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Ann Kramschuster
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

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The Spirit of the Individual: A Portrait of Beethoven

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Ann Kramschuster
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Dr. Edward Turley, Thesis Advisor
Edward Hardy 5/4/93
K. R. Harling 5/7/93
Paul & Harold 5-7-93
Margaret C. Cooks 5-7-93
The key to the art of performing music is communication. Too often today, musicians will only push the right keys and negate, or not examine, the inspiration, or "soul" of a piece. To perform successfully, it is important to consider analytical aspects as well as biographical, historical, and musical content. The total compositional process is often described as existing on two levels: 1) the ideological and inspirational from which music is born, and 2) the laborious process of composing the music according to a particular form and stylistic vocabulary. It is important to examine both the analytical and subjective components that have influenced the composer. For this reason, it is essential to reconstruct a concept of Beethoven rooted in his own practices and attitudes of his era.

The concept of the "spirit of the individual" is an important influence on the Beethoven's music. By exploring the inspiration that motivated Beethoven and discovering how he translated and interpreted the spirit of the individual in his compositions, we can better understand the music and communicate its message to others.

"The spirit of the individual" is a theme that started to flower during the Enlightenment, the period that approximately spanned the years 1770 and 1830. This new era called for independence, a rebellion against the aristocracy, and a universal comradeship between humans. In the 1770's, a new literary movement referred to as the Storm and Stress (Sturm und Drang) challenged intellectualism with "irresistible primitive force" of feeling (Mansten 63). Universality, rationality, and clarity were replaced by individuality, irrationality, and
obscurity. Thus, the early romantic was born. Rather than treating truth as a goal, the emphasis was on the struggle to find truth—the early romantic artist searched for the infinite.

Beethoven appeared at a unique time in history when philosophical views were changing and colliding with one another. He inherited the musical language of the past and looked toward the future. In fact, Beethoven remarked to Archduke Randolph that, "In the world of art, as in the whole of creation, freedom and progress are the main objectives" (Thayer 982). Was Beethoven aware of the shifting theoretical positions? This is debatable, but it is clear that Beethoven was affected by the ramifications of the contemporary thought of the Storm and Stress movement as it is vividly apparent in his life. Beethoven's "calling" was shaped by the philosophy of Neefe, contemporary literature, and the political climate into which he was born. As a result, the music of Beethoven is strikingly unique and individual. It is imbued with feeling and passion, a new musical language, and a changing concept of form.

Christian Gotlob Neefe (1748–98), one of Beethoven's first teachers, arrived in Bonn at a critical point in Beethoven's development, both in a personal and artistic sense. Personally, Neefe was warm and unpretentious, earning Beethoven's respect by demanding the same dedication and hardwork of himself as well as his students. Artistically, Neefe's influence was crucial in helping Beethoven chart his musical course. He introduced him to Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier and to Carl Phillip Emmanuel Bach's Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments. Neefe's evaluation of other musicians in Bonn and the Breuning court revealed the attitudes regarding performance that he stressed in his teaching. He advocated performance practices such as "the
exploitation of dynamic shading, yielding oneself to one's emotions, declamatory performance, tempo rubato within a steady tempo, 'correct' musical feeling, and performances which are dependent upon moods and are therefore uneven" (Drake 4).

According to Kenneth Drake in his book the *Sonatas of Beethoven*, these are also characteristics of Beethoven's own manner of composing and playing as described by his students and contemporaries (Drake 5). It was through his association with Neefe and the members and friends of the Breuning family, a prominent family in Bonn, that the complex young Beethoven was drawn into the current of contemporary philosophical thought.

Jacques Barzun wrote in 1980, "The meaning of literature resides in the same motions of the spirit as those aroused by music; only the means differ" (Wallace 1). Beethoven seems to have aligned himself with this sentiment when he declared that his musical ideas "are roused by moods which in the poet's case are transmuted into words, and in mine into tones that sound, roar, and storm until at last they take shape for me as notes" (Thayer 2-851-2). It is well known that Beethoven was a great admirer of the contemporary literature of Goethe and Schiller. In correspondence to the publisher Breitkopf & Härtel on August 8, 1809, Beethoven makes the following request: "Perhaps you could arrange for me to receive editions of Goethe and Schiller's complete works. . . these two poets are my favourites."

