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A Celebration for the Beethoven Completist

A Beethoven symphony cycle on period instruments performed in chronological order by the Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique under John Eliot Gardiner honors the composer's 250th birthday.



John Eliot Gardiner leading the Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique at Carnegie Hall on Friday PHOTO: RICHARD TERMINE

By Barbara Jepson - Feb. 26, 2020

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In a concert season brimming with Beethoven favorites and rarities to mark the 250th anniversary of his birth, one presentation encompasses both categories: a Beethoven symphony cycle on period instruments. Performed in chronological order by the Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique under John Eliot Gardiner at Carnegie Hall, where it was the first of its kind, it begins anew at the Harris Theater in Chicago on Thursday.

The five Carnegie concerts were notable for their visceral excitement and unusual features. To emphasize Beethoven's embrace of the ideals of the French Revolution, Mr. Gardiner had orchestra members briefly sing while playing a passage from the final Allegro of the composer's Fifth Symphony. During a pre-series lecture, the British conductor said that Beethoven "pinched the theme" from a vocal piece by the composer of "La Marseillaise," which became the French national anthem. In addition, six of the works were performed with the violins and violas standing.

More familiar was the sheer aural appeal of the original or reproduction instruments themselves: gut strings, sweeter overall than their modern counterparts, with double basses as smooth as velvet; mellow wood flutes and golden-hued trumpets. The natural horns had an earthy, caramel character.

But it takes more than beautiful sonorities to make convincing music. Many symphony orchestra conductors have adopted certain principles championed by historical performance advocates, reducing the size of their string sections for Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven to restore the balance between strings and woodwinds that was customary during those composers' lifetimes. (A case in point: Under music director Yannick Nézet-Séguin, the 97-member Philadelphia Orchestra will present its "modern" Beethoven cycle at Carnegie beginning March 13 with 63 to 74 instrumentalists; Mr. Gardiner used about 60.)

More attention is paid to "appropriate" historical style in matters of phrasing and interpretation. One is less likely to encounter the kind of conductorial license that had Leonard Bernstein lending a time-stopping, almost Mahlerian quality to the Adagio of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony ("Choral") in a 1969 recording with the New

York Philharmonic for Sony. And conductors are more likely to take Beethoven's faster metronome markings seriously, even if, like Mr. Gardiner, they don't follow them slavishly. So the differences between "modern" and "period" performances are not as vast as they used to be.

Much admired for his Bach and Monteverdi with the English Baroque Soloists and Monteverdi Choir, Mr. Gardiner approached Beethoven with taste and well-blended orchestral sound, taking most of the thematic "repeats." In the composer's Allegro sections, tempos were at times precariously fast, yet the ORR's virtuosic strings handled them with ease. The unrestrained exhilaration of the Fifth Symphony's conclusion was so vividly portrayed that the audience roared its approval. In the famous four-note motif that opens the Fifth, Mr. Gardiner charted a course midway between the ponderous approach of earlier generations of maestros and that of period-instrument leaders who underplay it. The entire symphony was beautifully paced and intelligently conceived.

Performances of the lesser-known works were exemplary, although one wished for more expressive shadings in an otherwise impressive perusal of the lovely Second Symphony. The Fourth Symphony has always struck me as a retreat to safety after the boundary-pushing brilliance of the Third Symphony ("Eroica"), because it never fulfills the promise of its somber, almost primeval opening. But the conductor and his forces revealed its merits, which include a tranquil Adagio and a richly themed final Allegro.

Other highlights included an eloquent "Eroica" and a serene, well-paced Sixth Symphony ("Pastoral"), which often seemed to float on air, except, of course, in its vividly depicted "Storm" movement. The thunder effects from basses and timpani were wonderful, the playing from flutes and trumpets outstanding, a hallmark of this cycle. Throughout the concerts, however, the horns and occasionally the woodwinds were beset by brief intonational lapses, and the strings needed retuning between movements now and then.

The opening program featured the First Symphony and other early orchestral and vocal works, including excerpts from the ballet music for “The Creatures of Prometheus.” By presenting the symphonies chronologically, this Beethoven cycle brought the composer’s development into sharper focus. For example, the Finale of “Prometheus” contains a theme that later begins the fourth movement of the “Eroica.”

This approach also made it easier to trace the evolution of Beethoven’s quintessential compositional traits: the excitement he conjures from simple, recurring scale passages, his increasing use of woodwinds to carry melodic ideas, and his well-known tendency to interrupt the musical momentum just as it appears to reach a climax, and then do it again and again.

The final program ended with an electrifying performance of the Ninth Symphony featuring the superb Monteverdi Choir and the excellent soloists Lucy Crowe, Jess Dandy, Ed Lyon and Matthew Rose. Mr. Gardiner took the contemplative adagio faster than usual, but it never felt rushed. Many conductors have captured the exuberant bonhomie of the “Ode to Joy” section, but Mr. Gardiner also imparted its spiritual heart.

What a pity that encroaching deafness kept Beethoven from hearing his symphonies. And how miraculous that he nevertheless wrote more, vastly expanding the scale and expressive content of the symphonic form.

Ms. Jepson reviews classical albums and concerts for the Journal.