

## Living in Beethoven's Shadow

Early last October I started studying Beethoven's piano sonatas. After a couple of months I finished up, wrote a Beethoven influenced sonata and then started working on his symphonies. After an in depth study of the symphonies I started on the string quartets, which I'm just finishing up. I interspersed this schedule with studies of violin and cello sonatas, over a dozen sets of variations, dances, bagatelles, about 7 concertos, an opera, a couple of masses, etc.

Besides burying myself in LvB's (*note – I'll occasionally use "LvB" as short cut for "Ludwig van Beethoven"*) music, I started looking at some of his contemporaries – a quick listen to Weber, Paganini and Rossini with a more in depth listen to Schubert. I saw a lot of other names, but usually in a negative light: I was given the impression that these composers were awful and contributed nothing to the history of music. This sentiment was at its very worse in the late nineteenth century when Mozart and Beethoven were considered untouchable gods (strangely limited to only the most noble emotions, anything not grand and larger than life was the fault of the listener), while everyone else was considered to be a lowly worm crawling at the feet of the giants. Strangely enough, Haydn seemed forgotten – an occasional brief acknowledgement of his influence on Beethoven, but little else good or bad.

As I began to spend more time with the first generation of Romantic composers (following Rosen: Berlioz, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Chopin and Schumann – Wagner and Verdi, both about the same age as the others, are left out because their major contributions were after 1850 while the others did most of their greatest work before, more or less, 1850, and I know too little about others, such as Meyerbeer, to comment) I noticed some problems with the traditional storyline (i.e. Bach to Mozart to Beethoven to Schubert to the Romantics).

One big discrepancy to my ear is although LvB idolized Mozart, borrowing some themes and using a similar structure, his music feels closer to Haydn in temperament, style of motivic development, surface feel and detail. The Romantics seemed to ignore Mozart's structure but often followed him in temperament and surface detail, occasionally seeming to purposely avoid sounding like Beethoven.

Beethoven's music was often stark and relied on contrasts of opposites (he was, of course capable of subtleties), often to dramatic effect, while the Romantics more often smoothed over many of the contrasts with chromaticisms. Contrasts existed, even enlarged in many areas, but it wasn't the same stark tonic (or substitute) vs. dominant (or substitute) contrast that LvB used. This was really brought home to me when I wrote my sonata – the Neapolitan is very important throughout so I wanted to incorporate it in the first theme. When I put it in, thinking the dissonance would heighten the drama, it had the opposite effect – it smoothed over the joint and gave it a Romantic, almost sentimental feel. I continued to find that the more chromatic dissonance I added the less dramatic it sounded and the "sweeter", more Romantic it sounded.

Along the same lines, the dissonances and chromaticisms of Beethoven are usually structural in nature while the Romantics used dissonances and chromaticisms as colorations. I know I am treading on thin ice in these last two paragraphs, but I feel it is mostly a problem with semantics – if you listen to a Beethoven sonata with score in hand and then a Chopin prelude you should catch this difference I am trying to portray.

Beethoven often complained that his music was ignored and people liked the “new” music better than his music. Who was he talking about when mentioned the new music? Certainly not Schubert, who was almost total unknown, particularly in the 1810s. Possibly Weber and Rossini. Were there others?

I could go on and on, but I feel this is already too long. The point is, in ways Beethoven’s early music is often closer to the music of the Romantics than his later music, but there must certainly have been something else in there to fill the void – the Romantics didn’t just pop up fully formed like Athena from the head of Zeus.

I finally broke down and decided to listen to some of these “lesser” artists. I was pleasantly surprised.

Before I go into more detail on the individuals, I want to make some generalizations.

These composers often tried for Mozart’s sense of melody and copied his surface features without going too deep into his structures (Rosen calls this “classicizing”). They were free with their chromaticisms, but often for effect instead of as part of the structure. Although I can often hear the influence of their better known contemporary, just as often their music sounds closer to the Romantics that came after them. I haven’t studied any of their scores, but I can tell that the Classical sonata form has loosened much farther than LvB was usually willing to go (he loosened it, particularly in the early sonatas, but mostly he twisted and turned it to make it do what he wanted – Rosen argues that as he grew older LvB actually strengthened it and that his contemporaries didn’t loosen it but strove for it without understanding it) yet they haven’t abandoned it yet, not the way the first Romantics did.

