Criticism, Faith, and the Idee: A. B. Marx’s Early Reception of Beethoven

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We owe to Adolph Bernhard Marx perhaps the most self-effacing words Beethoven ever directed to a music critic. In a letter dated 26 September 1825, the composer asks his Paris publisher, Maurice Schlesinger, to remember him to Herr Marx in Berlin and then playfully entreats Marx, through Schlesinger, to “let him off the hook once in a while.”1 Earlier in the same year, Beethoven had written to Maurice’s father, the renowned Berlin publisher Adolph Martin Schlesinger, expressing his fervent hope that Marx would continue to reveal the higher aspects of the true realm of art.2

These enthusiastic acknowledgements of Marx’s critical writings come only a year and a half after Marx was hired by Schlesinger père to act as editor-in-chief of the Berliner allgemeine musikalische Zeitung, a new periodical which the publisher hoped would offer a serious challenge to the then popular Leipzig allgemeine musikalische Zeitung. Schlesinger’s selection of Marx was an inspired gamble, as the young legal practitioner and would-be composer had no journalistic experience whatsoever and had

1 “Bey dieser Gelegenheit ersuche ich Sie mich bey H. Marx in Berlin zu empheilen, daß er es ja nich[t] zu genau mit mir nehme u. mich zuweilen zur Hintertür hinausschlipfen laße” (26 September 1825, to Maurice Schlesinger). In addition to its inclusion in the standard collections of Beethoven’s letters, this letter is found in Ludwig van Beethoven und seine Verleger: Ihr Verkehr und Briefwechsel, ed. Max Unger (Berlin, 1921), p. 92.

published only one substantial essay, an appreciation of E. T. A. Hoffmann as a musician. In experience notwithstanding, Marx was responsible for a number of impressive achievements during the seven-year run of the Berlin periodical, not the least of which was the confident foundation of an ambitious new program for music criticism, one which was to demand a more spiritual reception of musical artworks. This aspect of Marx’s criticism brought him the attention and approval of Beethoven himself, who saw in Marx’s approach an antidote to those less imaginative strains of criticism which insist on “counting syllables.”

Already in the essay on E. T. A. Hoffmann, Marx sounds the theme that was to provide the basis for his critical agenda: the need for a subjective and artistic mode of criticism, in contrast to scientific and/or philosophical approaches. Marx lauds Hoffmann as a fearless pioneer in this direction and characterizes the latter’s critical method as an artistic rebirth of the artwork in the soul of the interpreter, who then gives out an image of the work as he sees it. The criterion for understanding an artwork is therefore some sort of spiritual communion, and Marx would later conclude that the scientific demonstration of a work’s technical features is only a lower stage of artistic understanding. The new seat of judgement is the spirit in its totality, and artistic understanding thus makes a claim for autonomy in an intellectual environment that had long been convinced of the sovereign power of scientific understanding. But the autonomy Marx claims for artistic judgement is not to be confused with the various philosophical attempts to establish a basis for aesthetic judgement or for the aesthetic response, despite Marx’s language and the powerful influence of Prussian idealism.

Ever since Eduard Krüger’s assessment of Marx’s composition treatise in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* of 1842, it has been assumed by many critics that Marx’s musical thought represents a specialized appendix to the aesthetics of Hegel. In this paper I will attempt to show that Marx’s early aesthetics are motivated by contemporary philosophical thought only to a limited extent, and that Marx’s conception of artistic understanding, the core of his critical program, is based largely on his personal identification with the dramatic coherence of the music of Beethoven. Marx attests to the strength of this identification by framing the critical act in terms not unlike those of a religious experience. On the other hand, it will be seen that his self-styled explication of the spiritual basis of music, embodied in the much discussed concept of the *Idee*, is directed in part by the aesthetic assumptions of German Romanticism and by the moral aspirations of the age.

