

# Heroism, Resistance, and Sentiment: Two Events Full of Beethovenian Drama

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## ABSTRACT

Beethoven's music has set the tone during different and diverse events in human history. It has been used in order to pinpoint major historical events, but it has been also used in order to represent ideas such as friendship of nations, freedom, and many others. There are two events though when the music of Beethoven has meant more than a fine and glorious tune for the Athenian public. These two events occurred under totally different circumstances, with the first being an incident involving a *Fidelio* performance during World War II in occupied Athens, and the second having to do with the death of the legendary conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos and his urn containing his ashes arriving in Athens. Although the two incidents are historically unconnected, they are very much underlined by the Beethovenian values represented within the actual score. In this study, I will present the historical framework of both events but also taking a step further will dare to connect these with values that have been attributed to Beethoven's music in terms of fundamental representation.

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## KEYWORDS

*Fidelio*, Maria Callas, Dimitri Mitropoulos, Athens

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The Beethovenian universe, as it has been reproduced and reconstructed through years and decades of narration and interpretation, has been described, among others, as a cosmos full of despair, cries for liberty, heroism and other characteristics that depict Beethoven as a titan and his music as a titanic deed. Romain Rolland writes in the foreword of his book:

I do not give the name hero to those who have triumphed by infinite thought or by sheer physical strength – but only to those made great by goodness of heart. Beethoven wrote, “I recognise no sign of superiority in mankind other than goodness.” Where the character is not great, there is no great man, there is not even a great artist, nor a great man of action; there are only idols unearthed for the cheap and short-lived applause of the multitude; time will efface them altogether. Outward success matters little. The only thing is to be great, not to appear so.

The lives of the great heroes were lives of one long martyrdom; a tragic destiny willed their souls to be forged on the anvil of physical and moral grief, of misery and ill-health. They were made great through their misfortune. Because these mighty souls complained little of their unhappiness, the best of humanity is with them. Let us gather courage from them; for torrents of quiet strength and inspiring goodness issued from their great hearts. Without even consulting their works or hearing their voices, we read in their eyes the secret of their lives – that it is good to have been in trouble, for thence the character acquires even more greatness, happiness and fruition.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, research that has been conducted mainly during the second half of the twentieth century, gives an earthlier description of him and his music without diminishing his musical achievements.<sup>2</sup> In any case, the equilibrium needs to find its balance somewhere in the middle. In a recent book on Beethoven, Daniel K. L. Chua makes the following remark that seems to sum up quite effectively Beethoven and his place in history:

Beethoven is music’s freedom fighter. In the aesthetic realm, he stands for musical autonomy; he is “the man who freed music.” In the political realm, he stands for the idea of liberty; he is the composer of freedom. By combining both the aesthetic and the political dimensions of freedom as the form and content of his music, Beethoven glistens as the beacon of liberty in the history of Western music.

Exactly what this freedom means, however, is less illuminating. The uncertainty is particularly acute when it comes to the political perception of Beethoven’s music, with opposing ideologies adopting the composer as their mouthpiece.<sup>3</sup>

Beethoven’s music has created an impact on the Athenian public on more than one occasion. Although our focus will be on *Fidelio* and Symphony No. 3, one cannot fail to pinpoint the total and irreversible triumph of the first ever performance of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9 in four consecutive concerts from July 3 to 6, 1942 with the Athens Conservatoire Symphony Orchestra (Συμφωνική Ορχήστρα του Ωδείου Αθηνών), soon to become the State Orchestra of Athens

<sup>1</sup> Romain ROLLAND, *Beethoven*, transl. by B. Constance HULL (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1917), 13–14.

<sup>2</sup> One needs to refer here to studies such as the one by Maynard SOLOMON, *Beethoven* (New York: Schirmer Books, 2/2001) and Alessandra COMINI, *The Changing Image of Beethoven: A Study in Mythmaking* (Santa Fe, NM: Sunstone Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel K. L. CHUA, *Beethoven and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 25.