Beethoven in correspondence and conversation is known to have frequently quoted Goethe, Schiller, and Homer (Cooper 148). He also set many texts by Goethe and Schiller including, respectively, the *Egmont Overture* and the *Ode to Joy* from the *Ninth Symphony*.

To further understand the parallels between the Storm and
Stress movement and Beethoven, it is helpful to hear the music within the context of the ideas which gave it life. Beethoven obviously read and respected Goethe's work. Therefore, it would be beneficial to illustrate in Beethoven's music aspects of the Storm and Stress movement such as deep personal experience, fusion of experience and imagination, and receiving inspiration from everyday experience, by examining two of Goethe's works, The Sorrows of Young Werther and Faust:

The characters in each of these books, Werther and Faust, are possessed by the desire for deep personal experience, even though the consequence of their action is the undoing of the individual each loves:

in his greatest works Goethe persuades us that in breaking the bounds of society and morality, his heroes discover a deeper meaning in life, a fullness and richness unknown to those who observe external codes. This highest intensity of being is the extreme of individualism but at the same time its dissolution, its self-loss in feeling... (Pascal 23)

Through the personal accounts and reflections of his contemporary, Muzio Clementi (1752-1832) and his student Ferdinand Ries (1784-1838), it seems that Beethoven subscribed to these sentiments. Clementi said that his playing was "violent and lacked finish, but always soulful." According to Ries, Beethoven also taught as he played:

If I missed something in a passage or incorrectly played notes and leaps which he wanted to have consistently accurate, he seldom said anything; only if I showed a lack in expression, in crescendi, or in the character of the piece did he become aroused, because he said, the former is an accident, the latter a lack of knowledge, feeling, or attention. The former happened quite often to him, even when he played in public. (Drake 5)

Beethoven did not subscribe to the detaching oneself from moods like trained virtuosos. Instead, Beethoven depended upon the combination of his enormous musical gift and the intensity of
his subjective feelings. In the *Heiligenstadt Testament* of 1802, we realize the depth of Beethoven's feeling for his art. Upon the advice of his doctor, Beethoven spent six months away from the noisy streets of Vienna in the quiet village of Heiligenstadt in hope that tranquillity would enable his hearing to recover. On October 6, 1802, Beethoven writes to his brothers with the realization that his approaching deafness is permanent. The only thing that prevents him from destroying himself is his music: "Thanks to (virtue) and my art, I did not end my life in suicide" (Cooper 170).

One of the most significant accomplishments of the Storm and Stress movement, according to Pascal, is the "fusion of imaginative experience and reality." Werther, for instance, was based on an event in Goethe's life. Beethoven's students claimed that when teaching he frequently utilized analogies from everyday life to provide psychological suggestion. Thus, the impressions which incited Beethoven's creative process could then be shared with the student performer (compiled from Drake):

...the Largo of Op. 10/3 suggests through nuances of dynamic shading the mental state of a person in a deeply depressed mood (Schindler).

...the Adagio of Op. 27/2 is like a "night scene, where a plaintive voice sounds from a great distance (Czerny).

...the theme of the finale of Op. 31/2 had been improvised by Beethoven after seeing a rider gallop past his window (Czerny).

...the finale of Op.57 is like "the waves of the sea on a stormy night, while from afar a call for help is heard." (Czerny)

...the first and third movements of Op.101 is characterized by Beethoven as "Impressions and Reveries." (Schindler)
The obvious importance Beethoven placed on this type of psychological suggestion is revealed in Schindler’s statement that one of Beethoven’s motives for wanting to prepare a new edition of the piano works was the desire to reveal the extra-musical idea behind each composition (Drake 6). Beethoven himself stated, "I always have a picture in my mind when composing, and I follow its lines" (Kerst 12).

Finally, the creative spirit of the times found inspiration in the commonplace and everyday. Characters from the middle and lower class emerged as subjects in the works of Storm and Stress authors. The tension within their lives between normal behavior and emotional stress gave their personalities, attitudes, and speech dramatic significance. According to Czerny’s reports of Beethoven’s improvisation, he typically began with simple ideas, giving the material psychological meaning through his style of playing and overall temperament. As he progressed in the course of the improvisation, various themes, melodies, and motives emerged to provide a structural unity. This same compositional technique seems to be evident in many of Beethoven’s scores. The themes retain the outline of their origin in a simple pattern like a broken chord or scale segment, such as found in the *Eroica Symphony* (Drake 7).

