From: E.T.A. Hoffmann: “Beethoven’s Instrumental Music” (1810/13)
Translated by Arthur Ware Locke

When we speak of music as an independent art, we should properly refer only to instrumental music which, scorning the assistance and association of another art, namely poetry, expresses that peculiar property which can be found in music only. It is the most romantic of all the arts, one might almost say the only really romantic art, for its sole object is the expression of the infinite. The lyre of Orpheus opens the doors of Orkus. Music discloses to man an unknown kingdom, a world having nothing in common with the external sensual world which surrounds him and in which he leaves behind him all definite feelings in order to abandon himself to an inexpressible longing.

Have you even suspected this peculiar power of music, you pitiable instrumental composers who have taken such anxious pains to portray definite emotions, yes, even actual occurrences? How could you possibly conceive of using plastically that art which is just the opposite of sculpture? Your sunrises, your thunderstorms, your Batailles des trois Empereurs, etc., were nothing but ridiculous aberrations and have been deservedly punished by absolute oblivion.

In song, where the words of the poem indicate definite effects, the magic power of music operates like that wonderful elixir of the sages, a few drops of which make every drink more exquisite and more delicious. The passions which are portrayed in opera — love, hate, anger, doubt — are clothed by music in the purple glow of romanticism, and the very experiences of life lead us out of life into the realm of the infinite.

The ever-increasing magic power of music rends asunder the bonds of the other arts.

That inspired composers have raised instrumental music to its present height is certainly not due to the improvement in the medium of expression, the perfecting of the instruments or the greater virtuosity of the performers, but comes rather from the deeper spiritual recognition of the peculiar nature of music.

Mozart and Haydn, the creators of the instrumental music of today, show us the art for the first time in its full glory; the one who has looked on it with an all-embracing love and penetrated its innermost being is — Beethoven! The instrumental compositions of all three masters breathe the same romantic spirit, which lies in a similar deep understanding of the essential property of the art; there is nevertheless a decided difference in the character of their compositions. The expression of a child-like joyous spirit predominates in those of Haydn. His symphonies lead us through boundless green woods, among a merry gay crowd of happy people. Young men and maidens pass by dancing; laughing children peeping from behind trees and rose-bushes playfully throw flowers at one another. A life full of love, of felicity, eternally young, as before the fall; no suffering, no sorrow, only a sweet melancholy longing for the beloved form that floats in the distance in the glow of the sunset, neither approaching nor vanishing, and as long as it is there night will not come for it is itself the evening glow which shines over mountain and wood.

1 [The name of a French symphony by Louis Jadin that celebrates Napoleon's victory at the Battle of Austerlitz]
Mozart leads us into the depths of the spirit world. We are seized by a sort of gentle fear which is really only the presentiment of the infinite. Love and melancholy sound in the pure spirit voices; night vanishes in a bright purple glow and with inexpressible longing we follow the forms which, with friendly gestures, invite us into their ranks as they fly through the clouds in the never-ending dance of the spheres. (Mozart's Symphony in E flat Major, known as "The Swan Song.")

In the same way Beethoven's instrumental music discloses to us the realm of the tragic and the illimitable. Glowing beams pierce the deep night of this realm and we are conscious of gigantic shadows which, alternately increasing and decreasing, close in on us nearer and nearer, destroying us but not destroying the pain of endless longing in which is engulfed and lost every passion aroused by the exulting sounds. And only through this very pain in which love, hope, and joy, consumed but not destroyed, burst forth from our hearts in the deep-voiced harmony of all the passions, do we go on living and become hypnotised seers of visions!

An appreciation of romantic qualities in art is uncommon; romantic talent is still rarer. Consequently there are few indeed who are able to play on that lyre the tones of which unfold the wonderful region of romanticism.

Haydn conceives romantically that which is distinctly human in the life of man; he is, in so far, more comprehensible to the majority.

Mozart grasps more the superhuman, the miraculous, which dwells in the imagination.

