MUSICAL DEBATE

Beethoven’s Tenth Symphony

Everyone knows that Beethoven wrote nine symphonies. In fact, the number nine has been etched into the collective conscience of symphonic musicians since Beethoven’s day. Not only does it mark off the extent of Beethoven’s work of its type, but, as though by the hand of fate, later composers have found nine symphonies to be an absolute limit. Antonín Dvořák lived to compose just nine symphonies, so too Ralph Vaughan Williams, Anton Bruckner, and Franz Schubert (although numbering in the latter two cases is murky). The great Viennese symphonist Gustav Mahler tried to cheat fate by withholding a number for his Ninth Symphony and giving it instead the title Das Lied von der Erde (The Song of the Earth). He then composed his ninth symphony, but fate had the last word because Mahler died before he could complete any more symphonies. Richard Wagner’s nickname for Beethoven’s Ninth, the “Last Symphony,” has resounded eerily throughout music history.

So it came as a great surprise to music lovers when in 1988 the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Barry Cooper, issued a CD of “Beethoven’s Symphony No. 10 in E-flat.” The work, also made available in a published score, contains only a first movement, and it sounds like a fairly typical Classical work of its type. But is it Beethoven’s creation? In a letter of 1827 the composer had written to London’s Philharmonic Society offering to compose for them “a new symphony, which is already sketched and lying on my desk.” Beethoven’s assistant Karl Holz later reported that he had heard Beethoven play a movement of the new symphony at the piano. Had Cooper found the sketches for this work? Based on Holz’s description of the mysterious composition, Cooper declared that he had indeed identified the symphonic sketches, some seventy measures of music. “All reasonable doubts are dispelled,” he declared. Cooper then fleshed out an entire movement on themes from the sketches, and Beethoven’s Tenth Symphony was born.

Or was it? Other Beethoven authorities leapt into the debate to question the existence of any authentic Tenth Symphony. Robert Winter pointed to the small number of sketches recovered by Cooper—corresponding to only 20 percent of the measures of the first movement. Winter also observed that these sketches contained only disjunct musical concepts rather than continuous ideas. Although many great composers have left behind incomplete last works, those were pieces in which the basic compositional work was completed by their creators, or which lacked only some small part.

Winter concludes that not enough Beethoven is present and that the title of the recording should properly be Cooper’s First Symphony, not Beethoven’s Tenth. The Ninth is still the “Last Symphony.”