I

A large part of Marx’s critical program may be gleaned from the writings of 1824 alone, the initial year of the Berlin periodical. In fact, almost all of the major issues which were to concern Marx throughout his career are already present in these early writings, and while Marx believed he was heralding the critical stance of a new music periodical in 1824, he was at the same time enunciating the program for his own career as a musical thinker. Marx’s introductory article, entitled “Concerning the demands of our age on music criticism,” indulges in the declamatory rhetoric of the manifesto. Its title alone implies a basic shift in thinking from that prevalent in late eighteenth-century music aesthetics: works now make demands on critics, instead of vice versa. Marx was convinced that music was finally coming of age in the early nineteenth century and that the badge of this belated maturation was music’s new found ability to express ideal content.

According to Marx, the so-called ideal period of music formed the highest stage of a three-stage process of musical development whose earlier stages were culminated by Bach and Mo-
zart, respectively. Marx accused the Leipzig paper of being the organ of the now obsolete Mozartean standpoint. This standpoint was incommensurable with the new and not yet fulfilled ideal period of musical art, and Marx’s newspaper would thus strive to comprehend and promote the fulfillment of this higher period. This could only be achieved by preparing the listener for an understanding of the important works of the age and the standpoint from which they were written. Marx clearly recognized that this project was of an open-ended nature, and he encouraged a healthy clash of opinions, in order to attain a higher, synthesizing viewpoint from which to survey the history of music and its path to the future.

Marx’s enthusiasm for the music of his day is informed by a belief in its spiritually elevated content and the concomitant conviction that such works make new demands on both listener and critic. In his introductory article Marx illustrates the critical standpoint of his periodical by describing at length the role of the critic in relation to the musical work and to the reader. At the heart of the critic’s task is the all-important process of critical judgement. Marx claims that the spiritual enrichment of the reader is the goal of criticism. This can only be attained by exposure to a judgement which offers a clear recognition (Erkenntnis) of the true essence of the object judged. This essence is characterized as the spiritual content of a work. The exact nature of this spiritual content is vague; Marx often refers to it as the Idee of a piece of music.

The concept of the Idee is central to Marx’s understanding of music and to his beliefs about the ideal content of the music of his age. I will accordingly concentrate my present investigation on this concept and its ramifications. What are Marx’s claims for the Idee? First and foremost, the Idee acts as the guarantor of a work’s unity, the symbol of its totality. Marx claims that “no proof [of formal integrity] can be more desirable or necessary to an artwork than the Idee; for only from this can the whole of the work be properly seen and judged.” In addition to the role of the Idee as the index of a work’s wholeness stands its role in relation to the individuality of a work. The fact that Marx never favors the reader with a comprehensive discussion of the nature of the Idee, choosing instead to share his pronouncements on the same in the scattered contexts of his reviews, implies that the Idee is best shown in individual cases rather than elucidated as a general concept. It is, in fact, that aspect of a musical work which guarantees the individuality of the work.

This guarantee is elaborated in Marx’s claim for the necessary correspondence of the Idee with musical form. Marx understands form as a function of the Idee:

In general, one speaks so often about form as a typus for all works of the spirit, seeming to designate it as something existing once and for all. Yet is form something independent? Is it something other than the revelation of the Idee, the incarnation of thought in the musical artwork? Every ripe and healthy Idee must reveal itself as such in a controlled form. Every Idee has created its own form, which must be organized like itself.

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9Marx, “Andeutung des Standpunktes der Zeitung,” BamZ 1 [1824], 446.
10Marx, “Über die Anforderung,” p. 10. Arno Forchert suggests that Marx’s editorial encouragement of conflicting opinions is more a juridical reflex, in the sense of litigation aimed at serving the spirit of the law, than an application of the Hegelian dialectic of synthesis through conflict. I believe this to be an eminently sensible observation and would add that we are far from understanding the extent to which forensic training influenced critical and theoretical thought in nineteenth-century Germany. See Forchert, “Adolf Bernhard Marx und seine Berliner allgemeine musikalische Zeitung,” in Studien zur Musikgeschichte Berlins im frühen 19. Jahrhundert, ed. Carl Dahlhaus (Regensburg, 1980), p. 386.
11Marx, “Über die Anforderung,” p. 3.

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Each work has an individual Idee and a correspondingly individual form. The presence of an Idee guarantees the individuality of the form.

