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REVIEW ESSAY

Beethoven Studies after 'the Universal': Method, Mediation, and Europe

Beethoven Studies 4. Edited by Keith Chapin and David Wyn Jones. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. xviii + 248 pp.

Manchester Beethoven Studies. Edited by Barry Cooper and Matthew Pilcher. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023. xxii + 348 pp. £90.00 (cloth).

Beethoven the European: Transcultural Contexts of Performance, Interpretation and Reception. Edited by Malcolm Miller and William Kinderman. Turnhout: Brepols, 2023. xix + 410 pp. €120.00 (cloth).

Three edited collections published between 2020 and 2023 – *Beethoven Studies 4*, *Manchester Beethoven Studies*, and *Beethoven the European: Transcultural Contexts of Performance, Interpretation and Reception* – offer a clear triangulation of current Beethoven scholarship. What connects them is not a shared repertorial focus (the composer inevitably provides that), nor a unified theoretical programme. Instead, each volume foregrounds *mediation* as a central intellectual problem: how Beethoven is made meaningful through institutional infrastructures, textual and generic translation, interpretive paradigms, performers' bodies, reception, discourse and geopolitical framings. In this way, the books contribute to a post-2020 effort to articulate what is at stake in Beethoven studies, once the relevance of a canonical composer is no longer the point to be proven. The question is not so much whether Beethoven matters, but instead how Beethoven is made to matter in specific settings and through particular evidence. Naturally his works remain central objects of inquiry; but they are approached as nodes within networks of agency: archival criteria and taxonomies (unfinished symphonies, sketch leaves), vocal bodies and singers' reputations (gender and national style), instruments and sensoriums (deafness, touch, multi-sensorial performance), conceptual traditions (Idealism and sovereignty) and the reception infrastructures that route Beethoven through local histories and transnational circuits.

This approach to Beethoven and his music via mediation resonates with the now well-established critiques, from the 1990s, of the canon as self-reproducing ideology. Lydia Goehr's account of the work-concept frames the musical 'work' as a historical achievement rather than a natural category, while Tia DeNora's sociology of Beethoven's 'genius' traces how cultural authority is assembled through institutions and actors.[1] Through these lenses,

[1] Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Tia DeNora, *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius: Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792–1803* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

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the present collections can be read as investigations into the infrastructures and practices – editorial, analytical, performative, institutional and discursive – through which Beethoven is continually re-made as archive, concept, body and signifier.

Each volume makes the argument differently, inviting comparative reading. *Manchester Beethoven Studies* situates Beethoven within various infrastructures and relationships, including those of teachers, genres, institutions, religious frameworks and civic reception. The volume's title does not refer to a Manchester focus in the studies per se, but rather to the authors' ties to the University of Manchester. Only the final essay has an explicit connection between Beethoven and that city: an account of Charles Hallé as a Beethoven champion.[2] Whereas *Manchester Beethoven Studies* is primarily concerned with the infrastructures through which Beethoven circulates, *Beethoven Studies 4* is more explicitly concerned with the interpretive and evidentiary frames through which Beethoven becomes knowable: archival criteria, conceptual paradigms, analytical models and embodied practice. *Beethoven the European* extends the idea of mediation to a larger and more explicitly geopolitical register. Its very framing of Beethoven as European cannot be merely descriptive (Miller and Kinderman, Preface, pp. ix–x). In such a frame, 'Europe' is necessarily contested: a set of routes, appropriations, border-crossings and interpretive negotiations. In other words: the object is not Beethoven-as-European-genius but Beethoven-as-European-signifier – made and remade through institutions, performances and discourses that cross national and cultural boundaries.

Cooper and Pilcher preface *Manchester Beethoven Studies* by situating it among 'several other recent collections' in the field, explicitly naming *Beethoven Studies 4* and Jeremy Yudkin's anniversary volume *The New Beethoven*.[3] Their aim is exploratory rather than synthetic: the essays, they remark, 'raise more questions than they answer' (Cooper and Pilcher, pp. 6-7). The value of their exploratory stance becomes clear in the way the volume places technical and contextual enquiry side by side. Chapters that focus on notation or analysis sit next to reception-historical work on civic musical labour, and the juxtaposition is instructive: it shows Beethoven's music moving through the institutions, practices and agents that enable it to circulate and accrue meaning.