(Κρατική Ορχήστρα Αθηνών). Mikis Theodorakis, on the occasion of the performance of his work *Apocalypse: Ode to Beethoven* (Αποκάλυψη: Ωδή στον Μπετόβεν), wrote:

The year 1942 has been a landmark for me. Firstly, this was the year that I listened to symphonic music (Beethoven's 9th). Secondly, I started developing my theory on "Universal Harmony," which was meant to be my guide throughout my life (Thought and Action) and thirdly, I embarked on the composition of my first choral-symphonic work with the initial title Symphony No. 1, which I changed later to *Apocalypse*. ... In the art sector, I initiated with an ambitious and difficult project, the composition of my first symphonic work with *Ode to Joy* being my sole experience, trying to reciprocate with unbelievable courage and self-confidence my own "Ode to Beethoven" (Ωδή στον Μπετόβεν).<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, it was another performance that had an even greater impact during the years of Occupation by the Axis powers. It was August 14, 1944 that the premiere of *Fidelio* was given by the, then newly established, Greek National Opera (Εθνική Λυρική Σκηνή) at the Herodus Atticus Theater of Athens (Ωδείο Ηρώδου του Αττικού). Among those featured in the operatic cast was Maria Callas, who was still using her real name, Maria Kalogeropoulou.<sup>5</sup> The work was performed fourteen times in total from August 14th up to September 10th, about a month before the withdrawal of the Nazis from Athens (October 12, 1944) and Kalogeropoulou starred in eleven of them, all sung in Greek.<sup>6</sup> The Athenian audiences and public saw this as an opportunity to express their inner feelings about their oppressors. The idea that a work which reflected a sparkle of freedom was about to be staged in the open theater of Herodus Atticus, seemed the perfect occasion. Most, if not all, of the performances were sold out and public reaction resembled more a resistance movement than an enthusiastic, musically oriented, audience. One of the spectators wrote:

The sight of chained people that were coming out at the yard in silence, in rows of twos and threes, passing by the jail's gate, under the sounds of the submissive and solemn orchestral prelude, filled the audience with awe and a whisper spread through. And when the last chorus concluded ... thunderous applause broke out.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> "Το 1942 υπήρξε για μένα σταθμός. Πρώτον, άκουσα για πρώτη φορά Συμφωνική Μουσική (την 9η του Μπετόβεν). Δεύτερον, ανέπτυξα την θεωρία μου, «Για τη Συμπαντική Αρμονία», που έμελλε να γίνει ο οδηγός σε όλη μου, τη ζωή (Σκέψη και Δράση) και τρίτον, άρχισα τη σύνθεση του πρώτου χορωδιακού – συμφωνικού μου έργου με τον αρχικό τίτλο «Συμφωνία αρ. 1», τον οποίο μετέτρεψα αργότερα σε «Αποκάλυψη» ... Ένα άλλο, στον τομέα της Τέχνης, ξεκινώντας από το φιλόδοξο και δύσκολο εγχείρημα της σύνθεσης του πρώτου συμφωνικού έργου μου, με μοναδικά ακούσματα την «Ωδή στη Χαρά» και ανταποδίδοντας με ανεξήγητη τόλμη και αυτοπεποίθηση τη δική μου, «Ωδή στον Μπετόβεν»." Mikis THEODORAKIS, *Apocalypse: Ode to Beethoven* (Μίκης Θεοδωράκης, *Η Αποκάλυψη: Ωδή στον Μπετόβεν*), <<http://www.mikistheodorakis.gr/el/writings/articles/?nid=5398>> (accessed September 23, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Program of the performance where the name of Maria Kalogeropoulou is included <<https://digital.mmb.org.gr/digma/bitstream/123456789/10848/1/documentsingle.pdf>> (accessed September 23, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Nikos PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS, *Η άγνωστη Κάλλας* [The unknown Callas] (Athens: Kastaniotis, 1998), 643.