Some of these composers didn’t have the same compositional rigor as Mozart or Beethoven – I’ve read that Dussek’s scores were often riddles with “mistakes” that most first year composition students would catch, yet he didn’t seem to care – the total effect was more important than details such as consecutive fifths or enharmonic misspellings. Most of these composers certainly didn’t spend the time LvB did with motivic development or working and reworking large-scale structures. Because of this, they were considered lightweight and not serious. On the other hand, how many composers are as profound as Beethoven? And did anybody ever spend as much time as LvB with motivic development?

As far as “serious” and “profound” go, a lot people, including some composers, in LvB’s day did not understand his symphonies. Hummel admitted he didn’t and did not write any symphonies of his own because he knew they wouldn’t compare to Beethoven.

Weber is famous for his attacks on Beethoven's symphonies, calling him a mad man and worse, and, to my ears, this is reflected in his own symphonies, which are conservative in comparison (strange given Weber's great imagination in other instrumental works). Even Schubert didn't seem to understand Beethoven's symphonies until later in life. Spohr did seem to understand LvB and championed his symphonies, conducting them with his new invention, the baton. On the other hand, Spohr's own symphonic works are very different than LvB's.

I made a list of composers that seemed to be the most important and tracked down CDs of these composers. I missed a few composers, and am sorry if I missed your favorite non-LvB early 19<sup>th</sup> century composer (Moscheles stands out as a major omission). I tried to get at least 2 CDs and I ended up with a half a dozen for both Spohr and Hummel and over a dozen for Schubert (most I already had). The following list is, more or less, in order of birth. One note – most of the music that I listened to was written within 5 years, ten at the outside, of LvB's compositional life – very little from before 1790 and very little from after 1832 with the bulk of the works coming from about 1795 to 1825, so what I listen to was pretty much contemporary with Beethoven, even though a couple of these composers wrote works long before him and a couple out lived him by decades.

Clementi – For the first member of our list I should say he lived in Mozart's shadow, though I saw one reviewer who thought we'd all be talking about Clementi sonatas if it wasn't for Beethoven - Clementi was born a little before Mozart and outlived Beethoven. Mozart hated Clementi while Beethoven greatly respected, and was influenced by, him. He was on friendly terms with not only LvB, but also with Hayden, who exerted a lot of influence on his music. Mozart may have hated him because some considered Clementi the better pianist. Or it may have to do with style and taste – Mozart most certainly would consider much of Clementi's work as vulgar. Maybe, as claimed, Mozart's dislike comes from a perceived lack of substance.

As far as real piano technique (as opposed to harpsichord technique translated to piano) Clementi was actually more important than Mozart. His technique, both playing and writing, was very influential on most of the composers on this list as well as on LvB. The *music* of Mozart was, of course, more influential.

Much of Clementi's music, particularly the later music, is very "proto-Romantic". He often softened/weaken the Classical sonata forms and used chords more for their effect than for structural reasons. (People who consider him 100% classical state these same reasons for calling him a second rate composer behind Haydn, Mozart and LvB.) Some of his music seems to anticipate Weber, Hummel (who was a student, as was Field) and Schubert. Listening to his later sonatas, particularly those of Opus 40, I often forget who I am listening to and for a second might think it is Beethoven. Although not totally unknown, I feel this is a composer who should get wider recognition.

Dussek – Dussek was about 10 years older than LvB and died about 15 years before him. He lived a life worthy of Hollywood, much more like a Romantic novel than as a real

Romantic composer. And, at least for the last 15 years or so of his life, his music is much more Romantic than Classical.

On the Romantic side, his music was often programic. He also occasionally gave his music a distinctive Bohemian sound. Sometimes he seems to anticipate what Beethoven would be doing 5 years down the road, other times what Schubert did 15 years later and occasionally anticipated the early Romantics by 30 years. Other times his music still seems stuck in Mozart's shadow. His technique was much heavier than most in that time period, anticipating LvB, and he worked with Broadwood to create a piano that showed off that heavy technique, twice having him add a half an octave to the keyboard (starting at 5 octaves and ending at 6).

