

Sympathetic Vibrations

The thesis of this paper is that Beethoven could ‘hear’ the music he wrote after having gone deaf in his ears. From the discussion about this statement, we shall see that a characteristic of revolutionary art is that it opens up channels of communication that had not previously existed.

However, history tells otherwise about Herr Beethoven; in particular, it tells us that Beethoven began to go deaf in his twenties and became increasingly impervious to sound by the later years of his life, thus making it impossible for him to hear what he was composing. Being the Promethean figure of western classical music, music historians view Beethoven’s struggle with deafness in the context of a posthumously discovered letter he wrote in 1802 while on vacation in Heiligenstadt, which is today part of Vienna: in this letter that was never mailed to its intended recipients, Beethoven declares that he will fight the poor luck that has come his way and that he will triumph through his art (i.e., music) over the forces of Nature (e.g., his deafness) that try to destroy him – the ‘him’ of his actual life and the ‘him’ of his music. Beethoven is therefore viewed as a Promethean figure in western classical music because, just as Prometheus defied the gods by bestowing fire on humankind, Beethoven defied the misfortune that had befallen him, i.e. his deafness, in order to obtain unhindered expression for humankind through sound.

But the analogy between Prometheus and Beethoven is not exact. For example, Prometheus did not experience a dearth of wood at the exact moment that he transferred fire from the hearth of the gods to humankind. If Prometheus had transferred fire from the hearth of the gods to humankind without wood, or some other burnable material, then the feat of Beethoven composing music while being unable to hear it would be a comparable overcoming to that of Prometheus because in both cases the assumedly essential medium through which the gift to humankind is given is separated from the giver, thereby making it impossible for the giver to give the gift. Thus if Prometheus had had no burnable material then he could not have given fire to humankind; if Beethoven had not been able to hear through his ears then he could not have given sounds to humankind – sounds that are heard through the ears. Yet, we know from history that Beethoven *did* give expression-laden sounds to humankind although he could not hear them with his ears.

Returning to the hypothetical case of Prometheus suffering a scarcity of burnable material, what if he had some spark plugs? The question of who started the fire (an ‘excuse me’ to another Piano Man) from the gods’ hearth would then be irrelevant because Prometheus would have had a different medium through which to give his gift to humankind. Spark plugs are not a burnable material since they are metal, thus a lack of burnable material (which had been the alleged medium through which fire is transmitted) would not have hindered Prometheus from bestowing fire on humankind.¹

¹ Of course spark plugs didn’t exist in prehistoric Greece, but two pieces of metal that could be hit against one another to create a spark definitely did.

In fact, the primary characteristic of the analogy between Prometheus and Beethoven that historians/critics invoke is the defiance of authority to nurture one's own creations. According to Greek mythology, Prometheus created humankind and gave it fire because of the pity he felt for them being left in the dark and in the cold; by giving humankind fire, he defied Zeus, who was the king of the gods. Similarly, Beethoven defied his fate, which was a worsening sense of hearing, in order to nurture his musical creations to fruition.

However, by the earlier thought of considering the medium through which the gift to humankind is given, it is clear that the analogy between these two characters exists on tenuous grounding in the former case and on slightly more substantial foundation in the latter. In other words, the analogy between Beethoven and Prometheus when considering *the things* being created seems to be substantial, whereas the analogy between them when considering *the medium* through which their gift to humankind is given is not clear, as a consequence of the 'spark plug' argument.

By understanding the discrepancy in the analogy between Prometheus and Beethoven, we will be able to see that *Beethoven could 'hear' what he wrote after having lost hearing* in his ears. Thus we turn our attention to the medium through which Beethoven experienced music. His initial claim to fame in Vienna, the 'city of music', was as a piano virtuoso. As famous performers did in those days, he wrote his own music to play in both private and public performances. Thus he composed many works, his early ones, while being able to hear in his ear every note he was playing. Meanwhile though, he was feeling the vibrations from the piano through his fingers and possibly even his legs, which were either pressed against the piano or rested on the wooden floor that would vibrate in response to the vibrations of the piano as it produced audible sound. Even though Beethoven went deaf in his ears in the second half of his life, he never relinquished the ability to feel the vibrations of either instruments or voices. In fact, it is a well-known story that Beethoven had to lean his head on the top of his piano to feel the subtle changes in harmony while composing the second movement of the 7th symphony. By feeling the vibrations through different parts of his body, *Beethoven was able to touch the music he was writing instead of hearing it.*

It is not unusual that Beethoven would experience music by touching it. After all, he was a pianist his whole life and the senses of both touch and hearing are crucial to performances on that instrument. In fact, the sense of touch could be considered more important than hearing because the speed of sound through air (i.e. the way we hear with out ears) is approximately four times slower than it is through most woods and metals used to make a piano. Thus a pianist (not a keyboardist who runs the sound through a speaker) touches the music he plays before it is heard, and so he is able to adjust his playing accordingly before the audience hears the finished note. In a similar way, singers touch a note within their torso and throat as they sing it to see if the vibrations of that sound are consistent with the surrounding harmonies.