<sup>7</sup> "Η θέα των αλυσοδομένων ανθρώπων, που έβγαιναν σιωπηλοί δύο δύο, τρεις τρεις, από την καγκελόπορτα της φυλακής στην αυλή, με την υποβλητική συνοδεία του πρελούδιου της ορχήστρας, σκόρπισε ένα δέος και ένας διάχυτος ψίθυρος ακούστηκε. Και όταν τελείωσε και το χορωδιακό τραγούδι ... ακολούθησαν θυελλώδη



It was the moment that the occupied capital had been waiting for for a long time. A work through which the people were able to express their suppressed feelings towards their tyrants using as a vehicle a work that derived from their own cultural universe. *Fidelio* is a masterpiece where many humanist values are being praised. Among those, freedom occupies a large part of the plot and is present all through the work, up until the last chords. Of course, a major role had to do with the news that was coming from the rest of Europe, where the Axis powers were defeated rapidly and the audiences knew about it, feeling overwhelmed by the approaching liberation of the country. *Fidelio* was meant to be the last major production of the National Opera operating under the supervision of the Germans. Although the work was banned in several other occupied cities, this was not the case for Athens. The artistic advisory board proposed Beethoven's only opera to be enacted in Athens and, surprisingly enough, the censors allowed it.

The performance itself carries its own merit, away from its transformative significance. Most critics praised the cast and orchestra for their performance. *Fidelio* in Athens can be understood as one of the first – probably along with Manolis Kalomiris's *Protomastoras* (Masterbuilder) a few months before – important successes of Maria Callas, in a role that she will not really embrace in the years to come and in a genre that she will scarcely touch upon later in her performing career. Composer and music critic Alexandra Lalaouni wrote:

Kalogeropoulou, who performed the Leonore role, gracefully supplied all her rich theatrical talent, her beautiful voice, her musical insights and really moved everyone. Of course, she has a lot to correct and learn with her voice, but taking into account her young age and her lack of experience we cannot but salute and praise the first ever Greek Leonore.<sup>8</sup>

*Fidelio* is the only opera Beethoven composed throughout his lifetime. A unique and condensed sample of Beethovenian dramaturgy, which in fact contributes towards the development of the romantic opera genre as this will unravel in the decades to come after *Fidelio*'s premiere performance. His music, with its thick and meaningful nature, in this case needs to be placed within the boundaries of melodrama. However, on those nights in Athens, during a repressive and endless present for the contemporary audiences that attended, Beethoven helped them realize what it is to feel free and liberated from a tyranny. It was a moment of rebirth and resurrection for the exhausted Athenian public, a performance that many remembered later as a breaking point and an escape from the chains that they had been bearing for more than three years. Wilhelm Furtwängler probably put it very well in Salzburg in 1948 when he said that *Fidelio* is “Beethoven himself. It is this ‘nostalgia of liberty’ that he feels, or better, that he makes us feel.”<sup>9</sup>

Although this incident has been inscribed deeply in the character of Athens and its citizens and although it remains a monumental and significant moment within the modern history of this city, connected with Beethoven's music, an event that has been perceived as a moment of resurrection for many, Beethoven's music has also been connected to another major event that

χειροκροτήματα.” Alkiviadis MARGARITIS, “Η Κάλλας Λεονόρα στο κατοχικό ανέβασμα του Φιντέλιο” [Callas as Leonora at the *Fidelio* performance during the occupation], *Θέατρο* nos. 59–60 (1977), 113–117.

<sup>8</sup> Polyvios MARSAN, *Μαρία Κάλλας: Η Ελληνική σταδιοδρομία της*. Χρονικό [Maria Callas: Her Greek career. A chronicle] (Athens: Gnosi, 1983), 136.