Beethoven's music stirs the mists of fear, of horror, of terror, of grief, and awakens that endless longing which is the very essence of romanticism. He is consequently a purely romantic composer, and is it not possible that for this very reason he is less successful in vocal music, which does not surrender itself to the characterization of indefinite emotions but portrays effects specified by the words rather than those indefinite emotions experienced in the realm of the infinite?

Beethoven's mighty genius oppresses the musical rabble; he excites himself in vain before them. But the wiseacres, looking around with serious countenances, assure us, and one can believe them as men of great understanding and deep insight, that the worthy B. does not lack a most abundant and lively imagination; but he does not know how to curb it. There can be no discussion of the choice and the formation of his ideas, but he scatters the good old rules in disorder whenever it happens to please him in the momentary excitement of his creative imagination.

But what if the inner, underlying organic structure of these Beethoven compositions has escaped your superficial glance? What if the trouble is with you, that you do not understand the master's speech, intelligible to those to whom it is dedicated? What if the gates to that innermost shrine remain closed to you? — In truth, quite on a level with Haydn and Mozart as a conscious artist, the Master, separating his Ego from the inner realm of sound, takes command of it as an absolute monarch. Aesthetic mechanicians have often lamented the absolute lack of underlying unity and structure in Shakespeare, while the deeper glance could see the beautiful tree with leaves, blossoms, and fruit growing from one germinating seed; so it is that only through a very deep study of Beethoven's instrumental music is that conscious thoughtfulness of composition (Besonnenheit) disclosed which always accompanies true genius and is nourished by a study of art.
What instrumental work of Beethoven testifies to this to a higher degree than the
immeasurably noble and profound Symphony in C minor [= the 5th]? How this
marvellous composition carries the hearer irresistibly with it in its ever-mounting climax
into the spirit kingdom of the infinite! What could be simpler than the main motive of the
first allegro composed of a mere rhythmic figure which, beginning in unison, does not
even indicate the key to the listener. The character of anxious, restless longing which
this portion carries with it only brings out more clearly the melodiousness of the second
theme! — It appears as if the breast, burdened and oppressed by the premonition of
tragedy, of threatening annihilation, in gasping tones was struggling with all its strength
for air; but soon a friendly form draws near and lightens the gruesome night. (The lovely
theme in G major which is first taken up by the horn in E flat Major.) How simple — let
us repeat once more — is the theme which the master has made the basis of the whole
work, but how marvelously all the subordinate themes and bridge passages relate
themselves rhythmically to it, so that they continually serve to disclose more and more
the character of the allegro indicated by the leading motive. All the themes are short,
nearly all consisting of only two or three measures, and besides that they are allotted
with increasing variety first to the wind and then to the stringed instruments. One would
think that something disjointed and confused would result from such elements; but, on
the contrary, this very organization of the whole work as well as the constant
reappearances of the motives and harmonic effects, following closely on one another,
intensify to the highest degree that feeling of inexpressible longing. Aside from the fact
that the contrapuntal treatment testifies to a thorough study of the art, the connecting
links, the constant allusions to the main theme, demonstrate how the great Master had
conceived the whole and planned it with all its emotional forces in mind. Does not the
lovely theme of the Andante con moto in A flat sound like a pure spirit voice which fills
our souls with hope and comfort? — But here also that terrible phantom which alarmed
and possessed our souls in the Allegro instantly steps forth to threaten us from the
thunderclouds into which it had disappeared, and the friendly forms which surrounded
us flee quickly before the lightning. What shall I say of the Minuet? Notice the originality
of the modulations, the cadences on the dominant major chord which the bass takes up
as the tonic of the continuing theme in minor — and the extension of the theme itself
with the looping on of extra measures. Do you not feel again that restless, nameless
longing, that premonition of the wonderful spirit-world in which the Master holds sway?
But like dazzling sunlight the splendid theme of the last movement bursts forth in the
exulting chorus of the full orchestra. — What wonderful contrapuntal interweavings bind
the whole together. It is possible that it may all sound simply like an inspired rhapsody
to many, but surely the heart of every sensitive listener will be moved deeply and
spiritually by a feeling which is none other than that nameless premonitory longing; and
up to the last chord, yes, even in the moment after it is finished, he will not be able to
detach himself from that wonderful imaginary world where he has been held captive by
this tonal expression of sorrow and joy. In regard to the structure of the themes, their
development and instrumentation, and the way they are related to one another,
everything is worked out from a central point-of-view; but it is especially the inner
relationship of the themes with one another which produces that unity which alone is
able to hold the listener in one mood. This relationship is often quite obvious to the
listener when he hears it in the combination of two themes or discovers in different
themes a common bass, but a more subtle relationship, not demonstrated in this way, shows itself merely in the spiritual connection of one theme with another, and it is exactly this subtle relationship of the themes which dominates both allegros and the Minuet — and proclaims the self-conscious genius of the Master.