The collection opens by foregrounding pedagogical infrastructure. Kris Worsley's chapter 'Beethoven's Indebtedness to his Teacher Christian Gottlob Neefe: A Comparison of Their Variations on Themes by Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf', for example, is centred on Neefe and situates Beethoven not as an isolated prodigy but within instructional environments and inherited repertoires: teachers, models and the social reality of musical training (Cooper and Pilcher, pp. 8–39). The emphasis on comparison also sharpens a methodological point, but its broader contribution is to show how formation narratives depend on concrete pedagogical networks rather than on retrospective myths of autonomy. A related strand emerges in chapters that attend to vocal music and text-setting, where language serves as a mediating infrastructure. Beethoven's vocal music can be made to appear marginal in a Beethoven profile dominated by instrumental works. Matthew Pilcher's chapter on 'Beethoven's *Erste Liebe, Himmelslust*, WoO 92: Sources, Languages, Text-Setting' treats this concert aria as a site where texts, languages and cultural expectations intersect with compositional decision-making. The effect is to re-route Beethoven through the practical problem of setting words – an art that was (and remains) social, linguistic and cultural in ways that purely instrumental music can appear not to be (Pilcher in Cooper and Pilcher, pp. 40–94).

[2] Siân Derry, 'Charles Hallé: a Beethoven Champion in Manchester', 293–335.

[3] Jeremy Yudkin, ed., *The New Beethoven: Evolution, Analysis, Interpretation* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2020).

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Medium translation – especially through both transcription and chamber repertoires involving winds – forms another key network. Here, the volume's strength is its insistence that 'Beethoven' is not reducible to the canonical edition and the presumed 'original' medium. Transcription, arrangement and instrumental re-scoring expose Beethoven as a repertoire circulating through the capacities and constraints of various performance environments. These studies, including chapters by Martin Harlow and Jos van der Zanden, are the kind that are often treated as ancillary to those of 'works' and yet they are particularly revealing about how Beethoven's music became socially usable, pedagogically transmissible and locally meaningful.[4]

The collection also includes essays that could be described as performer-facing or hermeneutically oriented, including analysis of 'word cues' in the Fourth Piano Concerto in a chapter by Sara Eckerson. Such work can be placed within a long tradition of interpretive analysis, but the phrase 'word cues' also suggests a specific orientation: analysis as something that speaks to performance decision-making, and to the semiotic traces embedded in compositional detail (Eckerson in Cooper and Pilcher, pp. 165–87). This is again mediation: what a performer 'takes' from the score is not simply the notated pitches and rhythms but an interpretive instruction-set – whether framed as rhetoric, affect or implied verbality. The final chapters, on religion and on cultural contexts (including Beethoven's view of Scotland and Charles Hallé as a Beethoven champion in Manchester), consolidate the book's infrastructural emphasis. They explore a set of institutions and agents – belief frameworks, concert cultures, champions and civic identities – through which Beethoven is continually re-authored.[5]

The density of case studies is intellectually satisfying, but what holds the pluralism together besides the name 'Beethoven'? Perhaps the point is precisely to resist a unifying thesis; yet the book's most persuasive moments are those where the authors suggest that infrastructure and mediation *are* the thesis. Making that more explicit – perhaps through a more developed editorial framing that names 'mediation' as the guiding concept – would confirm the book's contribution beyond aggregation. Even so, the collection is highly usable. For graduate seminars, it offers a model of how to write a Beethoven chapter that is neither hagiographic nor narrowly technical. For readers increasingly alert to the politics of place and cultural production, it demonstrates how local histories can destabilize universalizing accounts without abandoning the musical object.

Beethoven Studies 4 is a tightly shaped collection whose essays repeatedly test established categories of Beethoven scholarship. The volume's breadth is evident from its opening chapters. John D. Wilson reconstructs Beethoven's musical apprenticeship at the Bonn electoral court by tracking the institutional spaces and genres through which apprenticeship occurred – moving from chapel to theatre to Akademiensaal – thereby aligning early biography with musical labour and courtly infrastructure (Wilson in Chapin and Jones, pp. 1–23). W. Dean Sutcliffe's essay 'Gracious Beethoven?' similarly treats musical sociability as a conceptual problem rather than a merely technical one, using convention and individuality to reframe how Beethoven's 'newness' is negotiated within inherited forms (Sutcliffe, in Chapin and Jones, pp. 24–43, at 24–6). Together, these essays establish *Beethoven Studies 4* as a set of methodological prompts: each contribution demonstrates how a change in question (institutional setting; sociability as aesthetic) produces a different Beethoven.