<sup>9</sup> Furtwängler Sound, quote from 1948 Salzburg Festival. <<http://furtwänglersound.com/recordings/beethoven/beethovenfidelio50/>>, (accessed October 4, 2020).



took place a few years later. This time, it was not a moment of ecstatic cry for freedom or a happy occasion, which was enriched with Beethovenian grace. On the contrary, it was a moment of mourning and sadness.

It was November 2, 1960 when the legendary conductor Dimitris Mitropoulos died in Milan, during a rehearsal of Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 3 that was to take place a few days later. He had just arrived from his performance of the same work in Cologne with the Cologne Radio Symphony Orchestra, his last public appearance as it turned out to be. During that morning when Mitropoulos collapsed at the podium, he was evidently pale and exhausted as was described by musicians present at the incident. He suffered from a coronary attack that actually killed him almost instantly. Dimitri Mitropoulos, who had constant health issues during the last years of his life, had made all preparations in case of his passing. A letter that was found on him stated that he wanted to be cremated and that his ashes should be given to his former student and heir James Dixon and, if he wished, he could donate the urn with its contents to Greece so that Mitropoulos's burial could take place there.<sup>10</sup>

The procedure was followed according to Mitropoulos's wish and his body was taken to Lugano, in Switzerland for the cremation process. William Trotter, who wrote the most comprehensive, yet probably sole, biography of Mitropoulos, writes:

The government of Greece sent a C-47 military plane, on the day following the cremation, and the ashes were taken back to Athens by Theodore Vavayannis. That same afternoon, a ceremony was held in Mitropoulos's honor at the Theater of Herodus Atticus, and the urn was placed on public view for three days at the Athens Conservatory.<sup>11</sup>

What Trotter describes as "a ceremony" was actually an event full of sentimental climaxes that revealed the magnitude of Mitropoulos's personality and presence for a country and a nation that desperately needed heroes that could make them proud outside the country's borders. In any case, this was already revealed a few years before the conductor's death when he visited Athens to perform in 1955 and admiration poured out from Greek music lovers and admirers.

The procession on the day that the conductor's ashes arrived in Athens was as solemn as it could be. The military plane carrying the urn arrived in Athens in the afternoon of November 6, 1960 and Theodoros Vavayannis climbed down the airplane stairs, holding a box that contained the ashes of Dimitri Mitropoulos. A guard of honor by the then Royal Air Force formed a passageway in front of the airplane, attributing appropriate honors. Governmental officials were waiting to escort Vavayannis at the next station of Mitropoulos's last journey in Athens. A car carried the company to the Herodus Atticus Theater, the Athens open theater in which Mitropoulos had performed several times during his Athenian career. There, a large crowd had been waiting for the urn to arrive. Although it was already winter and concerts were not held anymore for that year at the theater, the stands were all occupied by those who wanted to pay their last respects to Mitropoulos. The box that contained the urn was covered now with the Greek flag and Panagiotis Kanellopoulos, vice president of the Greek government and member of the

<sup>10</sup> William R. TROTTER, *Priest of Music: The Life of Dimitri Mitropoulos* (Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1995), 441-442.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Vavayannis was a friend and protégé of Mitropoulos and conductor of the Athens Symphony Orchestra (i.e. the State Orchestra of Athens).



Academy of Athens, paid his respects by laying some flowers on behalf of the Greek government when the urn entered the main stage of the Herodus Atticus Theater.<sup>12</sup> However, apart from the large crowds that were standing still at the stands and the officials who performed their duties, the most important feature of that evening was about to come. The State Orchestra of Athens, the orchestra with which Mitropoulos spent a substantial amount of his career, was already in position waiting to perform what must have been the most sentimental and heart-breaking moment of the ceremony. Vavayannis proceeded with the covered urn and placed it on the maestro's podium in front of the orchestra and the musicians sat down to perform Beethoven's "Funeral March" from his Symphony No. 3 without a conductor. After the performance, the urn was moved to the Athens Conservatory in order to remain there with an honorary guard formed by students until it was laid in the Athenian soil, at the First Cemetery of Athens.<sup>13</sup>

Apart from its sentimental value, the above incident has a lot to say about the significance of Beethoven's music in order to enrich such a dramatic moment. For the Greeks, Mitropoulos represented something beyond human. A great fellow compatriot who had managed to excel beyond the limited borders of his country and was hailed and praised as one of the great ones.