His piano concertos are very forward-looking, but I think it is his solo piano pieces that really shine. I particularly like his *Le Retour a Paris*, aka *Plus Ultra*. Although parts of it are obviously 1807, most of it sounds more 1837 to my ear – one modern reviewer calls it the first great Romantic piano sonata. The *Elegie Harmonique* is very moving and forward looking, but, at least to my ear, belongs more with Beethoven's tragic music than with, say, Schumann or Chopin.

Like several others on this list, Dussek worked a good portion of his life as a traveling virtuoso (no, Paganini did not invent the traveling virtuoso). Like Liszt, he relied almost as much on a personality cult and reputation as his music. He was also the first to turn his piano so that his profile was to the audience (he wanted to give the ladies a better view). He spent some years in, amongst other places, Russia, Paris (before the Revolution and, despite his great friendship with Marie Antoinette, after), London and Prussia. Although he met most of the composers of his day and was on friendly terms with not only Haydn but also Clementi and Spohr, he never set foot in Vienna or met Beethoven.

Time was not kind to Dussek, who over indulged in everything (particularly in the last years of his life), or to his music, which quickly fell out of favor when he died. In his day he was considered one of the greats (Haydn's words - "the most honest, politest and most excellent man among all composers", "a most upright man of integrity, culture and – concerning music – most excellent" both 1792.) but his music was forgotten shortly after his death from gout.

Of all the composers on the list, I was most surprised by Dussek, mostly because I had read so little about him and so expected so little from him. Anyone who is interested in early Romantic music and hasn't heard either of the two sonatas listed above owes it to himself or herself to look them up.

Hummel – Hummel began life as a child prodigy and was taught by Mozart (who adored him), Clementi, Albrechtsberger, Haydn and Salieri. He studied with the later three at about the same time as Beethoven, and, though their relationship was often stormy, the two of them remained friends until LvB's death. While playing at LvB's memorial concert (at LvB's request), he met Schubert, who dedicated his last three sonatas to him

(the publisher changed the dedication to Schumann after both Schubert and Hummel had died). During his lifetime Hummel was considered one of the greatest composers, some calling him an equal to Beethoven. Although already starting to fade at the time of his death, he was still highly regarded (in Vienna they played Mozart's *Requiem* to mark his passing), but that fame quickly faded, which is a shame.

I really like Hummel's work a lot. When I first heard his piano concertos (I listened to the concerto in A minor and the one in B minor) I was instantly reminded of Chopin's two concertos, only Hummel's concertos are, in my opinion, "better" (I put "better" in quotes because it is not an absolute – there are parts of Chopin's concertos that stand out over Hummel's). Later I discovered that Chopin used Hummel's concertos, particularly those in A minor and B minor, as a model for his own and continued to play them his whole life. Hummel's concertos show Dussek's influence, though his piano technique in general was mostly influenced by Clementi. His melodies are very influenced by Mozart, though sometimes more highly ornamental. Because of his emphasis on ornamented, pretty melodies Hummel is often considered a lightweight composer of pretty, flowery music, i.e., of inconsequential music.

Besides the piano concertos (which I like so much) and the trumpet concerto (which is still played today), and many other works (septets, masses, operas, etc.) Hummel was, for the most part, a piano player with brilliant technique. As an example of that brilliance, although today we think of Czerny as Beethoven's student, after hearing Hummel for the first time he quit his lessons with LvB and took up lessons with Hummel – Czerny's technique was much closer to his second teacher's than to his more famous teacher's and he passed this technique down to the next generation (Liszt's father refused to pay the large fees Hummel demanded so Liszt studied with Hummel's most famous student, Czerny, instead). Hummel also wrote a very influential book on piano technique, *A Complete Theoretical and Practical Course of Instruction on the Art of Playing the Piano Forte*.

To my ears some of Hummel's piano sonatas rival most of LvBs early and mid period piano works, at least from a listeners point of view, if not a compositional rigor point of view. The *Sonata in F# minor, Opus 81* is fantastic and was greatly admired by Schumann (Hummel rejected Schumann as a pupil because of Schumann's neurotic tendencies).

