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When North Americans think of the Cold War, we imagine McCarthyism, the Space Race and spy games. However, the ideological battles fought in the world of culture were just as important as those in the economic and policy spheres. In his introduction to a volume of *The Journal of Musicology* dedicated to the Cold War, Peter Schmelz argues that the Cold War “was more about ideas and beliefs than about anything else” and “[n]owhere [were these] more common currency than in the arts, especially music.”¹ Germany, the literal meeting point of a worldwide cultural and political conflict, was also where the divide between East and West German ideologies played out most decisively. Given Germany’s extremely rich musical heritage, and the need to “undo” its tainting under Nazism, music, particularly that of the German masters, became a focus in East and West German cultural ideology.

Given his stature it was only natural that Germany’s most favored musical son, Ludwig van Beethoven, would become the musical lightning rod for the ideological and cultural conflicts between the two sibling states. In East Germany Beethoven was regarded as a hero of the *Volk*, a thoroughly German composer

¹Peter J Schmelz, “Introduction: Music in the Cold War,” *Journal of Musicology* 26, no. 1 (2009): 3-16.

with obvious leftist sympathies. In the West Beethoven represented a universalism that was unconcerned with and uninfluenced by politics. These ideologies competed for supremacy for the entirety of a divided Germany and much of the Cold War. The end of this ideological conflict came with the fall of the Soviet Union and the unrivalled global hegemony of the Western world, specifically the United States. A concert was organized in Berlin, the city most emblematic of the victory, as a part of the subsequent celebration. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, with its famous *An die Freude* (*Ode to Joy*) chorus, changed by the conductor Leonard Bernstein from joy (*freude*) to freedom (*freiheit*), proved to be a highly charged showdown between the dichotomous ideologies of East and West. Through the following investigation of the differing musical ideologies of both East and West Germany and of the *An die Freiheit* concert of 1989, it becomes clear that the presentation of *An die Freiheit* uncovered the political intentions behind the West's ostensibly apolitical representation of Beethoven.

The divide between East and West German ideologies of music revolved around its perceived relation to politics. Anne Schreffler has argued that art music was seen as "autonomous" in Western Germany, while East Germans considered music a "human activity" that was necessarily influenced by and reflective of current and desirable political realities.² The first step the early East Germans took in creating their German Socialist "Utopia" was to reunite the arts and the *Volk* they represented. Music, particularly the music of the German masters, was to be the didactic soundtrack of the new socialist order. In this task the East German vision of Beethoven become that of a

² Anne C Shreffler, "Berlin Walls: Dahlhaus, Knepler, and the Ideologies of Music History," *Journal of Musicology* 20, no. 4 (2003): 521.

“revolutionary Jacobin.”³, who as portrayed by scholars from the German Democratic Republic (GDR), resisted “reactionary social developments [...] ‘with fighting strength’” throughout his lifetime.⁴

The Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), the Communist party in control of East Germany, was particularly involved in the creation of a definitively East German Beethoven. In their hands the composer became a martial musician leading his loyal troops to battle. Citizen and composer alike became defenders of the socialist homeland they had created together. Two of the party’s most noted heads of state, Walter Ulbricht and his successor Willi Stoph, explicitly articulated Beethoven’s place in the new German socialist state at state sponsored functions and celebrations of the composer. The Ninth Symphony spoke to Ulbricht of the fraternity only possible within socialism, and the joy of all German workers whose long struggle towards communism was only accomplished with the policies and guidance of the German Democratic Republic.⁵ For Stoph, the work of Beethoven, “culminate[d] in the future image of a creative society, freed from exploitation and repression” that could only be realized through the “victorious struggle of the working class” and the creation of a German socialist community.⁶ These politicians traced a direct line from Beethoven and his works to the realization of a socialist German state created by the German Democratic Republic. According to official ideology, the Ninth Symphony was a call to all German

³ David B. Dennis, *Beethoven in German Politics, 1870-1989* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 183.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁶ Mark Evan Bonds, *Music as Thought: Listening to the Symphony in the Age of Beethoven*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 113.

workers to unite and create a better socialist German “brotherhood.”