Goethe’s poem, “Selige Sehnsucht” (Blessed Yearnings), expresses the spirit of Beethoven’s music and the Storm and Stress characteristics in a few lines. The poem expresses the belief that humans must be consumed in experience like a moth which is drawn into the flame of a candle, and, unless they have a desire to die and be transformed, they will remain in a "dull quest on a dark earth" (Drake 6). This also seems to be an
adequate description of Beethoven's method of composing. In Beethoven's own words, he states that mere formal beauty is nothing; soul, feeling, immediate and direct life is the first necessity for an art work: "Ah regards me, great heavens! My dominion is in the air; the tones whirl like the wind, and often there is a like whirl in my soul" (Kerst 23).

Amid the social and political upheaval of the latter eighteenth century, Beethoven lived in an age of revolution. He had an abiding and lively interest in politics and social economic questions that were reflected in his correspondence and expressed in his music. The Eroica Symphony is most commonly associated with the French Revolution. In 1798, General Bernadotte (1764-1844), the Ambassador of France who took residence in Vienna, wished Beethoven to write something in honor of the Republic, its victories and its heros. Though Beethoven's sympathies were mixed between the French republic and his own homeland, he admired Napoleon (1769-1821) for bringing the people together out from under the aristocratic tyrants. Napoleon Bonaparte was seen as a passionate champion of freedom and savior of his country. He was a symbol and embodiment of a world of freedom and hope (Grove 49). Beethoven expressed his own desire to embrace the world and bind distant people through art in a letter to his family and thus agreed to consider such a composition (Cooper 145).

Beethoven delayed the composition of the Third Symphony until 1803. This followed a period in his life of self examination and assessment. In 1802, Beethoven announced to his friend Wenzel Krumpholz (1750-1817), a violinist and mandolinist, that "I am not satisfied with my works up to the present time. From today I mean to take a new road" (Grove 49). The first
movement of the *Eroica Symphony* is described as an "infantry of individual soldiers forging with banners in heroic self-sacrifice." The second movement is a funeral march "expressing the sorrow and dignity of death." The scherzo has the "exhilaration of victory" while the finale sings of the "joy of triumphant human will-power." In addition there was a "musical revolution born of a social revolution"—new rhythms, techniques of orchestration, harmonic vocabulary, phrase structure, and innovative forms became Beethoven's new musical language (Knight 45).

In 1804 Napoleon claimed the title of Emperor. The infuriated Beethoven upon hearing the news, is claimed to have said, "After all then, he is nothing but an ordinary mortal! He will trample the rights of men under foot, to indulge his ambitions, and become a greater tyrant than any one." Beethoven tore the title page that dedicated the *Third Symphony* to Napoleon Bonaparte in half and threw it on the ground—his admiration turning to hatred. From that point on, it was simply referred to as the *Eroica Symphony* (Grove 54). However, the *Third Symphony* was inspired by the desire for freedom and may have influenced Beethoven's decision to follow a "new road" compositionally.

The Storm and Stress movement is often regarded as an age of feeling, individualism, and blurred conventional lines. Individualism and the search for feeling may have had an impact on the unusual formal and structural techniques employed by Beethoven in his late piano sonatas. For instance, individualism may play a part in the original fast tempo and metronome markings for the first movement and final fugue of the *Sonata in E-flat major*, Op. 106. For Beethoven, the spirit of the piece could only be found by attempting the impossible (Drake 8).
Resisting conventional norms can be seen in music and literature. Early romantic critics such as Schlegels and Jean-Paul expressed ideas in fragmented form—texts were intentionally left unfinished. Beethoven's later music corresponds closely with literary ideals encouraged by Schegel. According to Nicholas Marston's article "Intellectual Currents: Philosophy and Aesthetics," the Piano Sonata in A Major Op. 101 is deliberately vague and fragmented while the Hammerklavier has a sense of strain and difficulty placed on the performer and listener calculated as part of its overall aesthetic effect (Marston 64).