It is an interesting coincidence that both events that have been presented here, involved two of the most renowned artists that Greece has offered to the world. Certainly, Callas, at the time of the *Fidelio* performance was not the opera singer that she came to be later in life. However, examining these two incidents with the luxury that history provides, one should not fail to mark the coincidence.

Beethoven's music and in particular the two works that have been connected with the above incidents seem to require some further investigation as works of art that carry certain and determined messages. Would it have been the same if the Greek National Opera performed the *Missa Solemnis* for instance (the National Opera performed other grand choral works apart from opera), even if the Greeks knew that the German forces were continuously failing and retreating throughout Europe? What would have been the impact if the State Orchestra of Athens performed a movement from a symphony of one of Mitropoulos's most beloved composers such as Mahler, for instance from his Symphony No. 2? Obviously, questions such as these belong mostly in the realm of metaphysics and alternative history scenarios; however, one probably should consider them merely because they could produce interesting outcomes for the works that actually did get performed.

*Fidelio*, apart from its virtues as an artwork, can be considered firstly an act of praise to the republican spirit and subsequently to French Revolution. But apart from these, which are fairly well known, one should not neglect to compare the circumstances under which the opera, then still operating with the title *Leonore*, was premiered back in 1805. Vienna at that time was occupied by the French army. Many of the regular concert-goers were not there because they had fled the city to safer places. The premiere was not full and there were many officers of the French army attending.<sup>14</sup> Strangely enough, the situation of the 1805 premiere resembled the situation in 1944 Athens, which was also a premiere of the work in Greece.

<sup>12</sup> Takis KALOGEROPOULOS, *Κρατική Ορχήστρα Αθηνών: προϊστορία και ιστορία* [State Orchestra of Athens: prehistory and history] (Athens: State Orchestra of Athens, 2004), 109–111.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> John BOKINA, "Opera and Republican Virtue: Beethoven's 'Fidelio,'" *International Political Science Review/Revue Internationale de science politique* 12/2 (April 1991), 105.



Setting aside coincidences and looking at this work closely, one must refer to the political messages that it carries. On one level, *Fidelio* discusses the love and devotion that a wife has for her husband. But on a different level, this opera exists in order to praise freedom and democracy. John Bokina makes a rather interesting remark:

Republican politics are also distorted. The closing scenes of the opera are heavily laden with the symbols of Revolutionary republicanism: trumpets recalling the storming of the Bastille; the movement from the darkness of oppression, through hope, to the light of emancipation; the identification of this emancipation with both the slogans of the Revolution and popular aspirations. But the political content of this opera mixes the symbols of Revolutionary republicanism with a literal restoration of a properly constituted monarchy.<sup>15</sup>

One should remember that Beethoven reflects upon his own times when he composes *Fidelio*. The content carries a strong political message that fits the timeframe within which it is composed but it also carries a political message that surpasses Beethoven's contemporary situations. Tyranny and oppression should not be the norm and substitute for freedom. Actually, observing the work as it probably stood out in 1944 and neglecting all conceptual meanings that have application in the beginning of the nineteenth century when it was premiered, the aftermath that is delivered would have made direct connections as an anti-oppression, anti-Nazi work probably for any audience in Europe that had suffered under the Nazi boots. Therefore, the surprise would have been if the Greek audiences did not feel connected and responded differently. Fortunately, the Athenian public still seemed to have the instinct for such a connection and acted accordingly.

