

Beethoven's *Eroica* Thematic Studies

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I. Previous Hypotheses on the Subject of the *Eroica*

“He wants to sell you the symphony for 100 ducats. It is by his own statement the greatest work he has yet written. Beethoven recently played it to me, and I think that heaven and earth must tremble beneath one’s feet in a performance. He has a great desire to dedicate it to Bonaparte; if not, because Lobkowitz wants to have it for half a year, giving 400 ducats for it, it will yet be called Bonaparte.”
Ries to Simrock, October 22, 1803¹

Of Beethoven’s *Eroica* it can be said paradoxically that the reports that have come down to us about its occasion, “object” and purpose have done more to obscure its genesis than to clarify it. One will grasp the paradox of the situation if one calls to mind the following three things: first, that the *Eroica* and the *Pastoral* are the only Beethoven symphonies that officially belong to the genre of the *sinfonie caratteristiche*, that is, of the symphonies that are based on a specific subject;² secondly, that there is no dearth of accounts about the occasion of the work; and thirdly, that Beethoven himself provided the symphony with a kind of program when, in October of 1806, he published it under the title *Sinfonia eroica composta per festeggiare il sovvenire di un grand Uomo*.³

Even so the *Eroica* has prompted the most diverse interpretations and speculations. It would be no exaggeration to call it an enigmatic work.

The reason for this state of things is that the traditional accounts of the occasion and the subject of the symphony do not add up to a consistent whole. Let us, to begin with, test the historical ‘sources’ – passages in letters and reports by contemporary witnesses.

In the highly important but virtually ignored letter of October 22, 1803, to the Bonn publisher Simrock, cited above, Ferdinand Ries wrote, on Beethoven’s behalf, that the latter had a “great desire” to “dedicate” the symphony to Bonaparte, but that if the Prince Lobkowitz were to acquire the performance rights “for half a year,” Beethoven would just call it “Bonaparte.”

This letter was published only in 1929 and was thus unknown to the earlier researchers. Well known since 1838 and much quoted, on the other hand, was Ries’s report about the theme and the renaming of the work.⁴ According to that, the Third originally had Bonaparte for its “subject.” The renaming, we are told, occurred in the spring of 1804 when Beethoven learned from Ries that Bonaparte had proclaimed himself emperor.⁵

Ries’s account has been cited innumerable times. Nevertheless I shall reproduce it here *in extenso*, since we will have to refer to it repeatedly later on:

In the year 1802, Beethoven composed his third symphony (now known under the title *Sinfonia eroica*) in Heiligenstadt, a village situated an hour and a half from Vienna. Beethoven

often thought of a specific object while composing, although he frequently ridiculed and reviled tonal painting, especially the petty sort. Haydn's *Creation* and *Seasons* were butts of his ridicule at times, though Beethoven did not fail to recognize Haydn's loftier merits, conferring upon him the most deserved praises with regard to many of his choruses and other things. In this symphony, Beethoven had thought of Bonaparte, when the latter was still first Consul. Beethoven esteemed him extraordinarily highly at the time, comparing him to the greatest of the Roman consuls. I as well as a number of his closer friends have seen a clean copy of the score lying on his table, with the title page bearing the word "Buonaparte" at the top and "Luigi van Beethoven" at the bottom, but not another word. Whether the space between was to have been filled in, and with what, I do not know. I was the first to bring him the news that Bonaparte had proclaimed himself emperor, whereupon he flew into a rage and exclaimed: "Then he, too, is nothing but an ordinary man! So now he will also trample upon all human rights, indulge only his ambitions; he will now place himself above all others, become a tyrant!" Beethoven walked over to the table, grasped the title page at the top, tor it in two and tossed it on the ground. The first page was written anew, and only now the symphony was given the title *Sinfonia eroica*. Later the Prince Lobkowitz bought the composition from Beethoven for his use for several years, during which it was then given several times at the latter's palace.