These issues of feeling, individualism, and blurred conventional lines are further complicated by the nature and acoustic qualities of Beethoven's piano as a vehicle to project his compositional intentions. Performers must take into account the physical properties of Beethoven's piano such as the levels of sound, dynamic capabilities, tone quality, and the compass of the keyboard.

While the overall structural concept and format of Beethoven's piano and the modern piano are similar, a smaller sound is associated with the former due to its wooden vs. steel frame, lighter strings, lower string tension, and smaller hammers. Today's piano can get much louder than its eighteenth century counterpart. However, Beethoven's piano, because of the quicker decay, can achieve a softer and more lyric pianissimo impossible on the modern instrument. Furthermore, a fortissimo on Beethoven's piano is equivalent to a single forte on today's instrument, while a pianissimo on the older instrument is equivalent to a triple piano. In addition, the two instruments have strikingly different timbre and tonal color.
This presents to the performer both advantages and disadvantages. While the modern piano will not produce the same quality of hushed stillness of the opening of the Sonata in A-flat major, Op. 110, a Beethoven piano lacks the sonority in the forte and fortissimo levels for passages found in places such as the first movement of Op. 111. According to Tovey, the confining lack of sonority in Beethoven's piano challenged the spirit of the Storm and Stress movement—the need to reach beyond limits and to struggle with the impossible. Tovey feels that some passages, such as the sforzandos and fortissimo section of the Sonata in E-major, Op. 109, may sound weak on a modern piano because the instrument is capable of producing much more sound than Beethoven's instrument which is at its limit of capacity in such passages. However, the dynamic and the sonority difference between the two pianos does not indicate that Beethoven's works should only be played on period instruments. In fact, it is well documented in his conversations and letters to friends, colleagues, publishers, and piano makers that Beethoven was yearning for a more durable and expansive piano. One story has it that when Beethoven played, the page turner was more busy fixing strings that he had broken than turning pages (Drake 16). Nevertheless, it is important to remember the effect the limitations of Beethoven's piano had on the character and the spirit of the music and to carefully consider this aspect in contemporary performance.

Faced with the piano's smaller sonority, Beethoven often exploited the instrument's weakness by grasping beyond its limitations and exploring other solutions to the sonority problem: sudden dynamic changes such as the sforzando, a short crescendo or a subito piano; long extended passages under a
single pedal indication; finger pedaling and the overlapping of melody notes to create a more convincing legato were often used. Beethoven, however, delighted in these complications proclaiming to his publisher Steiner that "what is difficult is also beautiful, good, and great" (Kerst 13).

Beethoven challenged the established rules of composing. He inherited the musical language of his predecessors, such as Bach, Haydn, and Mozart: the major-minor tonal system, the traditions from eighteenth century Baroque counterpoint, the standard patterns and accompaniment figurations such as the Alberti bass, characteristic formal procedure, chord progressions, and cadences. His formal musical instruction was brief. When studying with Haydn, he made "mistakes" in strict counterpoint which then became characteristic of his later style (Cooper 79). Critics continuously accused him of "grammatical blunders" in his composition. In response, he stated to his student Ries, "Yes, yes, then they are amazed and put their heads together because they never found it in any book on thorough bass." Beethoven believed it was valid to learn strict techniques as a student, but freedom needed to be allowed as one got older: "In order to become a capable composer one must have already learned harmony and counterpoint at the age of from seven to eleven years, so that when the fancy and emotions awake one shall know what to do according to the rules" (Kerst 23).

Beethoven defined concepts of dissonance in a broader spectrum than preceding composers. He embraced the perfect fourth as well as the diminished seventh: "Rigorists, and devotees of antiquity, relegate the perfect fourth to the list of dissonances. Tastes differ. To my ear it gives not the least offense combined with other tones... the startling effects
which many credit to the natural genius of the composer, are often achieved with the greatest ease by the use and resolution of the diminished seventh chords" (Kerst 26). Beethoven studied Rameau's theory of chord inversions that relied heavily on Johann Kirnberger's ideas in his Die Kunst des reines Satzes. Kirnberger discusses three ways to construct a chord which in present day terminology corresponds to root position, first inversion, and second inversion. He discusses the seventh chord using the same principles. Kirnberger regarded the 6/4 chord as a variation of the 5/3, or root chord, where as pre-Rameau theorists felt it was a dissonance. Beethoven uses the 6/4 chord so freely that he treats it almost as an equal. For instance, the Hammerklavier Sonata's second movement ends on a 6/4 chord (Cooper 80).

