

Beethoven expert articles

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Expert article 2: A ‘Pseudo-Sketch’

The rediscovery of sketches is always a crucial event in a story like this. We’ve benefitted from many magnificent moments of that kind over the years, both for expanding our understanding of known works and for bringing back to light previously forgotten pieces. (And we’ve also been flummoxed by more than a few fascinating frauds along the way!)

The 1980s seem to have been the heyday for re-emergence of material associated with Beethoven’s 10. Thanks to the agency of some intrepid scholars and archivists we gained a considerably enhanced sense of the musical material and structural plans that Beethoven had in mind for this work. We may or may not find further sketches for this work in the future; in any case there is still plenty of material to unpack in what we have. This blog focuses on such question, centered on the emergence of a ‘pseudo-sketch’: a musical fragment not by Beethoven, but which he apparently intended to use in this symphony.

Let’s start at the very beginning. The earliest substantial material, clearly in Beethoven’s handwriting, and robustly connected to the 10th date from 1817/18,¹ around the time Beethoven agreed to write a pair of symphonies (the 9th and 10th) for the Philharmonic Society of London. In that early sketch ([HCB BSk 8/56](#)), Beethoven sets out his ideas in text rather than musical notation (as he sometimes would). That sketch is housed at the Beethoven Haus, Bonn who also provide a transcription as follows:

[Left:]

Adagio Cantique
From[m]er Gesang
in einer *Sinfonie*
in den alten Tonarten.

[Middle:]

entweder
für sich allein
oder als Einleitung
in eine Fuge
“Herr Gott Dich loben wir
alleluja”

[Right:]

vieleicht auf diese weise die
ganze 2te Sinfonie charakteri=
sirt wo alsdenn im lezten

[Across the Bottom:]

¹ Johnson, Tyson, Winter, *The Beethoven Sketchbooks*, Oxford 1985

Stücke oder schon im adagio
 die Singstimmen eintreten
 die orchester Violinen etc werden beym lezten Stück verzehnfacht.
 Oder das adagio wird auf gewiße weise im lezten
 Stücke widerholt wobey alsdann erst die Singstim[m]en
 nach u. nach eintreten – im adagio text
 griechischer Mithos Cantique Ecl[lesiastique
 im Allegro Feyer des Bachus.”

It is impossible to distinguish firmly here between plans for the 9th Symphony, for the 10th, for ideas realised in other works, and those abandoned altogether. Even a hypothetical attempt to follow these instructions exactly would be thwarted by the intrinsic uncertainty inherent not least in the three sets of ‘oder’ (‘or’). Nevertheless, there are several exciting possibilities to explore.

Firstly, Beethoven alludes to the possible use of voices. That is one of the defining characteristics of the 9th, though presence in the 9th does not exclude the possibility that they would have also featured in the 10th, especially if one takes the Wagnerian view that the use of voices in the 9th is indicative of Beethoven having accepted the limitations of abstract music and thus paving the way for the ‘total art work.’ That said, there’s little evidence that Beethoven thought that way, and many signs point to a 10th symphony that would have been very different from the 9th, so perhaps this Wagnerian view rings hollow and the vocal parts are a red-herring?

Beethoven also raises the prospect of a fugue. That is perhaps more separable from the 9th (notwithstanding the magnificent fugal passages in that work) and more encouraging as a distinctive idea to pursue in the 10th. This is simultaneously enhanced and complicated by the question of what fugal subject (or subjects) to use. The above text appears to plan for a fugue on ‘Herr Gott Dich loben wir’, though a later sketch ([HCB BSk 20/68, fol. 1v](#)) offers another fugue subject also apparently intended for this work:



Does this later subject replace plans for a fugue on ‘Herr Gott Dich loben wir’? Should there be fugues on both? Or neither?

What, finally, are we to make of the ‘Bacchanalian’ and ‘Ecclesiastical’ spirits invoked in this text? Do they imply a ‘whole world’ symphony which ‘embraces everything’ in the sense that Mahler would iconically set out some decades later? Or was the 9th symphony the ‘Bacchanalian’ one, leaving the 10th as an ‘Ecclesiastical’ counterpart? Cooper opts for a view consistent with the later, taking Beethoven to have an ‘introspective’ plan for the 10th, but once again there is contradictory evidence. For instance, the theme Beethoven initially sketched out for the finale ([HCB BSk 20, fol. 1v](#)) is about as public a musical statement as possible. Beethoven was ultimately to realise this theme in the ‘Gratulations-Menuett’ (WoO3), complete with trumpet and drum fanfare:

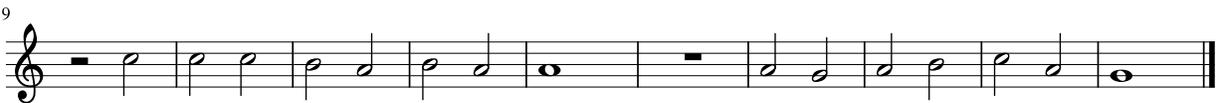


On the ‘Ecclesiastical’ side, we have more concrete guidance, with specific mentions of ‘den alten Tonarten’ and especially the extremely significant and previously undocumented allusion to ‘Herr Gott Dich loben wir’ – this is our suggestive ‘pseudo-sketch’ that warrants unpacking.

‘Herr Gott Dich loben wir’

‘Herr Gott Dich loben wir’ is the German text for the Te Deum and has been associated with various themes over the years. Of these, surely the most promising candidate for our purposes is an ancient melody with origins in ‘Cantique Ecclésiastique’ (to which Beethoven refers in the same breath), and which passed through Luther’s hand to find representation in numerous hymnals from the 17th century onwards, and to be featured in several Bach cantata movements (BWV 16, Mvt. 1, BWV 119, Mvt. 9, BWV 120, Mvt. 6, BWV 190, Mvt. 1, BWV 190, Mvt. 2, BWV 190a, Mvt. 2).

Quite how Beethoven would have used, or even transcribed it is another question entirely, though the following version broadly based on Bach’s version (BWV 16, Mvt. 1) would seem a credible starting point.



This melody is eminently consistent with the idea of ‘alten Tonarten’ (old modes / tonalities) to which Beethoven also so compellingly alludes. Beethoven’s plan to use the old modes is fascinating for many reasons. Firstly, it is a subject matter well known to have interested Beethoven (among relatively few other composers) at this time. These modes made their way into important late works including the *Missa Solemnis* (1819–23) and the ‘Heiliger Dankgesang’ movement of the op.132 string quartet (1825) which Beethoven explicitly labels as being ‘*in der Lydischen Tonart*’ (in the Lydian mode).

Secondly, none of Beethoven’s surviving *musical* sketches for the 10th are indicative of such modally-inflected material, so the identification of this modal theme in the above text constitutes our only ‘way in’ to that musical territory. Finally, it sheds new light on the idea that Beethoven’s retrospective view in this work was limited to his own *priori* work, ‘rather than earlier composers as is the case in other late works’ (Cooper 2003, p.21). This sketch would seem to indicate that Beethoven was interested in both after all.

In summary, on the basis of no new sketches, and no musical notation at all, we can identify a new 'pseudo-sketch' which arguably constitutes a new theme to work with, and which contains highly interesting material that connects with wider plans and ideas associated with this work. If we can accomplish this on the basis of a few words, think of what we could do with real musical material! That'll be our subject for the next article.