**Theatrical Symphony and Symphonic Theatre**

JOSEPH HAYDN • Symphony no.49 in F minor, Hob. I:49, “La Passione”

WOLFGANG A. MOZART • Symphony no. 25 in G minor, K. 183

JOSEPH HAYDN • Overture to azione teatrale, *L'Isola disabitata*, Hob. XXVIII:9

LUDWIG V. BEETHOVEN • Symphony no. 4 in B-flat major, op. 60

The nicknames of Haydn’s symphonies are at least as arbitrary as any other musical nicknames, few of them holding even the slightest claim to ‘authenticity’. They have often helped popularise particular symphonies, whilst helping leave others in relative obscurity, yet the homely implications of the ‘Hen’ or the ‘Clock’ have tended to further a patronising myth of genial, ‘Papa’ Haydn, denying the composer the true measure of his radicalism and historical stature. The so-called *La Passione* Symphony, no.49, in F minor, presents a somewhat different case; however ‘inauthentic’, its title has at least suggested something to be taken with *Sturm und Drang* seriousness. However, it seems, as Elaine Sisman revealed in a 1991 article (‘Haydn’s Theater Symphonies’), that the title refers to the particular circumstances of a Holy Week performance in Schwerin in 1790 rather than to the work itself.

The ‘traditional’ view certainly seems to chime with the work’s Baroque near-archaism: Haydn’s final essay in the slow-fast-slow-fast *sonata di chiesa* form, likewise with the relentless march of F minor, the minuet’s F major trio offering only momentary relief. *Sturm und Drang* characteristic – syncopation, counterpoint, ‘profundity’ of expression – seem undeniable. HC Robbins Landon, very much in this tradition, described the work as ‘dark-hued, sombre – even tragic’. Sisman’s research, however, has suggested a very different provenance and thus perhaps interpretation; a Viennese source calls the work ‘Il Quakuo di bel’humore’; a theatrical context seems likely. Sisman argues that the celebrated ‘rapid-fire repeated notes and imitiations of the second group’ in the *Allegro di molto* ‘achieve a light-heartedness that belies the “tragic” minor-mode associations, and recall [the composer, Georg Joseph] Vogler’s remarks about the importance of rhythm in the mood-defining attributes of comedy and tragedy’. Waggish Quaker – at least on the surface – or Christ crucified? How to reconcile? Should we try? Sisman rightly points to discrepancy between compositional intention and appropriation of a symphony or a movement therefrom, also to a ‘substantial disparity in contemporaneous views’ of Haydn’s language, his ‘broadly dramatic style … designed to serve a variety of ends’. We might conclude that the tragicomedy of Haydn’s symphony’s is more all-embracing, even Shakespearean, than condescending ideas of ‘geniality’, occasionally interrupted by ‘seriousness’, would ever have permitted. We can, perhaps should, still hear Passion-like onward tread in the first and third movements, grief-laden, wordless drama(s); likewise *Sturm und Drang* leaps, disjunctures, even violence in the second and fourth. Let us do so, however, on account of the music and its performance rather than the nickname – and let us not forget the theatre entirely, which, after all, is no stranger to tragedy.

Tragedy is, of course, indelibly associated with Mozart’s so-called ‘little’ G minor Symphony, no.25, just as it is with its ‘great’ successor in the same key, no.40. There is no need to deny a ‘special’ quality both to Mozart in the minor mode – this is, after all, his first minor-key symphony – and indeed to Mozart specifically in G minor. Albert Einstein called it Mozart’s ‘key of fate’: his equivalent, if you like, but also his contrast, to Beethoven in C minor. If Romanticism colours that judgement, that need not be a bad thing, although it is always worth, as with Haydn, interrogating lazy assumptions. As Wolfgang Hildesheimer noted, the ‘game of key speculation … is fruitful and open to all; everyone can play and, by sharing his experiences, can consider himself a winner.’ Let us then, play the game, albeit without claim to interpretative exclusivity.

*Sturm und Drang* syncopated outbursts play their role here too; indeed, they are the very opening material of the *Allegro con brio* (a marking more readily associated with Beethoven than with the seventeen-year-old Mozart). So does an important, even prophetic, role for bassoons, no longer ‘just’ part of the *basso continuo*. Chromatic disorientation, just as we experience in the first movement of its first-movement successor in the ‘great’ G minor Symphony, marks the onset of development here too. Bearing in mind Haydn’s symphony, though, as well as Mozart’s operatic experience and future, there is eighteenth-century theatricality as well as Romantic promise in the plunging diminished sevenths of this movement. So too, is there, in the songfulness of the slow movement, its E-flat major consolation in keeping with the expressivity of the ‘love aria’. (Mozart had just written *Lucio Silla*.) Muted violins heighten the sense of emotional bonds almost, yet not quite, burst. There is almost neo-Classical austerity in the stark unisons of the Menuetto, the G major *Harmoniemusik* of its Trio serving as an all-too-brief vision of another, brighter, warmer world, but it is to G minor that we return for the tragic vehemence of the finale. There is no Beethovenian journey from darkness to light here, it is as if Gluck, in his *Orfeo ed Euridice*, had been able todispense with the wretched operatic convention of the *lieto fine* (happy ending). Jens Peter Larsen was probably right to caution against viewing the work, Romantically, as ‘self-confession’; yet, if we take that caution on board, why not, at least a little?