Hummel definitely took a much more Romantic track than LvB and greatly influenced the first generation of Romantics. However, since his music always showed its Classical era roots, as the Romantics' star rose, Hummel's fell. For the last 150 years he has gotten very little respect and is often considered a very minor composer. Perhaps the fact that he never wrote a symphony didn't help – the public at large doesn't take a composer seriously unless they write symphonies, Chopin excluded. Or maybe it is that his music, no matter how Romantic, often sounds derivative of Mozart's (to my ears, even the one popular Hummel piece, the trumpet concerto, has a Mozart-ian sound to it – more so than the piano concertos). I don't care – I like his music and can hear the genesis of Chopin, Schumann and Liszt whenever I listen to his later music. He might not have been as

technical of a composer as LvB, but he was a very different composer, and an excellent one at that. In my opinion, it is time for a Hummel revival.

John Field – An Irish born composer, Field spent much of his childhood in Britain where he studied with Clementi and met Haydn, who encouraged him. It is possible he also came into contact with Dussek and Hummel, who were both in England at that time.

Field is mostly known for his Nocturnes, which influenced Chopin. The young Chopin sometimes bragged that people thought he was one of Field's students, but later in life didn't have too many kind words for this particular influence. I enjoyed the 4 concertos I've heard, but I don't think they are as good as Hummel's. Of course, "good" is a very subjective term and I do enjoy them. The Nocturnes are better, just don't try to compare them to those of Chopin – you need to listen to them for their own merits.

Paganini – If you've studied music at all, you've heard of Paganini. He greatly influenced the first Romantic generation, particularly Liszt, who modeled his early career after Paganini.

I often hear people say Paganini's music is high in technical brilliance but low in musical sensibility. I would have to disagree to some extent.

Paganini was greatly influenced by Italian opera, particularly the bel-canto style then popular, and his music reflects this influence. His lines are often very operatic and singing. His compositional rigor might not be as deep as LvB and his music certainly isn't as profound, but it still has merit beyond its technical difficulty. But, as is the common complaint, they never let you forget their difficulty.

So much has been written about Paganini elsewhere that I'll just leave it at that.

Spohr – I was floored when I first put on a CD of Spohr's Double Quartets. Why haven't more composers worked with this combination? On the reputation of his clarinet concertos Spohr is heard a little more often than Hummel (Hummel's own trumpet concerto is well known), though these are just the tip of the iceberg for this prolific composer. He wrote 9 symphonies and died while working on a tenth (sounds all too familiar), wrote quite a few violin concertos and a huge amount of string quartets. He is also known for his octet and nonet.

His relationship with LvB may have been even stormier than Hummel's. LvB started off liking Spohr's work quite a bit, but later called it too chromatic and too dissonant, which seems strange given that to modern ears LvB's music often seems much more dissonant than Spohr's. As stated above, Spohr continued to champion Beethoven's music his whole life and conducted the symphonies every chance he got.

Spohr lived and worked much later into the Romantic era than the others on this list and even outlived many of the first generation of Romantics. Even more than Hummel he spans the period between the Classical and the Romantic (Hummel was breaking with

the Classical tradition to help create the new Romantic music, Spohr, though knowing and understanding the Classical tradition as well as Hummel, was a Romantic through and through.). Because of his long life, Spohr also lived to see his music fall out of favor, as the music of the early Romantics (many of whom he outlived) became all the rage, and his music more and more seemed to belong to the past rather than the future.

Very enjoyable music, and highly recommended.

Weber – In my mind I divide Weber's music into three main categories – symphonies, other instrumental music and opera.

If I based my judgment of Weber on the symphonies (I've heard 2, are there more?), he would not be included here – I find them conservative and a little dull. Occasionally they show the imagination he brings to other works, but not often enough for me to listen to one of his symphonies over Haydn or Beethoven (to my ear Haydn's London symphonies are bolder and more forward looking).

I really enjoy the other non-symphony works of Weber. They are often very innovative and obviously were influential to the early Romantics. His clarinet concertos are perhaps even better known than Spohr's. His *Konzertstück* for piano and orchestra is perhaps his most influential purely instrumental work (even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century - Stravinsky modeled one of his works on it), with his *Invitation to Dance* (for piano but later orchestrated by Berlioz) most likely coming in second. Speaking of Berlioz – Berlioz, who is often thought of one of the greatest orchestrators, was greatly influenced by Weber.

Where Weber shone, however, was in his opera. I listened to *Oberon* and *Der Freischütz*. The latter is often given as an example of early Romantic music, particularly the famous "Wolf's Glen" scene. This whole scene is astounding – I know of nothing that comes close until Berlioz. It could be taken without changing a note and placed into a movie and still sound fresh. If it occasionally sounds a little clichéd, remember that Weber invented that cliché – it was bold and exciting in his day.