Understanding Beethoven's deafness in these terms opens up a new way of considering the developments in western music that are accredited to him. For example, he is

considered to be the catalyst to 19th century symphonic music's expansion of the orchestra. In particular, for the 3rd, 5th and 7th symphonies he added trombones and for the 9th symphony he added more brass and an entire chorus. The expansion of the orchestra, i.e. the variety in the types of instruments upon which the composer calls at his discretion, is a movement in music that continues today in popular music² as well as in classical music. Music historians credit Beethoven with starting the explosion in the size of the orchestra that happened in the 19th century and continued in the 20th up to the present day.

But what if he expanded the orchestra just so he could touch his music as he was writing it? In other words, I claim that Beethoven added boisterous instruments like the trombone and an entire chorus because these sources of sound audible to the ear were also sources *tactile to the touch*, via the vibrations of the floor, which was usually wooden in those days. Of course, these instruments were not always playing every measure of the pieces for which they were added to the orchestra and so they were not always providing this tactile support for Beethoven to experience his music *en vivo*. Additionally, these instruments were not the only ones that could provide a tactile sensation to Beethoven through the floor's vibrations because the double basses (or upright basses, as they are known in jazz) had been part of the standard orchestra since before Beethoven's time – and those instruments in unison can certainly excite vibrations from the floor. But by having a tactile reference point from which to predict what tones other instruments simultaneously should make, Beethoven was able to predict what sounds could be made concordantly with the 'touched' sound. Furthermore, since the bass notes are the notes upon which all harmonies are built in western tonality, from a compositional point of view, the bass note is the most important one to hear since any melody can be created by predicting the interval above that note – an ability that Beethoven had since he was not deaf for the first part of his life, and thus had experience predicting the sounds of those intervals.

But by adding new instruments to the orchestra that contributed to Beethoven's tactile experience of his own musical creations, he inadvertently opened a whole new world of musical experience for the audience as well. In particular, he widened the door to the tactile realm of musical experience that had previously been exclusively accessible only to musicians, who touch the vibrations of their instruments (either corporeally like a singer or extra-corporeally like an instrumentalist), or in mildly unobtrusive ways when the double bass supports the celli's bass lines one octave below. Beethoven conquered the seemingly catastrophic loss of hearing in his ears by finding a new medium through which music could be expressed.

² For example, Postal Service uses a recording of some rhythm made by two objects of metal in "Sleeping In"; this is an expansion of the rock orchestra to include this newly created 'instrument', which the composer (Chris Walla) uses to make music. Of course, I am not comparing Chris Walla to Ludwig van Beethoven, but I am demonstrating that the idea of incorporating more instruments in an orchestra continues today in popular as well as classical music.

Thus returning to the troublesome analogy with Prometheus that had launched this discussion, Beethoven in fact had ‘spark plugs’ when he ran out of ‘wood’. In particular, even though Beethoven ran out of the ‘wood’ (the medium, i.e. hearing) by which he would give his ‘fire’ (his gift, i.e. his music) to humankind, he was able to find the ‘spark plugs’ (another medium, i.e. a tactile sense of music) through which he was able to transmit his ‘fire’ (his gift, i.e. his music) to humankind.

Therefore, I recommend to every artist that a reconsideration of the channels through which your message can translate should be considered. There are five universal channels, or senses, through which humans interact with the world: touch, sight, hearing, taste and smell. Thus I will end this essay by playing the devil’s advocate in a discussion about ways to expand an audience’s experience of one’s own creation:

- Can an audience smell music or taste visual art?
- Can an audience see music or touch all performing arts?
- Can an audience hear visual art or taste music?

Although I don’t know the all of the answers to these questions, since I have just thought of them, I have answered a few of them to myself as I have written them. However, for the ones that remain, the first step in finding an answer is to know what the question is. Prometheus knew what the problem was (i.e. Zeus’ anger about giving fire to humankind) and defied it. Beethoven knew what the problem was (i.e. his deafness) and bypassed it³. These are some of the questions and now it is up to us, the creators, to answer them.

³ Of course, along the way he threw plenty of notable temper tantrums, as he was prone to do.