Barry Cooper's essay on Beethoven's unfinished symphonies is a good example of scholarship that begins with the sources and poses careful questions about what, exactly, we

[4] See also my work on arrangements of Beethoven's music, especially *Beethoven's Symphonies Arranged for the Chamber: Sociability, Reception, and Canon Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[5] Susan Cooper, 'Beethoven's Faith and Beliefs in the Context of His Age: Some Unexplored Avenues and Reassessments, with Special Reference to Sailer', 244–76, at 244–7; Barry Cooper, 'Beethoven's View of Scotland', 277–92, at 277–8; Derry, 'Charles Hallé', 293–335, at 293–9.

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are examining (Cooper in Chapin and Jones, pp. 44–81). This could easily become a hunt for 'lost masterpieces' or an attempt to imagine how Beethoven might have finished works he left incomplete. Cooper avoids that. He treats unfinished symphonic material as evidence of Beethoven's working habits, and as a way of thinking about how sketches, drafts and abandoned plans relate to the finished symphonies we know. His systematic survey of the sketches lends unexpected support to Gustav Nottebohm's nineteenth-century estimate that Beethoven began at least fifty symphonic projects.[6] But the real value lies in the method: counting forces us to be clear about definitions. What counts as a 'work' in this context? What makes something 'symphonic'? When does a cluster of sketches become a 'project' rather than a passing idea? Once these questions are answered, one can see how much Beethoven scholarship depends – often without saying so – on decisions about classification that shape the story we tell about the archive. The essay, therefore, stands as a model of how Beethoven studies continues to produce new knowledge from 'old' materials: not by discovering entirely new documents, but by re-sorting known materials under revised criteria. It also complicates the idea that Beethoven's output is closed, stable and exhaustively mapped. Unfinishedness reintroduces contingency into the Beethoven oeuvre, and with it a more realistic interpretation of compositional labour and its interruptions.

Two further chapters underscore how the volume mobilizes analytical and historical frameworks as mediators. Giorgio Sanguinetti's essay on 'tonal prototypes' positions Beethoven's harmonic practice within an inherited repertoire of syntactic patterns, asking not simply whether Beethoven uses a given schema but how he transforms it as a compositional resource. The approach implicitly engages with schema-theoretical work in eighteenth-century studies, grounded in the work of Robert Gjerdingen, and its Beethovenian value lies in the way it turns 'inheritance' into something that can be demonstrated: by identifying recurring prototypes and showing how Beethoven recomposes them under new formal and expressive pressures (Sanguinetti in Chapin and Jones, pp. 144–65).[7] David Wyn Jones's chapter on the Austrian *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* offers a complementary form of mediation: he uses the periodical to show how Beethoven's works, performances and reputation were represented to Viennese readers (Jones in Chapin and Jones, pp. 166–88).

Tom Beghin's chapter on 'deafly performing' the last three piano sonatas pursues a conspicuous methodological turn in recent Beethoven work: the insistence that embodiment is not an optional supplement to 'the music' but a legitimate site of evidence. Beghin approaches Beethoven's deafness through the material experience of playing the piano – touch, vibration and kinesthetic awareness – rather than treating deafness simply as loss. This gives embodied performance an unusually central role in the interpretation of the late sonatas (Beghin in Chapin and Jones, pp. 209–38, at 209–13). Beghin's governing claim – that transcendence in the late sonatas becomes stronger when anchored in Beethoven's concrete interactions with his instrument, framed as a multi-sensorial experience for a 'deafly hearing' person – cuts against two familiar tendencies. First, this resists the metaphysical inflation of the late works as pure spirit, detached from material conditions. Second, it resists the reductive medicalization of deafness as a biographical explanation, long a dominant paradigm.[8] Instead, Beghin uses disability and instrumentality to argue about how we

[6] Gustav Nottebohm, 'Sechs Skizzenhefte aus den Jahren 1825 und 1826', *Musikalisches Wochenblatt* 6 (27 August 1875): 425–30, at 429. Nottebohm estimated that, had Beethoven completed all the symphonies he began, the total would have numbered at least 50.

[7] Robert O. Gjerdingen, *Music in the Galant Style* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[8] For historiographical and critical reflection on this topic see Kristin M. Knittel, 'Wagner, Deafness, and the Reception of Beethoven's Late Style', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51/1 (1998): 49–82.

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know what we think we know about late Beethoven: through touch, vibration, kinesthetics and the performer's sensorium – an approach also explored by Robin Wallace.[9]

Keith Chapin brings an ecocritical perspective to Beethoven's association with idealist notions of autonomy and sovereignty—that is, he asks how ideas of environment, interdependence and human embeddedness in the natural world might change the way we understand Beethoven. Rather than simply identifying representations of nature, he asks what happens when the supposedly autonomous Beethovenian subject is understood as relational and environmentally situated (Chapin in Chapin and Jones, pp. 103–20). Since Beethoven scholarship has long been entangled with the philosophical tradition that elevated autonomy and sovereignty as aesthetic virtues, this ecocritical perspective also unsettles part of the philosophical tradition that helped make Beethoven central. Autonomy, in this reading, becomes less a heroic ideal than a category to be rethought.