As it somehow symbolizes both the unity and the individuality of a musical work, Marx deems the Idee to be the true essence of the work and, as such, the appropriate object of the critic’s investigation. How can the critic come to know the Idee of any given piece? On several occasions in his early writings Marx speaks of a spiritual surrender to the artwork, a process in which the critic attempts to identify with the spirit of the artist as expressed in the work. Marx characterizes the artwork as “the child of the man in his totality, whose birth requires the collaborated efforts of all his powers.” The critic must fathom that spirit in the best way he can—by bringing the totality of his own spirit to bear upon it. For Marx, spirit means the working together of the diverse components of human mentality, such as reason, imagination, and emotion. Marx claims that analysis of musical works cannot be limited to the intellect (Verstand) alone; a more spiritual approach is needed to confront the “inseparable spiritual capabilities” of the artist. The concept of wholeness, of totality, is crucial to this communion between artist and interpreter. What is implied here is the reception of a totality (an artwork born of the total powers of a human being) by another totality (the interpreter). In other words, one’s nearest resource for understanding the spirit of another, expressed in the totality of an artwork, is the totality of one’s own spirit.

This defense of the validity of spiritual interpretation is reminiscent of Schleiermacher’s defense of divination as the essential component of textual hermeneutics. For Schleiermacher, since all individuality is a manifestation of universal life, it follows that everyone carries a modicum of everyone else within himself. Divination of an author’s meaning is thus stimulated by comparison with oneself. Marx stresses the totality of all the factors involved—the work, the artist, and the interpreter—as the basis of and motivation for critical divination.

Karl Philipp Moritz’s influential essay of 1788, “Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen,” is the locus classicus for the argument that the artwork is a totality which cannot be comprehended by the intellect (Denkkräft) alone. According to Moritz, just as the totality of nature cannot be known by human understanding, neither can the totality of an artwork, such a totality can only be felt or, in the highest human potentiality, created.

It is clear that many of Marx’s pronouncements are traceable to influential thinkers of his intellectual milieu. This group includes the founder of the University of Berlin, Wilhelm von Humboldt, as well as some prominent members of the university’s faculty, namely Fichte, Schleiermacher, and Hegel. For example, Marx’s triadic historical schema and his notion that a conflict of opinions will necessarily lead to a synthesizing standpoint evoke the most public aspects of the Idealist philosophy of history. And his view of the Idee as the spiritual content of a musical work seems cut from the same cloth. Most of the Idealist thinkers developed related concepts about artworks; Humboldt’s linguistic theory even employs a concept analogous to the Idee in reference to the speech act.

Marx was also aware of earlier pioneering efforts in literary criticism. He explicitly mentions Lessing, Goethe, Schiller, and Wieland in this regard and identifies his own stance as an artist/critic with these illustrious precursors. This would explain why his initial observations echo some of the ideas expressed in Goethe’s famous introduction to the Propyläen, for exam-

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19 See Humboldt’s Kawi-Werk, of which Marx speaks highly in his memoirs (Erinnerungen. Aus meinem Leben, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1865), II, 124) and which is known today as Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues. The similarity of Humboldt’s “inner speech-form” to Marx’s Idee is evident in the following passage: “Both the inner speech-form and the sounds of the language work together, as the latter conform themselves to the demands of the former, the treatment of this speech-unity becomes thereby the symbol of the desired specific conceptual unity. This latter unity, thus planted in the sounds of the language, extends itself over the specific speech act as a spiritual principle.” Wilhelm von Humboldts Werke, ed. Albert Leitzmann, vol. VII (Berlin, 1907), p. 121.
20 Marx, "Wer ist zu der Theilnahme an der Zeitung berufen?" BamZ 4 (1827), 13.
ple. In general, Marx’s ex cathedra pronouncements are suspiciously eclectic and undeveloped, leading me to believe that he borrowed popular notions of literary and philosophical writers to buttress his own view of music. What is his own view? Is it merely an often contradictory amalgam of various philosophical positions, as some of Marx’s present-day critics have claimed? In other words, are the traceable influences in Marx’s discourse the basic components of his thought, or is there a coherent viewpoint that underlies and is cloaked by these influences? I believe there is such a viewpoint, in order to get at it we must analyze more closely Marx’s concept of the individual work and its Idee.

