:346.

For the relevant passages, see page 318 and note 105 above.

1795

Letter to the editor of the *Gentleman's Magazine* 77 (January–June 1795): 386, on "Hints for a New Mode of Dueling."

The writer signs himself "**Serioso-Whimsical.**"

1813

[Cerichelli, A.], *Il filosofo serio, o Il flemmatico*. A work of fiction listed in the *Allgemeines Verzeichnis der Bücher* (1813) as having recently been published in Cerichelli's *Novelle divertevoli* (Leipzig). Also listed in the 1849 auction catalog for the estate of Ludwig Tieck (*Catalogue de la bibliothèque célèbre de M. Ludwig Tieck*).

1815

Thomas Skinner Surr, *The Magic of Wealth: A Novel* (London), 2:137.

After a long and flowery disquisition, ending, "Or what, above all, is the value itself of those indispensable services, thus publicly avowed by the homage of ministers themselves?" the speaker interrupts himself to say, "Lud! lud!—what a strain of *serioso pomposo* am I falling into!"

1824

Pierre-Louis Ginguené, *Storia della letteratura italiana* (Milan), 6:98.

In his analysis of *Orlando furioso* Ginguené comments that “Tutto questo è narrato **con un serio** assai comico.”

## 1829

Giovanni M. Pagni, *Memorie storiche per servire alla vita di Vincenzio Monti* (Florence), 8.

Pagni disparages an earlier eulogy to the poet and playwright Vincenzo Monti (1754–1828) by Paride Zaiotti: “Lo Zaiotti, che intimo suo confidente ben conosceva la buona indole di lui, col solito suo modo di esagerare beatificandolo, ha composto per la Biblioteca Italiana un panegirico sacro, o per meglio dire **una inetta e ridicola cicalata in serio** stile.”

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## Abstract

Beethoven acknowledged the radical nature of his "Quartetto serioso" (1810) when he noted that it had been written for "a small circle of connoisseurs" and was "never to be performed in public." The coda to the quartet's finale, with its sudden reversal of tone, has proven especially

problematic, eliciting responses that include incomprehension (Marx) and outright dismissal (d'Indy). More recent accounts have pointed to irony as a strategy of negation, but Beethoven's contemporaries were inclined to embrace it as a constructive, liberating device. The Schlegel brothers, among others, championed it as the primary instrument of an epistemological framework that promoted the accommodation of multiple perspectives. The antifoundationalist nature of irony encourages a mode of understanding that precludes the possibility of any one "correct" perspective. Beethoven's use of "serioso" here and elsewhere, moreover, evokes a sense of the word that conveys pathos bordering on bathos. The "Quartetto serioso" is Beethoven's most extreme essay in irony, a device that would permeate his later works in more subtle but no less far-reaching ways. Opus 95 also reflects the growing prestige of artistic incomprehensibility, part of a broader shift from an aesthetics based on the principles of rhetoric, in which the artist bears the burden of intelligibility, to an aesthetics based on the principles of hermeneutics, in which the audience assumes responsibility for comprehending a given text. Beethoven's "late" works, often regarded as products of self-critique or turning inward, can thus be heard as part of a wider effort to engage audiences as active participants in a community dedicated to a dialectic of critique.

**Keywords:** Beethoven, irony, incomprehensibility, serioso, rhetoric, hermeneutics