Katherine Hambridge shifts attention away from composers to singers, reception and the construction of German operatic vocality (Hambridge in Chapin and Jones, pp. 121–43, at 124). The focus on Anna Milder and on 'category-crossing' vocality is important as a corrective to composer-centred narratives, and also as a methodological repositioning: the evidence here is reception discourse about voices, bodies and national style. By arguing that Milder's voice destabilized prior associations of gender, singing style and nation, and furthermore opened space for a 'newly conceived category of German operatic vocality', Hambridge provides a powerful account of how national style is manufactured. Beethoven's opera becomes a means by which nation is negotiated through singers' bodies, critical discourse and the social understanding of vocal timbre and technique.

Michael Spitzer's 'Beethoven as Sentimentalist' rehabilitates sentimentality as a historically meaningful aesthetic category rather than treating it as incompatible with Beethoven's canonical seriousness (Spitzer in Chapin and Jones, pp. 82–102). Birgit Lodes's essay on 'composing with a dictionary' in the *Missa solemnis* extends the mediation theme into the interface between language and sound, suggesting that textual tools – lexicographic resources – can shape compositional choices. This is a particularly valuable reminder, in a repertoire often treated as spiritualized absolute music, that words remain practical materials, handled with reference systems and technologies (Lodes in Chapin and Jones, pp. 189–208). Taken together with Beghin and Hambridge, these essays make a coherent statement: Beethoven scholarship thrives when it tests the categories it inherits – work, voice, nature, autonomy, transcendence, prototype and sentiment – against new frames and interpretive responsibilities (Beghin in Chapin and Jones, pp. 209–38; Hambridge in Chapin and Jones, pp. 121–43).

The standard critique of 'studies' volumes applies in principle to *Beethoven Studies 4*, just as it does to *Manchester Beethoven Studies*: the risk of dispersion. Yet the editors appear to embrace dispersion effectively, as a way of staging a set of experiments. Despite the diversity of topics, many of the essays reconsider familiar Beethovenian categories – unfinishedness, sovereignty, vocal category, schema, liturgical language, embodied performance – by changing the kinds of evidence brought to bear on them.

Manchester Beethoven Studies works broadly at the level of infrastructures and *Beethoven Studies 4* at the level of methodological reframing; but *Beethoven the European* explicitly makes geography – and, more precisely, the category of 'Europe' – part of the problem. The volume originates from an international conference in December 2020, and the editors' premise is that Beethoven's 'universality' is inseparable from historically situated, and frequently contested, conditions of performance, interpretation and reception. The collection, therefore, asks not simply how Beethoven travelled across Europe, but how 'Europe' itself

[9] See also Robin Wallace, *Hearing Beethoven: A Story of Musical Loss and Discovery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

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is produced (and destabilized) through Beethoven as cultural symbol and musical practice (Miller and Kinderman, Preface, pp. xv-xvi).

The book's structure is correspondingly expansive. Eighteen chapters are divided into three parts: 'Politics, Aesthetics and Ideology', 'Reception across Europe and Beyond' and 'Performance and Analysis'. Rather than advancing a single narrative, the three sections approach Beethoven's European identity through political history, reception, performance and analysis. The effect is to position Beethoven's works within multiple, sometimes competing, interpretive communities, rather than presuming a stable 'European' Beethoven (Miller and Kinderman, Preface, pp. ix–xviii).

Part 1 is the volume's most overtly political. Kinderman's opening essay treats Beethoven's Ninth Symphony as a 'disputed symbol of community', emphasizing interpretive volatility rather than consensus (Kinderman in Miller and Kinderman, pp. 3–22). Other chapters in the section examine the political conditions of Beethovenian meaning-making across diverse contexts, including diplomacy, commemoration and ideological contest. In this respect, Beethoven the European sits productively alongside scholarship that has argued for Beethoven's political embeddedness, while also extending that agenda toward reception histories that reach well beyond Beethoven's lifetime.[10]

The chapter by Michael Christoforidis and Peter Tregear is exemplary in the way it uses a diplomatic event as an interpretive lens without collapsing music into illustration. By taking the Congress of Verona (1822) and the post-Napoleonic 'Concert of Europe' as points of orientation, they foreground the entanglement of cultural production with governance: censorship regimes, international alignments and the symbolic economy of public events. Beethoven appears here not so much as an abstract 'European' genius but as a composer whose works could participate in the staging of political order, even as local and international pressures inflected them. The chapter shows the value of treating political history not as background but as evidence that constrains the range of plausible interpretation (Christoforidis and Tregear in Miller and Kinderman, pp. 23–38, at 23–34).