Disregarding a number of details (we will get to them later on), we can hardly doubt that Ries presented the episode accurately. Two documents and several accounts confirm the correctness of his presentation. Thus in the copy of the score dated August 1804, the Third bears the title *Sinfonia grande / intitolata Bonaparte / 804 [sic] im August / del Sigr. Louis van Beethoven / geschrieben auf Bonaparte*.⁶ The words *intitolata Bonaparte* are heavily erased, while the note "written about [or to] Bonaparte," in pencil, is in Beethoven's hand. Secondly, we have a letter of Beethoven's to Breitkopf & Härtel of August 26, 1804, which says explicitly that the Third is "actually" entitled Bonaparte.⁷

Essentially agreeing with Ries's account is also a recollection by the Baron de Trémont, a French officer, who met Beethoven in Vienna in 1809. Trémont reports the following:

At the imperial court in Vienna he was regarded as a republican. Far from sponsoring him, therefore, the court also never attended a performance of one of his works. Napoleon had been his hero, as long as he remained the first Consul of the Republic. After the battle of Marengo,⁸ he worked at a heroic symphony (Eroica) in order to dedicate it to him. It was finished in 1802, just when people began to talk about Napoleon's wanting to have himself crowned and then conquer Germany. Beethoven tore up his dedication and transferred his detestation to the French nation, which had bent under the yoke. Even so, the greatness of Napoleon preoccupied him uncommonly, and he often spoke to me about it. Despite his ill humor, he realized that he admired the way Napoleon had risen from such a low station. That flattered his democratic notions.⁹

Ries's story is supported finally also by the later account of Anton Schindler, according to which Beethoven received the impulse for his composition of the *Third* in 1798 from General Bernadotte, the French ambassador to Vienna. In

the third edition of his *Beethoven Biography*, Schindler writes that “the idea had come” from Bernadotte that Beethoven should “celebrate Bonaparte, the greatest hero of the age, in a musical work.”¹⁰

At first reading, these epistolary passages and reports seem to harmonize well enough. A more exacting comparison, however, will raise questions: Ries and the Baron Trémont insist that the *Third* was to have been *dedicated* to Bonaparte. Beethoven himself writes that it was actually *entitled* “Bonaparte.” Ries says that in writing this symphony, Beethoven had *thought* of Bonaparte. What exactly does this wording betoken? Does it mean that Beethoven saw in Bonaparte the ideal type of the “great man,” that he wanted to glorify him, that he wanted to create a symphonic “character portrait” of Bonaparte, or even that, like a number of poets in their odes to Napoleon, he wanted to allude in music to the heroic deeds of the First Consul?

Problems arise, moreover, when one tries to place the reports in relation to the music. If the *Third* was indeed conceived as a symphony about Bonaparte, what is the meaning of the *Marcia funebre* and the *Scherzo*; what function do they have in a heroic symphony? To whom does the funeral march refer, and how is one to explain the logical “breach” produced by the funeral march’s being followed by a “merry” Scherzo?

Finally: the two themes on which the *Eroica*’s Finale is based are borrowed from the music of the ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus* op. 43 (1800/1801) and from the *Piano Variations* op. 35 (1802). What is the connection between these two works and the subject of the *Eroica*, that is to say, Bonaparte, on the one hand, and the “great man” whose memory was to be celebrated, on the other?

These questions occupied Beethoven research for a century. From Hector Berlioz’s *Eroica* essays of 1837 and 1839 to the *Eroica* study of Arnold Schering of 1933, numerous artists, literati, writers and scholars endeavored to clear up the “Eroica problem.” The various views advanced can in the main be reduced to five hypotheses.

According to the first hypothesis, the *Eroica* was unquestionably a Bonaparte symphony: Beethoven composed it to glorify Napoleon Bonaparte, the First Consul of the French Republic, admired by many intellectuals all over Europe. Opinions diverged on the question *how* exactly the *Third* referred to the illustrious general and statesman, whether Beethoven wanted to represent Bonaparte as a heroic ideal or to draw a symphonic “character portrait” of him. The most representative views were as follows.