Beethoven heard new sounds and created an innovative musical language in his head that was not heard before by society. He carried the ideas around inside him until he was able to write it down. His intimate involvement with nature provided a source for creative inspiration:

I carry my thoughts about me for a long time, often a very long time, before I write them down; meanwhile my memory is so faithful that I am sure never to forget, not even in years, a theme that has once occurred to me. I change many things, discard, and try again until I am satisfied. Then, however, there begins in my had the development in every direction, and inasmuch as I know exactly what I want, the fundamental idea never deserts me,—it arises before me, grows,—I see and hear the picture in all its extent and dimensions stand before my mind like a cast, and there remains for me nothing but the labor of writing it down, which is quickly accomplished when I have the time, for I sometimes take up other work, but never to the confusion of one with the other. You will ask me where I get my ideas. That I can not tell you with certainty; they come unsummoned, directly, indirectly,—I could seize them with my hands,—out in the open air; in he woods; while walking; in the silence of the nights; early in the morning; incited by moods, which are translated by the poet into words, by me into tones that sound, and roar and storm about me until I have set them down in notes (Kerst 29).
Beethoven was definitely on a "new road;" his innovations in musical form seemed to continually develop between 1790 and 1826. Beethoven changed the conception of a large scale work by breaking down the concept of movement and searching for an artistic whole. One technique he used was to enlarge the size of the movements. The allegro con brio of the *Eroica Symphony* is of mammoth proportions. The enlargement of the exposition consequently led to the expansion of the development and ultimately the coda. Beethoven sometimes composed two development sections and, frequently, prior to returning to the home key, a fugato section was also added. This is apparent in the *Waldstein*, *Appasionata*, and *Hammerklavier* piano sonatas. The coda tended to evolve into its own separate development section by building further on existing themes or by introducing new material and elaborating on it. A second technique to establish an organic whole was to create a higher level of compositional unity through tonal and thematic integration of the movements. As early as the Op. 27 Piano Sonatas, Beethoven shifted the weight of the sonata from the first to the final movement by miniaturizing the earlier movements. A final technique Beethoven used was to join the slow movement to a scherzo or finale or even just omit the slow movement in favor of a slow introduction as in the *Waldstein Sonata*, Op. 53 (Drabkin 207).

Beethoven's music can be seen as a result of the early romantic notion of the Storm and Stress movement made known to Beethoven through Neefe, the literature, and the political climate. Beethoven's music was a bridge between the confinement of the eighteenth century and the abandonment of the nineteenth century. He was yearning for escape and a new means of
expression by attaching specific feelings to the music, expanding his harmonic language, and redefining classical period forms. The Sonata in E major Op. 109 is an example which exemplifies many new techniques used by Beethoven.

Op. 109 has been described as containing "the spirit that binds together noble and virtuous souls, a spirit that Time cannot destroy" (Mellers 213). The first movement has contrasting vivace and improvisatory adagio sections that alternate feelings and moods of dolce and an expansive lyricism. The second movement portrays an agitated intenseness which then melts into a set of variations to be played "gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung," or songful, with much inner feeling and expression. The whole spirit of the piece is complementary to the Storm and Stress philosophy of the previously mentioned "force of feeling."

Structurally, the sonata is unusual even for late Beethoven. The first movement has a fast-slow alternating and dovetailing formal scheme (Blum 225). This is unprecedented; earlier sonatas always have the slow section first, serving as an introduction, (as in the Pathétique Sonata, Op. 13) and remaining subordinate to the ensuing fast sonata-allegro section. However, in Op. 109, the vivace and adagio sections are equal in importance. Furthermore, compositionally in the first movement, Beethoven uses unique techniques such as sudden dynamic changes, sforzandos, subito pianos, and overlapping melody notes.