II

Let us consider the nature of the Idee. What exactly is this allegedly spiritual essence? The citation on page 185 embodies several unsettling components of Marx’s understanding of the Idee. First he associates the Idee with thought, when he claims that form is the incarnation of thought in the artwork. Next he describes an Idee worthy of revelation as “ripe and healthy.” He goes on to say that Form must be organized like the Idee. This raises some questions: Can the spiritual essence of a work be isomorphic with that work’s outward form? And can it be said to have a life process which can be stunted by a lack of health?

Several other of Marx’s descriptions of the Idee may contribute to our understanding of this elusive concept. In a lengthy review of Beethoven’s cantata Meeresstille und glückliche Fahrt, Marx claims that the spiritual content of musical works is far from any abstract idea:

No one would seriously undertake to set Logic or the elements of Euclid . . . to music. And that same law is applicable to all other ideas which in their essence have no connection, or very little connection, with actual sensuous nature.

Here Marx states that the Idee must have a palpable connection with sensuous reality in order to be suitable for musical representation. In the same article Marx compares the Idee of a lyric poem to that of a piece of music. The poem can express an Idee in its immediacy without needing to spell everything out, as the more material-bound arts must do. For this reason, Marx claims that in many cases the addition of music to such a poem would disturb the revelation of the poem’s Idee, “binding it instead to a distinct series of sensuous representations . . . [M]usic’s continuous forward motion would compel the poem to forego those ideas from which alone it would be intelligible.” Thus the temporal parameter of music precludes the expression of nontemporal content, of content that does not represent some continuous process. An Idee suitable for musical representation must therefore be something that can be unfolded in time, that can generate a process.

It is clear that Marx’s Idee is related to concrete reality, that it has a kind of metaphorical “life,” and that this life is expressed in terms of a potential for temporal realization. When Marx actually demonstrates the existence of an Idee, he explicitly associates it with extramusical

20Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Hamburger Ausgabe in 14 Bänden, ed. Erich Trunz, vol. XII (Munich, 1982), pp. 38–55. The views of Goethe which I would here invoke include the self-effacing stance of the critic, embodied in the notion of surrendering to the artwork; the idea that every artwork demands the whole man; art conceived as natura naturans; and the responsibility of the artist for the theoretical contemplation of his art. Concerning this last point, Marx believed that only practicing composers could contribute meaningfully to musical thought. His insistence on this score led to a deart of outside correspondents for his periodical, leaving him to fill in haphazardly [Heinrich Dorn, „Berliner allgemeine musikalische Zeitung, recensirt von H. Dorn,” Cäcilia 8 (1828), 178–79].


23“Musik würde . . . ihn an eine bestimmte Folge sinnlicher Vorstellungen fesseln, oder ihn durch den unaufgehaltenen Fortgang zwingen, alle Ideen zu übergehen, aus denen der folgende Vers allein deutbar ist.” Ibid., p. 395.
representation. Some examples from his earliest Beethoven criticism will serve as illustrations. In order to understand the context of these illustrations, we must briefly reconstruct a peculiar aspect of Marx’s conception of musical history.

During the initial year of his periodical, Marx offers interpretations of several Beethoven symphonies as part of an extended discussion of the composer’s achievements in that genre. He arrives at these interpretations by placing Beethoven at the apex of a three-stage process of historical development which includes the symphonies of Mozart and those of Haydn as the first two stages. He then goes on to delineate a (what else?) three-stage developmental process within Beethoven’s own symphonies. Marx places the Fifth Symphony in the first stage, a stage representing Beethoven’s initial decisive step beyond the lyric, Mozartean standpoint, which for Marx involves the expression of personal feeling. With the Fifth Symphony, Beethoven moves from the lyric standpoint to a stage which is still lyric “but which portrays not a feeling but a succession of soul states with a deeper psychological truth.” The second stage of Beethoven’s development involves the enrichment of instrumentation and the portrayal of external events and situations without explanatory words. Marx mentions the Sixth Symphony in connection with the second stage but chooses to illustrate the potential of this stage with the so-called “Battle” Symphony, known today as “Wellington’s Victory.” The third and highest stage involves the union of the tendencies of the first two stages: “psychological development is linked with a succession of external situations, portrayed in a thoroughly dramatic activity of the instruments constituting the orchestra.” The Third and Seventh Symphonies serve as examples of this culminating stage.