To George Grove, the “first movement was certain[ly]” a portrait of Bonaparte, “the March . . . certain[ly] also, and the writer believes . . . that the other movements are also included in the picture, and that the *Poco Andante* at the end represents the apotheosis of the hero.”¹¹ Charles Wood, a friend of Grove’s, was likewise convinced that all of the movements of the *Eroica* referred to Bo-

naparte.¹² Wood thought he could draw this conclusion from the (hardly significant) observation that both the main theme of the opening movement (the “Napoleon motif”) and the themes of the *Marcia* and the Finale are based on triads.¹³ Wood thought it conceivable that in composing the Scherzo Beethoven might have had the following scenario in mind: a festive, excited multitude expects the arrival of the “hero,” who enters at the sudden *Fortissimo* (mm. 93ff.) and, in the Trio, addresses the people. Paul Bekker, in turn, saw in the main theme of the head movement a portrait of “the two opposing sides” in Bonaparte’s “heroic nature,” namely “onward-pressing energy and plangent, resigned reflection.”¹⁴ Alfred Heuss, too, regarded it as a foregone conclusion that the first movement of the *Eroica* set forth a “character portrait” of Bonaparte, while the Finale evoked in him an image of “how a Napoleon, like a true Roman consul, proclaims his destiny to the assembled people”¹⁵ – an image Heuss took over from Wood. Edouard Herriot was a good deal more cautious in his judgment, in that while for him, too, an ideal Bonaparte dominated the *Eroica*, he warned against the presumption of trying to interpret the symphony thus in detail.¹⁶

According to the second hypothesis, the *Eroica* has nothing to do with Bonaparte but should be interpreted as a program symphony on a classical subject. In a much-criticized study, Arnold Schering presented the surmise for discussion that Beethoven, a zealous reader of Homer, took the image of the hero he had in mind during the composition of the *Eroica*, not from his own time, but from classical antiquity, specifically from Homer’s *Iliad*. According to Schering, Beethoven based the movements of the symphony programmatically on the following four scenes from the *Iliad*. The exposition of the opening movement depicts Hector’s farewell to Andromache and his little son Astyanax (Book 6); the dramatically agitated development paints a battle scene, namely Hector’s fight with Patroclus and the death of Patroclus (Book 16); while the recapitulation has as its subject Hector’s return to Andromache. The *Marcia funebre* is supposedly conceived as the obsequies for Hector, slain by Achilles (Book 24), while the *Scherzo* depicts the martial and athletic contests in honor of the fallen Patroclus (Book 23). The Finale is to be taken as an “apotheosis of splendor and strength.”¹⁷

One may note here that nearly a century before Schering Hector Berlioz had adduced verses from Virgil and Homer in interpreting the *Eroica*. The *Marcia funebre* appeared to him as a transcription (*traduction*) of the verses in which Virgil describes the funeral procession of the young Pallas (*Aeneis* XI: 78f., 89f.). The *Scherzo* Berlioz, like Schering,¹⁸ linked to the funeral contests in honor of Patroclus in the *Iliad*.¹⁹ Similarly, the Berlioz admirer August Wilhelm Ambros thought that the *Eroica* was presided over by the same spirit “we encounter when we read Aeschylus’ immortal tragedy of the seven heroes against Thebes, or the *Iliad* with the *aristeias* of its heroes, its divine banquets, the sa-

cred marriage of Hector and Andromache and the glorious death of the “noblest of the Trojans.”²⁰

Of major influence on *Eroica* interpretation after 1850 was a hypothesis originated by Richard Wagner. According to this conception, Beethoven in the *Eroica* did not want to write a “biographical symphony” on Bonaparte but wanted to musically represent an idea, the idea of heroism. Wagner first set down this idea in his artist novella “Ein glücklicher Abend” (“A Happy Evening”) (1841). Here (evidently following Berlioz), he ventured the thesis that Beethoven’s symphonies are based on “philosophic ideas” (several years earlier, Berlioz spoke of “poetic ideas” in Beethoven’s symphonies²¹) and thought that the *Eroica* gave musical expression to the “idea of a heroic force reaching with gigantic impetuosity for the highest.”²² Wagner does not deny that Beethoven was prompted to the composition of the *Eroica* by the figure of Bonaparte, but insisted that it would be quite wrong to relate the symphony in any way to Bonaparte’s deeds. Nowhere in the symphony could an immediate external “connection with the fate of the hero” (i.e. Bonaparte) be demonstrated. To quote Wagner:

...tell me where, at what point in this composition can you find any passage of which one could rightly presume that in it the composer wanted to point to a specific moment in the heroic career of the young general? What is the point of the funeral march, the scherzo with the bugles, of the finale with the soft, tender andante inset? Where is the bridge of Lodi, where the battle at Arcole, where the march to Leoben, where the victory at the pyramids, and where is the 18th Brumaire?