The second movement is a scherzo in temperament, but is structured around a skeletal sonata form—it has an exposition with two contrasting themes, a short development section, and a recapitulation. The traditional arrangement of keys in the sonata-allegro form, however, are somewhat ignored. In the
exposition the first theme is in E minor and the second theme progresses to the minor dominant, B minor. In the recapitulation, the first theme is naturally in E minor, but instead of remaining in the home key for the second theme as is expected in traditional sonata-allegro form, Beethoven transposes the second theme into the major dominant, B major. The movement closes with a short coda. Compositional techniques such as short crescendos and decrescendos as well as sudden dynamic changes enhance the agitated, intense spirit of the movement.

The last movement is a set of variations. It is the first time, in the piano sonatas, that Beethoven used this form for a finale. Some claim that the theme is one of the greatest slow melodies ever conceived (Blum 226). The theme Beethoven creates is self-contained, in two sections, and based largely on the alternation of dominant and tonic chord progressions which serve as a harmonic underpinning through the elaborate set of variations. Each variation relies on established techniques that Beethoven adapts—he doesn’t use them in the strict classical sense, but makes them conform to his own early romantic musical language. The first variation is simply an elaborate melodic ornamentation of the theme. The second variation contrasts arpeggiated figurations with ornamented block chords, and then combines the two techniques while closely following the theme’s harmonic scheme. This variation is distinctly separated into two sections, as is the theme, with each section closely following the above mentioned pattern—alternation of arpeggiated chords, block chords, and then the two combined toward the end of each section. The third variation is a fiery burst of energy that employs the outline of the theme’s melody and running scale passage figurations common in the eighteenth century classic
style. The first section of the fourth variation is a type of canon while the second part contains both imitative, canonic material and arpeggiation. The fifth variation, though it doesn't follow the rules for eighteenth century baroque counterpoint, can be thought of as an early romantic interpretation of a fugue. Though this claim can be debated, at least we need to acknowledge the roots this variation has in counterpoint and the traditional fugue form. This quasi-fugue slowly dissolves into a statement of the theme under a "B" pedal point. The theme slowly gathers momentum through the use of long extended trills, pedal point harmony, and elaborate arpeggiation. It eventually evolves into its own "sonic world" which itself represents a departure from standard eighteenth century homophonic texture. The theme finally emerges from this texture, in its original form, as a kind of Benediction to the whole set of variations. The theme at the beginning is by every standard full of emotion, beauty, balance, and classic period symmetry, but after emerging from the variations the theme seems metamorphosized: the beauty and feeling contained in the theme seems to have transcended to a higher spiritual plane of subliminal resignation, serenity, and peace—all characteristic of late Beethoven.

Although each movement has its own individual identity in an established form, Beethoven blurs the lines separating the movements creating a complete compositional unity. He attains this effect through several techniques. First, he creates a simple tonal structure for the overall piece: E major–E minor–E major. Secondly, the harmony and melodic line of the vivace section of the first movement and the theme for the variations are astoundingly similar. Finally, the first two movements are
short and serve as a preface that leads us to expect a weighty focal point, satisfied by the variations.

The Sonata in E major, Op. 109 is just one example of Beethoven's tremendous musical genius. Performers could spend a lifetime just exploring this one piece—slowly discovering deeper and deeper levels within the music and themselves. Performers need to be careful of never just "going through the motions." Beethoven played and composed with character, mood, and passion. Thus, when performing a piece, we must not only look analytically for clues of interpretation, but also for motivating inspirations. Only by combining the intellect with the passion can we succeed in communicating the full meaning of the music.

Composers' efforts compositionally, including Beethoven's, can often differ from the comments that they make about their music to the press, the public, and to their students, friends, and colleagues. They even can repudiate many of their previously accepted thoughts, ideas, and habits. It is tenuous, at best, for us to seek direct links between historical, philosophical positions, literary movements, and political changes with what actually occurred in the composer's conscious mind during the compositional process. However, Beethoven was an artist who functioned in and responded to the society into which he was born; and it serves contemporary students and performers well to examine the musical environment of both individual composers and their society as we seek to develop an informed and thoughtful interpretation of their works. Did the society in which Beethoven lived serve as a catalyst for the new creative paths he sought or did Beethoven impact society through the originality and uniqueness of his genius? Though either argument can be defended, and it is most likely a synthesis of both Beethoven's
original, unique genius and the influence of society, it is a certainty that Beethoven transformed the conception, philosophy, and language of music—he truly possessed the spirit of the individual.
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