Obviously, Marx’s explanation of the development of Beethoven’s style is not chronological. He himself recognizes this disparity, acknowledging in a footnote that he does not present the symphonies in chronological order but rather in an ordering “most suitable for the elucidation of our point of view.” In other words, this is not an account of Beethoven’s chronological development; it is rather an ahistorical ordering of his works according to the type of extramusical representation Marx feels they demonstrate. Such an ordering defines musical development in terms of stages whose culmination is not temporal but substantive. This allows Marx to establish the nature of what he felt to be Beethoven’s greatest music without the constriction of a chronologically dictated process of stylistic development. It also establishes Beethoven’s most dramatically conceived symphonies as the point of departure for both Marx’s concept of musical history and his concept of musical content.

Returning to Marx’s characterization of the three stages of Beethoven’s symphonic development, we may notice, with the German critic Arno Forchert, that the first stage involves subjective expression, the second objective portrayal, and the third a synthesis of subjective and objective. Central to Marx’s third stage, I believe, is the conception of the drama, entailng the representation of both inner and outer forces in a continuous process of conflict. His three stages would then correspond to the standard Romantic typology of lyric, epic, and dramatic art, with drama as a culminating synthesis. Marx is reacting to what he feels is a quality of dramatic representation in Beethoven’s “greatest” works.

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27 Marx does devote an extended discussion to the “Pastoral” Symphony four years later in his monograph Uber Malerei in der Tonkunst; this discussion can be found literally intact in Marx’s far more accessible biography of Beethoven. See Marx, Ludwig van Beethoven: Leben und Schaffen, 2 vols. [pt. Hildesheim, 1979], II, 97–99.


29 Ibid., p. 174n.

30 Marx used this type of ahistorical derivation in his well-known doctrine of forms (Formenlehre); I discuss the ramifications of that particular application of this approach in “The Role of Sonata Form in A. B. Marx’s Theory of Form,” Journal of Music Theory 33 [1989].

This is evident in the nature of Marx’s interpretations of the two symphonies in question here, the Third and the Seventh. These interpretations prove to be rather undeveloped dramatic programs, both martial in nature. In neither case does Marx attempt to demonstrate a definitive Idee; he claims that he is more interested in showing how these works suggest an Idee. 32 For example, Marx implies that the Idee of the first movement of the Eroica is “the successful image of a hero’s life.” This image is then temporally realized by a dramatic succession of events, a dramatic program.

In introducing his interpretation of the Seventh Symphony, Marx is confidently explicit about the unequivocal nature of the program:

Without any exterior designation . . . the sense of this symphony develops with such triumphant certainty that one need only surrender oneself to the effect of the tones in order to see an image—or rather a Drama—take shape that is more definedly individual than has ever arisen in musical art. 33

As with the Eroica, Marx sees the first movement as an image of martial life. He characterizes the slow introduction as an invocation, even providing a text for the opening half notes: “Hört die Wundermärh” (Harken to the wondrous tale). The rising string figures of the introduction remind Marx of the opening lines of Wieland’s epic poem Oberon, lines which initiate a standard invocation to the poetic muses:

Noch einmal sattelt mir den Hypogryphen
Zum Ritt ins alte romantische Land 34

The “old romantic land” into which we are invited to ride by Beethoven’s introduction is that of a southerly, warlike people— the Moors in their Golden Age. The remainder of the movement presumably describes this land, and Marx’s interpretation is, in this case, more a tableau than a program. 35

Foreign to our own more absolutist sensibilities is the unquestioned assumption in Marx’s criticism that the spiritual elevation of Beethoven’s works is directly proportional to their ability to portray very specific extramusical content, even if this content is fashioned by Marx as being somehow supraindividual or transcendent. For Marx, the measure of musical progress of any given age resides in the specificity and elevation of extramusical content that the music of that age is able to represent. What is the basis of Marx’s assumption that music can, and must, represent extramusical content? And what governs the curious contradictions of his notion of the Idee, a spiritual essence that seems all too material?

