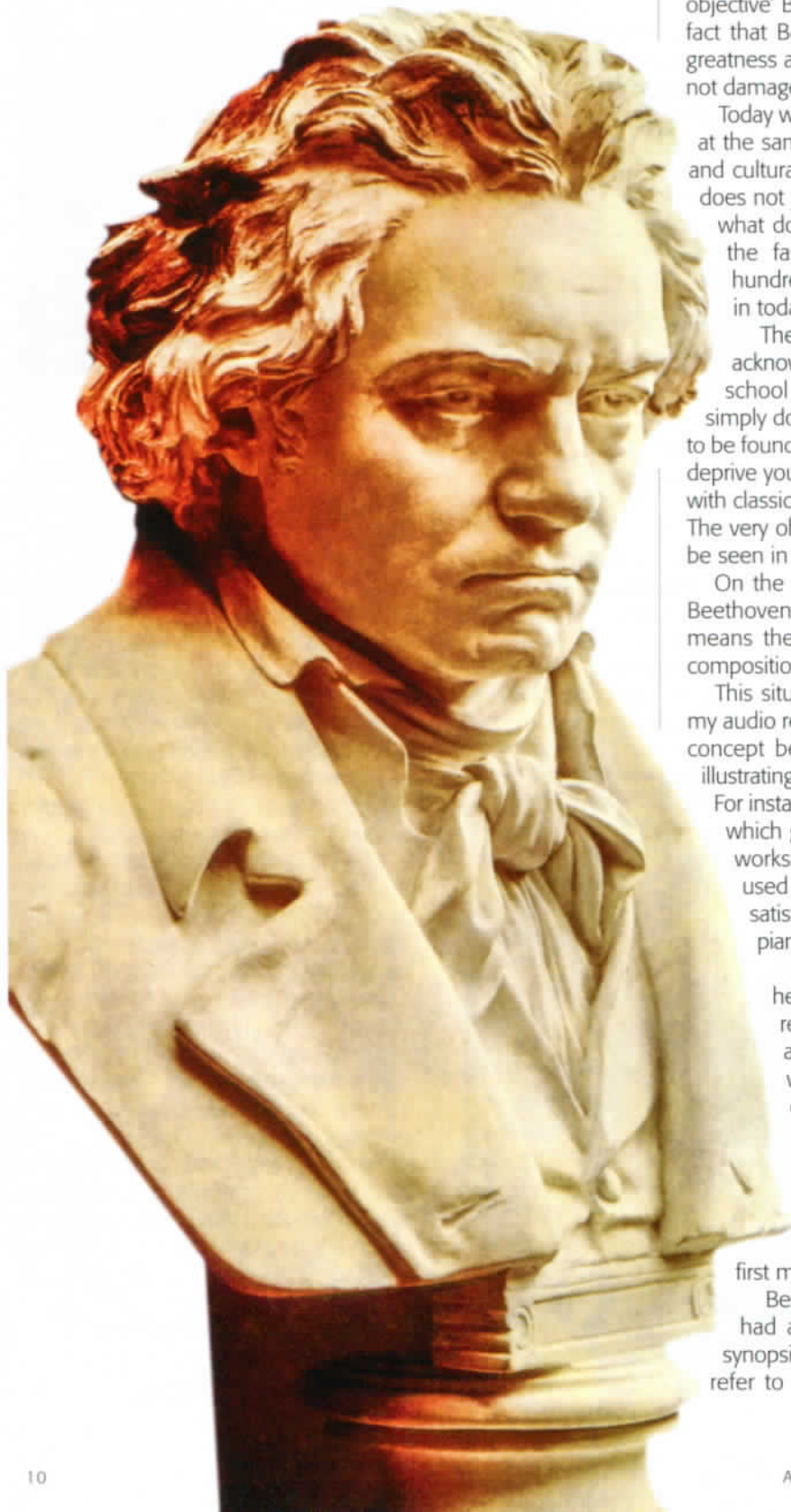


# Beethoven today

Dirk Joeres

The distinguished German pianist and conductor outlines the approach to his new integral recording of Beethoven's nine symphonies.