From these reflections grew that “philosophic” *Eroica* interpretation Wagner published in 1851. Here he leaves the genesis of the work entirely out of consideration; Bonaparte’s name is never mentioned. At the center of the “programmatic elucidation” stands the concept of the heroic, which Wagner wants to be taken “in the widest sense” and to be conceived “in no way as referring only to, say, a military hero [!].” By “hero,” the “entire complete human being” is to be understood, “who is possessed of all purely human feelings – of love, of pain and of strength – in their greatest fullness and force.”²³ One can see that Wagner strips the concept of the heroic of all temporal ties, elevating it to the highest conceivable level of abstraction!²⁴

Wagner’s widely read *Eroica* interpretation found many adherents and was adopted, silently or *expressis verbis*, by a number of commentators.²⁵ Naturally it could not satisfy everybody: several years after its publication a fourth hypothesis was formulated, which declares the *Eroica* to be a program symphony on the subject “A Hero’s Life.”

The originator of this hypothesis was to all appearances the Russian musicologist Alexander Ulibishev. In his much-criticized Beethoven book he opined that two of the movements of the *Eroica*, the *Marcia funebre* and the *Finale*,

could not be reconciled with the “poetic idea” of the symphony, the idea of heroism personified in Bonaparte. A funeral march did not fit in with a symphony composed as a homage to a man “of whom the whole world knew that he was only too full of life.” Also, there was “nothing less heroic than the Finale of the heroic symphony.”²⁶ To explain this seeming discrepancy, Ulibishev flirted with the anecdote transmitted by Fétis, one pulled out of thin air, that the triumphal C major movement later used as the Finale of the fifth Symphony had originally served as the second movement of the *Eroica* and that Beethoven composed the *Marcia funebre* only after he had received the appalling news that the First Consul had made himself emperor.²⁷

Starting from these reflections, Ulibishev interpreted the *Eroica* as a heroic symphony. He called the first movement a “depiction of human greatness,” the *Marcia funebre* “a drama in four acts,” the *Scherzo* “a scene of a lull in war.” The Trio proclaims “that there is a day of rest in the camp.” The Finale appeared to Ulibishev “as a far too lengthy musical curiosity.”

With these in part rather odd views, Ulibishev gave a new direction to *Eroica* interpretation. For all their reservations about Ulibishev, two prominent Beethoven critics, at any rate, held on to his interpretation of the *Eroica* as a program symphony: Adolph Bernhard Marx and Wilhelm von Lenz. Oddly enough, they expressed similar views at nearly the same time (1859 and 1860).

In the first volume of his Beethoven monograph, Marx wrestles with Wagner’s *Eroica* interpretation, emphasizing that it implied “apt things, close to the truth,” but criticizes that Wagner gives us, “instead of a vision of the full life, the cerebral extract,” thus losing his way from the work of art “into the abstract, the nonartistic.” In Marx’s view, the *Eroica* offers an “ideal image” of the heroic life in four “acts.” Thus the first movement represents a battle, (“the quintessence of the heroic life”). In the *Marcia funebre*, Beethoven invokes a “funeral image.” The *Scherzo* hardly admitted of an unambiguous content summary. (“Is it a camp diversion? Is there peace and the army on its way to the dear homeland?”) The Finale, at any rate, described “the pleasures and festivities of peace.”²⁸

The notion that the *Eroica* offers an ideal image of the heroic life also hovers over Lenz’s interpretation, though Lenz frequently works with military analogies.²⁹ Many of his statements are metaphorical in nature. One has to keep that in mind if one wants to understand the program he proposes for the four movements:

Allegro	Life and Death of a Hero
Marcia	The Funeral
Scherzo	Ceasefire at the Grave
Finale	Wake and Heroic Ballad

Some interesting perspectives on the *Eroica*, finally, emerged from noting the close thematic link between the *Eroica* Finale and the *Prometheus* music. Based on this fact, several critics had advanced the hypothesis that the *Eroica*, and particularly its Finale, might also be related in theme to the Prometheus subject. Already George Grove thought that “perhaps the melody which [Beethoven] employed in the *Finale* [of the *Prometheus* music] and elsewhere . . . may have had some specially radical signification.”³⁰ Hugo Riemann³¹ and Paul Bekker³² took another step by relating the striking, short introduction to the *Eroica* Finale to a passage in the *Tempesta* of the *Prometheus* music. In view of this analogy, Bekker surmised that the *Eroica* Finale might be based on the Prometheus subject and therefore added, besides Napoleon and Abercrombie,³³ the figure of Prometheus to the possible *Eroica* “models.” Riemann, again, thought it likely that Beethoven might have transferred the congeries of ideas in which he moved during the conception of the *Prometheus* music to the personality of Bonaparte.³⁴ Walther Vetter, too, was of the opinion “that Beethoven in creating this Finale had thought of the glorious figure of Prometheus.”³⁵

It remains to be mentioned that the preceding survey includes only those opinions that are particularly representative of the five hypotheses. Naturally there are views that, as it were, mediate between these hypotheses. I shall cite two examples.

In an essay published in 1868 about Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, the noted Russian music critic Alexander N. Serov also included some remarks about the *Eroica*, remarks that border partly on Berlioz’s trains of thought and partly on Wagner’s conceptions. For Serov, the Third has nothing to do with the battle scenes of the Napoleonic wars but is rather a “symphony of freedom.” Its sphere is “purely ideal, influenced by the world of antiquity, its heroic figures remain *abstract*, quasi like bas reliefs, without the least reference to ‘color’ or ‘costume,’ nor to the turn of the 18th to the 19th century.” Besides, the issue is not at all the *war* but its *conclusion*, “wherefore a major emphasis falls on the ‘festival of peace’ of the glorious Finale.”³⁶

Hermann Kretzschmar, in turn, conceives the *Eroica* as a program symphony *sui generis*. The title under which Beethoven published the work should be understood less as a “detailed program” than as “a general directive.” Kretzschmar regards the attempt by von Lenz and Marx to “ascribe specific images of warrior life” to the movements of the symphony as permissible for the middle movements but as not “feasible” and even “absolutely paltry” with regard to the other movements, especially the opening one. In his view, the head

movement conveys, not the image of a battle “but that of a heroic nature, whose main features Beethoven has grasped with a unique depth of insight and engages in reciprocal action.”³⁷ Nevertheless, Kretzschmar, like countless other commentators, interprets the development section as a dramatic “depiction of the battle the hero directs.”

Most of these “hermeneutic” hypotheses, it should be said, are speculative in nature and hence of limited value at best for exact musicological research, for which only proof counts. If we keep this in mind, we will not be able to hold it against the discipline for (with the exception of Schering’s study) putting questions about the subject of the *Eroica* aside and concentrating on tectonic, structural and stylistic aspects of the symphony. This turn to the opposite extreme naturally entailed a complete redefinition of the place of the *Eroica*: since the work of Alfred Lorenz, Heinrich Schenker, Walter Riezler, Werner Korte and Walter Engelsmann, the *Eroica* is by many regarded as a work of “absolute music.”³⁸

After the excesses of the old hermeneutics, the skepticism of many scholars vis-à-vis the content issue is certainly understandable. However, we must at the same time admit that a purely formalistic investigation no longer gets us any farther, either. The fact remains that the question of content, which the *Eroica*, like many other Beethoven works, raises, has lost none of its relevance. One may perhaps “put it aside,” but one cannot ignore it.

It appears that the time has come for a hermeneutics of Beethoven’s music to become again a task of Beethoven research. The “*Eroica* problem,” at any rate, is no fiction. Let us see to what extent new questions, new investigative procedures, new observations and new research results can contribute to its solution.