I would argue that Marx’s reaction to the interpretive challenge present in the works of Beethoven forms the basis of his musical thought, and that this thought is primarily ahistorical and only quasi-philosophical. Is Marx’s Idee the metaphysical Idee of German Idealist aesthetics? Is it truly a measure of the world-spirit in the work, of divinity in mortal reality? How can it be, when Marx claims that only the most recent works are worthy of an Idee? For Hegel, art expresses ideal content in every age; only the type of ideal content varies from age to age. For Marx, only in the present age could music attain the power to express ideal content. Marx’s concept is far too specifically delimited to be anything like a philosophical construct. It is rather a pseudophilosophical attempt to justify the works of Beethoven by supplying them with a spiritual index of what he perceived was their coherence as meaningful totalities. Marx’s Idee validates the critic’s intuition about the wholeness of a musical work, symbolizing that wholeness as a spiritual essence.

33 Offene irgendeine von aussen entlehnte Bezeichnung . . . entwickelt sich der Sinn dieser Symphonie mit einer so siegreichen Bestimmtheit dass man sich nur der Einwirkung der Töne hingegeben darf, um ein so individuelles Bild—oder will man es lieber Drama nennen—augehend zu sehen, wie es noch nie in der Tonkunst entstanden ist.” Ibid., p. 182.
34 Marx omits a clause from the first line. The first stanza of Wieland’s poem reads as follows (with modernized orthography):
Noch einmal sattelt mir den Hypogryphen, ihr Musen,
Zum Ritt ins alte romantische Land!
Wie lieblich um meinen entfesselten Busen
Der holde Wahnsinn spielt! Wer schlang das magische Band
Um meine Stirne! Wer treibt von meinen Augen den Nebel
Der auf der Vorwelt Wundern liegt?

Ich seh, in buntem Gewühl, bald siegend, bald besieg,
Des Ritters gutes Schwert, der Heiden blinkende Säbel.
But there is more to be said about this characterization of the Idee as a kind of spiritual validation or “proof.” When Marx uses the verb “erkennen,” rather than “empfinden” or “auf fassen,” to describe what the critic must do to an Idee, he implies that the Idee is knowable in a precise way and that it resides in the musical object, waiting to be discerned. But by using the verb “erkennen” rather than “wissen,” Marx implies that the knowledge of the Idee is not necessarily verifiable and does not necessarily involve an absolute aspect of the work. In other words, even though he treats the Idee as a kind of proof, Marx is not invoking the explanatory mode of scientific understanding which seeks to reduce a material object to a conceptual essence verifiable through repeated experiment. He is rather asserting that the recognition of an Idee is not unlike an act of faith—both require a spiritual surrender, a relinquishing of the normative criteria for judgements of truth. Knowledge of an Idee is like knowledge of oneself (“Erkenne dich!”) or knowledge of God, true in a personal sense but not verifiable by means of human reason. Marx’s Idee is thus a concept imported from Idealist aesthetics but employed as a symbol of the critic’s intuition about the wholeness and spiritual elevation of the musical work. As such, the Idee resides in the critic, providing an index of his intuitive reception of the work, a reception made possible by a process of spiritual surrender akin to an act of faith.

III

At this point, I would like to explore more closely the nature of Marx’s engagement with Beethoven’s symphonic works, in order to ask how these works can inspire the act of faith so important to Marx’s notion of artistic understanding. We may approach this question by first examining Marx’s aesthetic prepossession for the quality of wholeness. How did wholeness come to acquire such an indispensable status for Marx as a criterion for judging musical works, and what are the ramifications for music criticism of this newly emergent criterion?