Symphony No. 3 has a long background history and has been the item of research for far too many, not only because of its vastly interesting musical material but also because of the discussion and subsequent withdrawal of the Napoleon dedication and, of course, its performance history. In any case, though, this text does not refer to the work as an individual piece of high art and craftsmanship on Beethoven's behalf, but investigates the choice of the specific second movement that accompanied and marked the commemorative event held in Athens for Dimitri Mitropoulos.

Imagine being in Athens during a November afternoon in 1960 and people decide to gather at an open theater to pay their last respects to the ashes of a great Greek musician. The choice of soundtrack was of the utmost importance. We are not sure how the State Orchestra of Athens decided to accompany this ceremony by performing the second movement, the "Funeral March," of Beethoven's Symphony No. 3. We actually do not even know who decided that this should be the work that they were to perform. Maybe it was a work that the orchestra felt comfortable performing without a conductor and within the emotional burden experienced by the individual players. After all, many of the members of the orchestra at that time were friends and colleagues who knew Mitropoulos since their conservatory years. It is difficult to imagine how difficult it was for them to play through any piece of music and seeing the urn that carried the ashes of a dear friend. Therefore, it might have been just a safe choice. What if, though, this was a choice that suited their aesthetic understandings, instead of performing an excerpt from a

<sup>15</sup> BOKINA, "Opera and Republican Virtue," 108.



Mahler symphony or even Mitropoulos's composition *Burial* from his youth that made such an impact when it was first performed with him conducting the same orchestra about forty years before his death in Athens? What if they felt that this was the appropriate work to be performed on such an occasion?

One might want to focus on the actual subtitle given at its first edition, which was "Sinfonia Eroica ... composta per festeggiare il sovvenire di un grande Uomo,"<sup>16</sup> meaning that this was a heroic symphony that was composed to celebrate the existence of a great Man who was not named, probably not Napoleon anymore. This is a work of praise and not only a mourning for the lost soul of a great Man. Would that feel appropriate for Mitropoulos then? Probably yes, even if it happened by coincidence, even if it was performed because this was the piece that the orchestra was able to play. Sometimes coincidences and aesthetic ties that appear between people and art might be stronger, even if it is approached with a pinch of salt and constructive imagery. Mitropoulos was truly a great Man in the Beethovenian sense. He managed to achieve the impossible of launching a career in one of the major centers for music in the world, leading some of the greatest orchestral ensembles that existed. He had a busy and fruitful career that helped music move forward by regularly helping and performing the works of young composers who had limited access to orchestras in order for their music to be heard and reach American and European audiences.

In the end, I believe that this work with all its background suited Mitropoulos's arrival at the podium of the State Orchestra of Athens, even if it was not conceptualized as such. It was the perfect fit for a man of Mitropoulos's caliber, and it represented his output in the most suitable way.

In this text, I tried to discuss two incidents that had a shattering effect in Athens and on the public in different periods and situations in time. One had to do with a quasi-celebratory event since the Nazis were on the verge of losing the war and that was a known fact, and the other, with the arrival of the remains of someone who was considered to be one of the greats (and in the eyes of his compatriots probably the greatest conductor who ever lived). Beethoven's music marked both events maybe as a choice that had to do with fortune and luck, but in the end, it has inevitably marked both in the most crucial and convincing way. Beethoven's music and character as they were especially perceived back in 1944 and 1960, a far more different perception than the one we have now, settled nicely in order to create two "Promethean" or even "Titanic" stories (to remember some attributions that have been largely credited to Beethoven by his admirers) that bear all the elements necessary to become not only a part of Athens's music history landmarks but also to be considered social history in the making. Both were staged at the same scene, the Herodus Atticus Theater, and both were observed by crowds of music lovers who flocked to witness something extraordinary.

<sup>16</sup> Carl DAHLHAUS, *Ludwig van Beethoven: Approaches to His Music*, transl. by Mary WHITTALL (London: Clarendon Press, 1991), 23-25.