Weber still has a very good reputation, which has not faded from age and his *Der Freischütz* is still performed.

Rossini – I don't listen to a lot of opera and yet I found so many of Rossini's melodies very familiar – you can't watch TV for an hour without hearing a commercial using one of his tunes or background music greatly influenced by this great composer. Strangely enough, while still a very young man, and right when his compositional powers seemed to be surging into the territory that only the greatest share, he retired. Rossini was notoriously lazy and may have just thought the compositional rigor to make the music he was imagining was too great and gave up. Who knows? He did continue to lead a very comfortable life and the legacy of the music he did write lives on to this day.

As a non-opera person, I only listened to the complete overtures and *Il barbiere di Siviglia*... I found a lot there to like. And people did like it – Rossini was very popular in his day and continues to help define that era in Italian opera.

Most music books give Rossini huge credit for inspiring the Romantics – much more than Dussek, Hummel or Spohr, who are either not mentioned or get a line about being totally inconsequential. From the little that I heard, he was important and influential, however... I do not want to say anything bad about this composer, but I feel others were equally influential, occasionally more so. Some composers, such as Berlioz, were not taken in by Italian opera and much preferred the German models.

Schubert – Can I say anything about Schubert you haven't heard before? Although his early music is highly original, well crafted and very enjoyable, the music of his last few years began to show a depth and level of compositional rigor that few have achieved. Listening to the works he composed during the last three years of his life makes one realize what a great loss his early demise truly was.

Since Schubert only outlived Beethoven by about a year we tend to forget that he was only about 5 years older than Berlioz and about a dozen years older than the other early Romantics. Even Wagner was only about 15 years younger. In other words, he was closer to being a contemporary with Berlioz than with anyone one on this list except Rossini, and was closer to the other early Romantics than to any of the others excepting Weber. (Notice that these three – Weber, Rossini and Schubert – are the three on this list that are best known today.) Looking only at birth dates, he is as close to Wagner as to Field, Spohr and Paganini. As far as Beethoven is concerned, Schubert almost evenly splits the distance between this great master and Brahms, and the distance between Dussek and Schubert almost the same as the distance between Brahms and Schoenberg, with the distance to Clementi being 8 years farther removed (or about the same as between Brahms and Bartok). If Schubert had lived until he was 60, he would be placed in the time line with the early Romantics, not with Beethoven.

And the early Romantics may have been nearly forgotten, just as the proto-Romantics on this list are largely forgotten.

---

Beethoven is a towering figure on the landscape of music. Few composers, before or after, can compare to him. Because of this we tend to only remember the most brilliant composers who worked during his era – we remember Haydn more for what he did before Beethoven published his Opus 1. And we remember Schubert, whose music was so adored by his slightly younger contemporaries and whose life, like Mozart's, was cut short making him more of a Romantic hero than a long-lived composer like Haydn or Spohr. Rossini, Weber and Paganini are also, to a lesser extent, remembered.



But there were so many more who we should remember. I know this can be said about any epoch, but can you think of any other 35-year slice of time since 1825 so dominated by 1 name? I can't – there have always been a handful of artists working at any given time that are still household names. Give me any decade from 1830 on up and I can, off the top of my head, name half a dozen composers that the general classical music fan would know. OK, when you get to the 1960's and beyond it will get a little tougher both for me to name them and for the general classical music fan to know, but I'm sure you get my gist.

Those working in LvB's shadow really did contribute so much to the evolution of music. If we totally removed Beethoven's music, the chronology would still make sense. Yes, there would be some music that would make us stop and say, "wow, where did that come from?" but over all there is a continuity from Clementi and Dussek to Spohr and Hummel and then down to Weber and Schubert before being picked up by Berlioz et al.

I'm not trying to say that Beethoven's music was not influential or totally stood outside of music history – his music was greatly influential and many of his innovations continued to be used for decades to come. More than just the language of music Beethoven helped to change the very nature of music making it more an instrument of self-expression than it had previously been considered.

What I am trying to say is that there were other influences, composers whose music seems to have had a more immediate impact on the sound of the music of the composers who worked in the 1830s and 1840s. And I think the music of these composers deserves to be heard.