There is no questioning the theatrical origin of the Overture, also in G minor, to Haydn’s *L'Isola disabitata*. The only Metastasio libretto set by Haydn, this 1779 opera opens with an orchestral movement veritably breathing the world (now past – or future?) of *Sturm und Drang*, although let us once again remind ourselves that our æsthetics are not necessarily to be identified with Haydn’s. The starkness of the opening *Largo* material recalls in (very) slow motion, albeit unknowingly, that of Mozart’s Minuet, preparing the way, as is the general manner of Haydn’s introductions, for the musical theatrics of the vehement G minor symphonic storm, which leaves our two sisters, Constanza and Silvia, abandoned on a desert island. A curtain-raiser, then, to a curtain-raiser: who says that Haydn, when compared to Mozart, lacks a sense of theatre?

Lack of ‘theatricality’ is an absurd accusation that long bedevilled reception of Beethoven’s *Fidelio*, some commentators unable to accept that the opera’s concern is freedom itself, or at least the highest bourgeois instantiation of that idea, rather than Mozartian characterisation. That said, there is no denying the symphonic sublation of the ‘merely’ theatrical in Beethoven’s symphonic *and* operatic work. By the same token, however, the Fourth Symphony, just as much as any of its still-more-celebrated companion works, shows that the relationship between symphony and theatre is properly dialectical. Taking its leave from Haydn, and yet also showing its distance, the B-flat minor introduction to the B-flat major first movement is dark, spacious, flowing in a fashion, which, if Wagner had been more sympathetic to this work, which he rarely conducted, might have suggested: ‘*Zum Raum wird hier die Zeit*’: ‘Here time becomes space’. Just as it had done, we might add, in Haydn’s ‘Representation of Chaos’ for the opening of *The Creation*. It is in this symphony as a whole, Donald Tovey argued, that ‘Beethoven first fully reveals his mastery of movement. He had already shown his command of a vastly wider range of musical possibilities than … Mozart or Haydn … But now he shows that these [new] resources can be handled in such a way that Mozart’s own freedom of movement,’ which we might with equal justice call symphonically theatrical or theatrically symphonic, ‘reappears as one of the most striking qualities of the whole’. It has sometimes been said that, in this movement, Beethoven’s melodic gift, however extraordinary, is placed firmly at the service of rhythmic propulsion. Analysis and performance alike will reveal that there is no such hierarchy; one is inconceivable without the other, and above all without the grounding of harmony. Just one instance, in which the timbral, often neglected in Beethoven, plays a crucial part in all these respects: listen to his use of the timpani, as theatrical as it is structurally dynamic. Whilst the development section declines for some time to leave the rare, distant key of B major, timpani B-flats urge the music on, enabling and underlying the orchestral crescendo through which the point of return will eventually come. Not, however, as soon as we might have been led to expect, for struggle and suspense have work yet to do.

The second movement is in rondo form, the leisure of its *Adagio*-progress both contrasting with and seemingly necessitated by the neo-Haydnesque ‘“spin” of the whole [first] movement’ (Tovey again). Ghosts of the musical past – the *Eroica*, late Haydn – haunt its sterner moments, yet inescapably Beethovenian humanity *in the present* always wins through, or will do in a comprehending performance that takes Beethoven’s dialectics as a musico-theatrical invitation. Teleology, Beethoven’s fabled ‘goal orientation’ is just as strong as in the first movement; means are both different and yet strongly related. The scherzo – in form, if not in name – is a successor to the heroic funeral games of the *Eroica*, the apparent primacy of rhythm again enabled, indeed intensified, by the equal primacy of melody and harmony. Beethoven’s abridgement of the final scherzo repeat elicited these words of praise from Tovey: ‘Never have three short bars contained more meaning than the coda in which the two horns blow the whole movement away.’ That is precisely how it feels.

If Schumann’s perception, however well-meaning, of ‘a slender Greek maiden between two Norse giants’ belittles this symphony as nicknames do those of Haydn, it is perhaps not entirely wide of the mark in pointing to the continuing relevance of Haydn’s humour. That is nowhere more so the case than in the finale. It is not a *perpetuum mobile*, although its opening suggests that that might be what we are in for; there is rather a Shakespearean quality, taking leave from both Haydn and Mozart, and which ought also to have attracted Wagner’s attention. The apparently tentative slowing down, just before the close, of the movement’s principal theme teases us and our expectations; music breathes the air of ‘all the world’s a stage’, albeit of an aural, invisible theatre. To return to Tovey, ‘Those who think the finale of the Fourth Symphony “too light” will never get nearer than Spohr (if as near) towards a right understanding of the Fifth, however much they may admire it.’