

André Boucourechliev, *Essai sur Beethoven* (1991)

Released in 1991, the *Essai sur Beethoven* holds a special place in André Boucourechliev's writings, as his only book published by Actes Sud and the only one to revisit a composer about whom he had already written. Why, more than two decades after his *Beethoven* of 1963, did Boucourechliev feel the need to add yet another stone to the colossal edifice of Beethoven studies?

The answer lies in the earlier book: in 1963, Boucourechliev had portrayed Beethoven as "the first modern mind" and his music as perennially contemporary, a constant challenge to listeners that evolves with each hearing. Twenty-six years later, Boucourechliev the listener had, indeed, evolved, and so had his Beethoven. He needed to confront this music anew, to answer the new questions posed by it: "If Beethoven never ceases to speak to us, he also demands, now and always, that we speak back; it is this demand that I respond to here" (p. 153).

To speak of Beethoven - or, better, *to* Beethoven - is a task for the essay. This genre, open to all experiments, allowed Boucourechliev to give his subjectivity free rein: "This essay [...] excludes neutrality, and I would even say objectivity as well" (p. 11). For objectivity is the musicologist's business, and Boucourechliev neither is nor wants to be a musicologist. He therefore approaches Beethoven's work with the utmost freedom. Freedom in the choice of material, first of all: from the outset, he rejects any claim to exhaustivity in favour of a focus on three major musical genres (the piano sonata, the string quartet, the symphony). And freedom of form: Boucourechliev experiments for the first time with a polyphonic structure in which biographical chapters alternate with chapters devoted to commentary on the works.

The *Essay on Beethoven* complements and extends the "phenomenological" approach (i.e. one that claims to return to the reality of the work) initiated in the 1963 book. Beethoven's music, constantly viewed within its time of creation, appears as radically new, in terms that depart from those of traditional analysis: in Boucourechliev we read of "Beethovenian strategies of time" (p. 66) and "rhythms of forms" (p. 67), as well as "groups", "blocks", "masses", and "Klangfarbenmelodie" - terms usually associated with much more recent music, but employed here to elucidate the formidable efficacy of Beethoven's musical time.

Finally, the essay broaches an ethical dimension only hinted at in 1963. What emerges little by little in the course of the essay is a Beethoven who is a genius but also a tyrant. The listener is his prey, hapless but happy: "Confronted with Beethoven's symphonies, *we have no freedom*, except the freedom to revel, consciously or unconsciously, with varying degrees of delight, in our own surrender to their powers" (p. 83). These symphonies, especially the Fifth, possess a "dictatorial sense" (p. 83). Such fancies no doubt owed something to Roland

Barthes and his notion of a “fascist language”. Dated as they may seem today, they nevertheless show that Boucourechliev, who consistently sought to build bridges between music and society, was abreast of the great debate over power and freedom in his times.

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