Beethoven is certainly the composer whose work has been subject to the widest variety of approaches. There was the 'romantic' Beethoven, the 'heroic' Beethoven, the 'structural, objective' Beethoven, the 'historically correct' Beethoven, etc. The fact that Beethoven's work has so many facets is proof of its greatness and that certain aberrations in these approaches could not damage it, demonstrates its powerful compositional qualities.

Today we can assess all these approaches to Beethoven, while at the same time we must be aware of the changes in society and cultural attitudes in our times. "Beethoven Today" therefore does not just mean: what does Beethoven offer to us but also: what do we offer to Beethoven? Or, in other words: what is the fascination stemming from Beethoven's works two hundred years after they were written and what do we bring in today from our side to do these works justice?

The answer to this particular question leads us to acknowledge some very sobering facts: music education at school has been reduced enormously in recent years or simply does not take place at all. Alarming examples for this are to be found all over Europe. Politicians, by allowing this to happen, deprive young people of the chance to at least come into contact with classical music, one of the greatest inheritances of mankind. The very obvious consequence is that this generation is rarely to be seen in the concert halls today.

On the other hand, for many regular concert-goers today a Beethoven Symphony is just something to be consumed. This means they miss intrinsic features of this music, not only its compositional finesse but also its rousing energy.

This situation was for me a strong motivation to accompany my audio recordings of Beethoven's Symphonies with videos, my concept being to deepen the understanding of his music by illustrating certain special aspects of his compositional technique.

For instance, few people know about Beethoven's sketchbooks which give us such a fascinating insight into the composer's workshop. For Beethoven composing was hard work. He used to polish-up original ideas again and again until he was satisfied with the final form. On the videos I illustrate at the piano some particularly interesting examples of this process.

A further speciality of Beethoven's technique is the way he treats rhythm. On the video which accompanies the recording of the First and Second Symphonies I speak about the up-beat principle which is so important in his work. It gives his music its special drive and can be an essential element throughout a complete movement (first movement of the Second Symphony). Tightening the rhythmic structure is another special feature in Beethoven's music, leading to an intensification of the thematic material. I demonstrate this on the video with the theme of the First Symphony's first movement.

Beethoven himself is reported to have said that he always had an 'organic entity in mind', by which he meant the synopsis of a complete symphonic movement, where sections refer to each other and so make up an entity. Richness of

motivic relationships and sometimes references to previous passages serve this purpose. Here is an example for a more hidden hint: for how many listeners (and players) might the beginning of the recapitulation of the First Symphony's first movement pass by without them being aware of the subtle reference to the introduction of this movement consisting in upward moving leading notes and rapidly changing keys.

So one can say: the more one knows, the more one hears and enjoys. This is particularly true for the music of Beethoven, this genial 'architect' who succeeds in making the complex construction of his 'buildings' appear as something quite natural.

A new chapter in the history of the symphony begins with the Eroica. A first novelty: the music becomes subjective and in this way we get a picture of Beethoven as a person. His character and his convictions shine through the music, so to speak. We know of Beethoven's sympathy for Napoleon Buonaparte as guarantor for Republican ideals, which ended abruptly when Napoleon declared himself Emperor. Whether Napoleon was the secret hero of the "Sinfonia eroica" or not: what remains as a message in this Symphony is Beethoven's strong plea for the freedom of the individual in every respect.

A second novelty in the Eroica: its dimensions. At its first performance in 1804 it was the longest symphony ever written till then and the variety of themes and motives was overwhelming. Most of the listeners on that occasion were

stretched to their limits and the Eroica still remains a challenge for the (first-time) listener. For this reason it seems to me important to give him some guidelines: in the first movement it is useful to demonstrate the overall structure, its great lines of development creating unity in diversity. In the second movement an overview is easier for the listener once he knows that Beethoven follows here – up to a certain point – the traditional formal scheme of a funeral march and then enlarges and enriches it by introducing a highly expressive fugato section. And last but not least, many special characteristics of the final movement become apparent in direct comparison with the Eroica Variations for Piano opus 35 Beethoven composed shortly before the Eroica Symphony.

The number of listeners who are likely to be acquainted with both the Symphony's finale and the Piano Variations is certainly limited and that is why I combined the two on the recording. At the beginning both works have exactly the same step-by-step build-up and also

further on we encounter interesting parallels. So this comparison, like Beethoven's sketchbooks, gives us an interesting glimpse into the composer's workshop. ■



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Photo: Hagen Willisch

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