



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

E. T. A. Hoffmann, “Beethoven’s Instrumental Music” (1813)

E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776–1822) lived the double life of writer and musician. In the former capacity he was the author of tales filled with such fantasy that a cat can tell its life story, or toy soldiers can come to life and do battle with an army of mice. Musicians from Schumann to Offenbach to Tchaikovsky have set Hoffmann’s fantastic tales to music, and Brahms was so fascinated by Hoffmann’s character Johannes Kreisler that he adopted this name as a pseudonym.

Hoffmann was one of the first nineteenth-century musicians to seek an outlet for his literary interests in the form of music criticism. He wrote reviews and articles mainly for the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* (General Musical News), an early musical periodical that was published in Leipzig by the music publisher Breitkopf & Härtel.

His critical interpretation of music by Beethoven was widely admired. In this study of Beethoven’s instrumental music (it first appeared in 1810 and was revised in 1813), he applies the literary term “romanticism” to Beethoven’s style to suggest the powerful expressiveness and emotionality inherent in purely instrumental works. His praise for instrumental music, of which Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony is for Hoffmann the supreme example, prefigures the theories of “absolute” music by writers such as Eduard Hanslick from later in the nineteenth century.

When music is discussed as an independent art, should it not be solely instrumental music that is intended, music that scorns every aid from and mixing with any other art (poetry), music that only expresses the distinctive and unique essence of this art? It is the most romantic of all arts, and we could almost say the only truly romantic one because its only subject is the infinite. Just as Orpheus’ lyre opened the gates of the underworld, music unlocks for mankind an unknown realm—a world with nothing in common with the surrounding outer world of the senses. Here we abandon definite feelings and surrender to an inexpressible longing. . . .

Thus Beethoven’s instrumental music opens to us the realm of the monstrous and immeasurable. Glowing rays shoot through the deep night of this realm, and we sense giant shadows surging to and fro, closing in on us until they destroy *us*, but not the pain of unending longing in which every desire that has risen quickly in joyful tones sinks and expires. Only with this pain of love, hope, joy—which consumes but does not destroy, which would burst asunder our breasts with a mightily impassioned chord—we live on, enchanted seers of the ghostly world!

Romantic taste is rare, romantic talent even rarer, and perhaps for this reason there are so few who are able to sweep the lyre with tones that unveil the wonderful realm of the romantic.

Haydn grasps romantically the human in human life; he is more accommodating, more comprehensible for the common man.

Mozart laid claim more to the superhuman, to the marvelous that dwells in the inner spirit.

Beethoven’s music wields the lever of fear, awe, horror, and pain, and it awakens that eternal longing that is the essence of the romantic. Thus he is a purely romantic composer, and if he has had less success with vocal music, is this because vocal music excludes the character of indefinite longing and represents the emotions, which come from the realm of the infinite, only by the definite affects of words? . . .

What instrumental work by Beethoven confirms this all to a higher degree than the profound Symphony [No. 5] in C Minor, a work that is splendid beyond all measure. How irresistibly does this wonderful composition transport the listener through ever growing climaxes into the spiritual realm of the infinite. Nothing could be simpler than the two-measure main idea of the first *Allegro*, which, in unison at first, does not even define the key for the listener. The character of apprehensive, restless longing contained in this movement is made even plainer by the melodious subsidiary theme. The breast that is oppressed and alarmed by intimations of things monstrous, destructive, and threatening wheezes for air with wrenching gasps, but just then a friendly, luminous figure appears and brings light into the dark night (the lovely theme in G major [m. 180-] that earlier had been intimated by the horn in Eb major). How simple is this theme—let that be said again—that the master places as the basis of the whole, but how wonderfully does he derive all the subsidiary and transitional passages from it through rhythmic interrelationships, such that these passages serve little by little to unfold the character of the *Allegro*, which its main theme only hints at. All these passages are short—almost all consist only of two or three measures—and these are constantly divided among the wind and string instruments. We might think that from such elements only something fragmented or incomprehensible could arise, but instead we receive from them a sense of the whole. So too the constant repetition of passages and single chords, one after the other, which increases the feeling of an unnamable longing that reaches to the highest degree. . . .

The inner structure of the movements, their working out, instrumentation, the way they are linked together—everything works toward a single point. But it is especially the inner interrelation among the main themes which produces that unity that alone allows the listener to achieve *one* single mood. Often this interrelationship becomes clear to the listener if he hears the connection of two movements, or if he discovers in different movements some common bass figure. But a deeper relationship that goes beyond such observations speaks often solely from one mind to another, and it is just this that exists in the two *Allegros* and the minuet and which splendidly proclaims the self-possessed genius of this master. . . .

Source: "Beethoven's Instrumental-Musik," in E. T. A. Hoffmanns *sämtliche Werke*, vol. 1, ed. C. G. von Maassen (Munich and Leipzig: G. Müller, 1908), translated by Bryan R. Simms.