Part 2 extends the reception frame beyond Europe without abandoning Europe as a reference point. Mai Koshikakezawa's chapter, for example, uses the 1927 Beethoven centenary to examine Beethoven's presence in Japan through the 'Moonlight' Sonata, tracing how nicknames, anecdotes and myths become vehicles of cultural transfer (Koshikakezawa in Miller and Kinderman, pp. 217–38, at 217). The chapter is especially useful in showing that Beethoven's authority travelled not only via score and performances, but through titles, anecdotes and pedagogical discourse. The chapter also complicates familiar models of 'influence' by showing how Beethoven can function as a resource for local cultural projects, not merely as a European import.

In Part 3, 'Performance and Analysis', Malcolm Miller examines the role of register and spatial exploration in the late piano sonatas, relating extreme registral writing to ideas of transcendence (Miller in Miller and Kinderman, pp. 319–44). Such arguments align with the collection's larger claim that close analysis remains indispensable, but only when its interpretive stakes are made explicit – when analytic description is linked to histories of listening, performance practice and cultural meaning.

One of the strengths of *Beethoven the European* is that it treats international reception as part of the history through which the Beethovenian canon was formed. The case-study model inevitably risks dispersal; yet, the editorial framing repeatedly re-centres a small number of recurring questions: how Beethoven's music is mobilized as a political symbol, how interpretive communities stabilize or contest meaning and how performance and analysis both participate in these processes. One might still wish for more explicit

[10] See especially Nicholas Mathew, *Political Beethoven* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); William Kinderman, *Beethoven: A Political Artist in Revolutionary Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

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theorization of 'Europe' as an analytical category – particularly given Europe's shifting institutional and ideological meanings in the early twenty-first century – but the book's transcultural emphasis already functions as an implicit critique of any uncomplicated European centrism.

The three volumes reviewed here model methodological plurality, but each asks to be read – and judged – by different standards. *Manchester Beethoven Studies* is strongest as a collection of well-shaped case studies, *Beethoven Studies 4* as a set of targeted conceptual essays that reconsider familiar categories through different kinds of evidence and *Beethoven the European* as a large-scale project centred on reception and performance in which cultural multiplicity is itself the object of analysis. Taken together, these volumes are best read not as competing 'new Beethovens' but as complementary demonstrations of what the field currently does well: they show Beethoven scholarship working across different kinds of evidence with an unusual degree of methodological self-consciousness. The result is a set of strong tools – some archival and taxonomic, some analytical, some performative, some reception-historical – for re-articulating why Beethoven remains a productive object of research in 2020s scholarship.

Manchester Beethoven Studies is the most immediately usable collection in the classroom and in seminar-based research cultures. Its great strength is its range of scales and its readability: it models how to move between technical detail and contextual argument. The editorial decision to let chapters sit in adjacency rather than under a single thesis works well for teaching and for scholarly browsing. Its limitation is also the one most likely to be felt by specialist readers: the book offers fewer moments where the introductory claim about productive questioning is sharpened into an explicit conceptual position. The reader is invited to infer, or create, the through-line rather than being given it. Of the three collections, *Beethoven Studies 4* most consistently challenges familiar assumptions through sharply focused individual studies. Its specialist chapters can also make the volume less immediately accessible to non-specialist readers. *Beethoven the European* is the most programmatic in scope and in its implied stakes. The volume will be particularly valuable for scholars working at the intersection of Beethoven reception, performance studies and cultural history, as well as for teaching contexts where Beethoven is approached as a contested inheritance rather than a monument. Because the volume is large and multi-part, its success will be felt most fully by readers who can engage the full sweep of its case studies rather than sampling selectively.

Taken together, these three edited collections reveal several recurring tensions in current Beethoven scholarship: between archival classification and interpretation, between nation as a historical category and Europe as a contested construction, and between the musical work as a stable object and performance or embodiment as forms of evidence. What none of the three volumes attempts – perhaps wisely, given the limits of edited collections – is a sustained synthesis of these methodological approaches into a single account of where Beethoven studies should go next. Yet that absence is also telling. Read together, the three books show a field that remains productive precisely because its objects, methods and assumptions continue to be contested.

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