In 1952 the GDR sponsored a huge commemoration of the 125th anniversary of Beethoven’s death. The SED’s concerts and speeches for the event were not simply a commemoration of Beethoven, but reclamation of the composer as an Eastern hero. The events were intensely political and used Beethoven to propagate anti-western ideology and justify the GDR’s statehood. Stoph argued strongly against the Western musical ideology that he claimed, “sought to remove the connection between Beethoven and the *Volk*” in order to commercialize and make palatable the “social implications of his creations.”⁷ Eastern critics accused Westerners of attempting to “de-ideologize” Beethoven, “thereby robbing people of the revolutionary education that they gained from the East German version.”⁸ Western musical dogma, in the eyes of Eastern leaders, stripped the people of the revolutionary power of the true Beethoven by separating him from his political convictions and profiteering off his legacy.

The fears of socialist critics were not entirely unfounded, given that the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) did actively attempt to “de-ideologize” the reception of Beethoven and his work. West German music commentators were “appalled by the jingoistic version purveyed by the Nazis and embarrassed by the revolutionary portrait promulgated in the GDR.”⁹ Rather, the West (West Germany and the Western world at large) pushed for an objective and politically removed Beethoven, a position summarized succinctly by the West German newspaper *Die Welt*: “Beethoven wrote not for, but also not against, society,”- he

⁷ Ibid., 113.

⁸ Dennis, *Beethoven in German Politics, 1870-1989*, 186.

⁹ Ibid., 191.

“considered music an unengaged art.”¹⁰ According to this interpretation Beethoven’s music was not a commentary on politics or the social order, nor should it be interpreted as expressions of any kind of ideological leanings. His art was a “pure” contribution, detached from politics, and “his greatness was limited to his achievements as an artist.”¹¹

While Eastern scholars were quite vocal about their response to Western ideas, Western academics did not aim their works at their peers across the Wall.¹² This did not mean of course that Western musical ideology was not formulated in response to Eastern thought, but rather that the political climate of the West would not allow the open politicizing of art. Acknowledging the dialogue between East and West would be tantamount to admitting that Beethoven was indeed connected to politics, something Western thinkers argued so fervently against.

Public events concerning Beethoven were also markedly different between the two countries. The West German commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the composer’s death in 1977 contrasted sharply with the previous East German commemoration in 1952. The explicitly political tone of the East was absent and strongly discouraged in West German commemorations. President Scheel was allowed in Bonn provided he did not make a speech or linger at the composer’s home, as it would be considered bad form in the West to mix politics with Beethoven’s moment. As government organizers stipulated, this “Todestag was to be observed in a quiet, reverent way... ‘it was not to be a state function.’”¹³

¹⁰ Ibid., 193.

¹¹ Ibid., 194.

¹² Shreffler, “Berlin Walls: Dahlhaus, Knepler, and the Ideologies of Music History,” 501.

¹³ Dennis, *Beethoven in German Politics, 1870-1989*, 197.

Broadly speaking, Western critics believed that the apolitical quality of Beethoven's music translated into a universalism that was understandable to all human beings and that transcended biases. For many Westerners, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, with its chorus of brotherly love and joy, reflected perfectly this universalist view.¹⁴ Unlike in the East, where the brotherhood evoked in Schiller's text was seen to speak to the working brotherhood of socialism, Western interpretations took it as a view of humanity beyond any divisions and concerned only with love.

Leonard Bernstein eloquently identified with this vision of global fraternity in the Ninth Symphony. Even before conducting the *An die Freiheit* concert of 1989, Bernstein was very involved in the crafting of Beethoven ideology. In his public television special on the composer for the 1970 bicentennial celebrations, Bernstein estimates that, "no composer has ever lived who speaks so directly to so many people [...] people of all classes, nationalities and racial backgrounds."¹⁵ Bernstein portrays Beethoven as a man devoid of political commitments, except perhaps to the concept of unsullied "human brotherhood," and depicts the composer as a man of childlike "innocence and trust" whose "innocent spirit speaks to us of hope and future and immortality."¹⁶

For these reasons Bernstein argues that no other composer is as fitting as Beethoven to lighten the "dark times" of the Cold War. Here innocence is linked to purity of spirit as

¹⁴ "Be embraced, you millions!/This kiss for the whole world!/Brothers, beyond the star-canopy/Must a loving Father dwell," Beethoven, Ludwig van Beethoven, "Choral," *Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125*. 1824. From a poem by Friedrich Schiller written in 1785.

¹⁵ Humphrey Burton, "The Ninth Symphony," in *Bernstein on Beethoven: A Celebration in Vienna*, 90 min: PBS, 1970.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

well as purity of intention. According to Bernstein, Beethoven's music is not sullied by the politics of his time nor should it be interpreted to serve individual political agendas. This vision of Beethoven as an "innocent" composer was the very core of Western conceptions of Beethoven as a removed, "apolitical" artist, and the antithesis of the Eastern view of Beethoven as mature, radical visionary.