At the heart of Marx’s bluster about the “new age” of music and music criticism is the conviction that individual works now make demands on critics. The bold language of these new works is not subject to immediate aural understanding; the critic can only hope to understand such works by perceiving them from the standpoint of the whole. To claim that a specific work is only comprehensible from the standpoint of its totality is to claim that the work demands repeated hearings. Arno Forchert has argued that this standpoint represents a basic shift in thinking about the musical object. When musical works began to be regarded as totalities, a new spatial perspective was brought to bear upon them. They were treated as spatial entities, as things which could be perceived in their entirety. This implies that there was a preexisting temporal perspective in musical reception. For example, older musical works could be perceived as understandable as they flow past the listener. No higher-level standpoint (other than the culturally conditioned internalization of tonal grammar) would have to be invoked in order to understand the surface details of the work; or better, nothing outside of the flow of the piece itself would be necessary to justify the musical syntax perceived at any given moment. The more progressive works of Beethoven would disrupt this comfortable relationship. Now the listener would feel the need to explain what is no longer automatically acceptable in terms of musical syntax. Interpretation becomes necessary. Works need to be heard more often, and music critics can finally invoke the criteria they have seen in Romantic literary criticism since the earliest essays of the Schlegels, namely the criteria of organic wholeness and coherence, and the reciprocal relationship of the parts and the whole.

By invoking the concept of the Idee when dealing with the works of Beethoven, Marx wanted to demonstrate as truth his feeling that these new works were coherent wholes. Is this

36Compare, for example, the third definition of “erkennen” in the famous dictionary of the Brothers Grimm: “geistiges . . . Eiskenen, höher als das bloss sinnliche Vernehmen.” Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Deutsches Wörterbuch, vol. 3 [Leipzig, 1862].


38I am thinking primarily of Friedrich Schlegel’s “Uber Goethes Meister,” which first appeared in the Athenäum in 1798, and August Schlegel’s 1797 essay “Shakespeares Romeo und Juliet”; the latter has been reprinted in August Wilhelm Schlegel, Kritische Schriften, ed. Emil Staiger [Zurich, 1962], pp. 92–113.
feeling of wholeness simply a virtue salvaged from necessity, in this case the necessary inability on the part of critics like Marx to understand the surface features of Beethoven’s music in musical terms? In other words, does Marx posit the work as a coherent whole simply because he has no other standpoint from which to judge the details of the work? If so, any work with a disruptive surface would be seen as a unified artwork, if only the critic could attain a high enough standpoint. No; there has to be something else in Beethoven’s music that not only justifies Marx’s faith in its unity but that constrains him to base his entire aesthetics on the assumption that music can and must represent things extramusical.

If we return to Marx’s three-stage schema of Beethoven’s symphonic development and look at his characterization of the first stage alone, we gain an important clue to Marx’s reception of the dramatic element in this music. He perceives in this stage “the succession of soul states portrayed with deep psychological truth,” and thus distinguishes it from the so-called lyrical stage, embodied in the music of Mozart. Marx often likens Mozart’s music to a passing parade of personal feelings whose success is governed by an artful play of contrasts. With Beethoven’s music, Marx feels something more momentous than a pleasing array of feelings; he feels the succession of states of soul. By using the expression “soul state” (Seelezahl), Marx implies something deeper than a Gefühl or an Empfindung, words he uses when describing the content of Mozart’s music. The states of soul allegedly expressed in Beethoven’s music represent more than merely personal feelings. Marx often identifies them with supraindividual, heroic values.

Beethoven presents a succession of these exalted states of soul and does so with “deep psychological truth.” Marx thus identifies with the temporal coherence of Beethoven’s music in a much deeper way than he does with earlier mu-

The succession of melodic ideas in Mozart’s music is not, for Marx, motivated by psychological truth but by a more superficial sense of playful propriety. Marx perceives Beethoven’s music as a psychologically valid dramatic process in which each stage follows coherently from the preceding one. This is the sense of his exuberant assessment of the Seventh Symphony, as cited above. The listener “sees” a drama take shape, due to the certainty of the developing “sense” of the music. In order to describe his intuition that Beethoven’s music proceeds with a deeply engaging coherence, Marx needs to assert the ability of music to represent external processes, for only in these processes can Marx find an analogy to what he feels when he is engaged by Beethoven’s music.