The political division at the heart of this conflict was abruptly dissolved on the night of Reunification, November 9th, 1989. After East Germany lifted the travel restrictions on its citizens, hundreds of thousands of East Berliners flooded West Berlin and "effectively punctured the Iron Curtain."¹⁷ The fall of the Berlin Wall was a monumental symbol not just for Germany, but for the whole world. Reunited Germans became the symbols of the reconfiguration of the new world order directed by the remaining Cold War superpower - the United States.

While the US government worked to orchestrate a new world politic, an individual American was orchestrating the concert to herald its cultural birth. Organizers of the Berlin Reunification concert made sure that western universalism was brought to the fore in Leonard Bernstein's presentation of *An die Freiheit*. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, with its famous chorus - *An die Freude (Ode to Joy)*, changed by Bernstein from joy (*Freude*) to freedom (*Freiheit*) - was the ultimate symbol of Beethoven's supposed universalism. *An die Freiheit*, offered the perfect opportunity for a public demonstration of a Beethoven finally removed from politics, unaware of and uninterested in the dogfights of the political realm.

The choice of an American conductor was a symbol of the concert's intended universalist message, and while East and West German performers were recruited for the concert, so were

¹⁷ Dennis, *Beethoven in German Politics, 1870-1989*, 197.

artists from the United States, the USSR, the United Kingdom and France. Audience members and reviewers heralded the concert's global message; one audience member commented that they found, "that just this Symphony of Freedom has a very particular meaning in this moment. The music fits like no other with the bonding of people to one another that is now occurring- I don't think we have any other music for such an event, do we?"¹⁸

However the political subtext of the performance, and the choice of its participants, belies this apolitical façade. That night the American-lead West was still aglow in the political triumphs of the hour and the dedication of the post-Reunification celebration to *Freiheit* or freedom was every bit as political a symbol as the destruction of the Wall. The "universal" ideas on parade reflected Western dedication to liberal capitalism in contrast to Eastern socialism.

In replacing *Freude* with *Freiheit*, Bernstein made the Ninth Symphony not only "a symbol of German unity," but also, and probably more importantly, "a symbol of the West's triumph over totalitarianism."¹⁹ Many saw the concert and the all-important word change as a commentary on German reunification, but highlighting the brotherhood already represented in the text of the finale would serve the same purpose. Bernstein would have had to revise neither the title nor the text. Changing "joy" to "freedom" was a calculated political move made by a composer experienced in political maneuvering, and meant far more than an "innocent" celebration of German unity. The West, through an American conductor, was claiming to free Beethoven (and Germany) from the chains of communism and give music back its autonomy, implying that true aesthetic

¹⁸ Ibid., 202.

¹⁹ Ibid., 260.

freedom was only possible within the political freedom granted by democracy. The German people were, as reviewers and audiences were quick to note, finally “free” not just to co-mingle with their fellow countrymen, but to enjoy the music of one of their country’s greatest men in any way they wanted, not just the way prescribed by the SED.

With all of this the apolitical façade presented in *An die Freiheit* begins to crumble. Western organizers argued that because of music’s political power, art was freed from politics. This contradiction undoes the notion of a complete Western victory over the ideology of the East. The West was, with the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of Eastern markets to capitalism, the undeniable champion of the Cold War. Even so, it could not rid itself completely of the Eastern critique of its musical reception. The message of *An die Freiheit* centered on universalism, but it was a universalism defined and limited to a liberal and capitalist sphere. Westerners chose the message of *An die Freiheit*, a message of art above politics. However, by choosing a message for this music the West confirmed music’s political significance and validated the Eastern understanding of music’s ideological power.

Music’s meaning and reception is ultimately tied to the needs and values of a given time and place, for it is, as Shreffler reminds us, a product of “human activity.”²⁰ No matter how much we try to convince ourselves otherwise, music will never and can never be anywhere near an “autonomous work.”²¹ Music, and any human expression for that matter, cannot avoid being political. Attempts to show music’s autonomy only further

²⁰ Shreffler, “Berlin Walls: Dahlhaus, Knepler, and the Ideologies of Music History,” 500.

²¹ Ibid.

highlight its deep connections to the political animals that create and consume it.

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