But beyond the deep-seated identification with a coherent dramatic process, Marx’s interpretations testify to an uplifting moral quality in Beethoven’s greatest works. Music alone cannot so move the listener; this must be music strangely in the service of some higher reality. It is only natural that Marx should come to associate the higher reality he felt in Beethoven’s music with the kind of transcendent human values manifested in the great social conflicts of his age, values such as heroism and the courage of the fatefuly oppressed individual. Such values were the subject of much of the dramatic literature of the Goethe-Schiller period; Marx himself claims in his memoirs that he and his childhood friends zealously memorized the most popular dramas of Schiller. The dynamic elements of Beethoven’s music—its rhythmic intensity; its sense of propulsion toward a goal, often achieved by undermining the stability of periodic organization; its frequent delay of culmination until the coda—these elements are easily fitted to the theme of intense struggle leading to triumph. Such a struggle, for example, would be conceived as a unified dramatic narrative and would serve as the basis for the unity felt in a musical composition. The unity Marx feels in Beethoven’s works is thus the unity of a dramatic narrative—but not just any narrative. It is Marx’s specific notion of a dramatic narrative in the service of some of the highest conceivable human values that pro-

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40Marx, Erinnerungen, I, 67.
vides the higher reality, or standpoint of the whole, from which Beethoven’s works must be judged and from which they gain their value as unified and individual totalities.

The reason for Marx’s insistence on the involvement of the totality of the critic’s spirit is now clear, for the moral elevation implicated in this higher reality demands such involvement: an Idee expressive of moral values would not fall in the province of the intellect alone. And we can now understand the sense of the contradictions in Marx’s definition of the Idee. Because the Idee symbolizes the standpoint of the whole and because this higher spiritual standpoint involves a dramatic narrative, Marx defines his Idee now as an essence (the whole) and now as a process (the extramusical narrative), depending on the context of the discussion. For example, during a discussion of the critic’s role, the Idee becomes an essence, a sought after proof; in the context of the interpretation of an individual work, the Idee is identified with the work’s individual form and temporal process.

I hope to have shown the extent to which Marx’s musical thought takes shape around his central experience with the music of Beethoven. His views on the nature of musical representation and spiritual content, on the role of criticism, and on the privileged historical position of his age all stem from his deep identification with the coherence of this music. In characterizing Marx’s aesthetics primarily as a response to Beethoven rather than to contemporary philosophical thought, it is not my intention to distance Marx from the general cultural constraints of his age. Marx’s account of the merger of music and spirit achieved in the work of Beethoven involves a conception of spirit that is indeed a product of the age. The ideal content music was now empowered to convey was not some abstract philosophical construct or some unapproachably sublime and timeless deity; it was rather the human spirit as it continued to chart an upward course of freedom in an age when the idea of such a course was assumed and cherished.

In 1830 Adolph Bernhard Marx was offered a professorship at the University of Berlin. His acceptance of this prestigious position brought an end to the Berliner allgemeine musikalische Zeitung. The ambitious promise of Marx’s 1824 manifesto for a new age of music criticism remained largely unfulfilled, and Marx himself may well have been perceived as a less than objective proselytizer for composers currently published by Schlesinger’s firm, composers such as Beethoven and Spontini. But we should not interpret Marx’s fixation on the music of Beethoven as the fatal flaw of his musical thought, demoting him from the heights of a courant philosophical reflection to the common level of the enthusiast. When understood as a comprehensive response to the music of Beethoven, Marx’s aesthetics gain great significance, for he was the first to develop a critical approach to music based on a faith in the unerring coherence and spiritual elevation of Beethoven’s masterworks, a faith we share today. To question Marx’s reception of this music is to question the roots of our own engagement with Beethoven. For we, like Marx, want to believe.

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41 There is evidence that this post was initially offered to the young Mendelssohn, who turned it down and recommended A. B. Marx. See Eduard Devrient, Meine Erinnerungen an Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy und Seine Briefe an mich (Leipzig, 1869), p. 100.

42 It is certainly likely that a strong factor in Schlesinger’s decision to hire Marx in the first place was the latter’s favorable attitude toward these two composers. See Forchert, “Marx,” p. 383.