How deeply, oh exalted Master! have your noble piano compositions penetrated into my soul; how hollow and meaningless in comparison all music seems which does not emanate from you, or from the contemplative Mozart, or that powerful genius, Sebastian Bach. With what joy I received your Opus 70, the two noble trios, for I knew so well that after a little practice I could play them to myself so beautifully. And it has been such a pleasure to me this evening that now, like one who wanders through the sinuous mazes of a fantastic park, among all kinds of rare trees, plants, and wonderful flowers, always tempted to wander further, I am unable to tear myself away from the marvelous variety and interweaving figures of your trios. The pure siren voices of your gaily varied and beautiful themes always tempt me on further and further. The talented lady who to-day played the first trio so beautifully just to please me, the Kapellmeister Kreisler, and before whose piano I am now sitting and writing, brought it home to me most clearly that we should honor only that which is inspired and that everything else comes from evil.

Just now I have been playing over from memory some of the striking modulatory passages from the two trios. It is true that the piano as an instrument is more adaptable to harmonic than to melodic uses. The most delicate expression of which the instrument is capable cannot give to the melody that mobile life in thousands and thousands of shadings which the bow of the violinist or the breath of the wind-instrument player is capable of giving. The player struggles in vain against that unconquerable difficulty set in his path by a mechanism which is based on the principle of making a string vibrate and sound as the result of percussion. On the other hand there is no instrument (with the exception of the much more limited harp) which has control to such a degree as the piano, with its completely grasped chords, of the kingdom of harmony, the treasures of which it discloses to the connoisseur in the most wonderful forms and images. When the imagination of the master has conceived the complete tone-picture with its many groups of figures, its bright lights and deep shadows, he can bring it to life on the piano with the result that it emerges from the world of his imagination all brightly coloured. The many-voiced score of this truly musical wonder-book, which portrays in its pictures all the wonders of the art of music even to the magic chorus of the varied instruments, comes to life under the hands of a virtuoso, and an effective polyphonic orchestral transcription played in the right way may well be compared to the artistic engraving of a great painting. Consequently the piano is exceptionally adapted for improvising, for transcribing orchestral scores, for unaccompanied sonatas, chord playing, etc.; and also for trios, quartets, quintets, etc., with the addition of the usual stringed instruments — compositions which really belong to the sphere of piano composition because, if composed in the right way, i. e. in four or five voices, they are based on harmonic development which naturally excludes the solo treatment of separate instruments in virtuoso passages.

I have a strong aversion for all the usual piano concerti. (Those of Mozart and Beethoven are not so much concerti as symphonies with piano obligato.) In such works the virtuosity of the solo player in passage playing and in melodic expression is
supposed to be brought out; but the best player with the most beautiful instrument strives in vain for that which the violinist, for example, achieves with ease. Each solo passage sounds dry and lifeless after the sonorous tutti of the violins and wind-instruments; and one is amazed at the finger agility, etc., without having one's feelings at all stirred.

How wonderfully the Master understood the characteristic spirit of the instrument and consequently handled it in its most appropriate manner!

At the bottom of each movement there lies an effective singable theme, simple but fruitful of all the various contrapuntal developments, such as diminution, etc. All the other secondary themes and figures are organically related to this principal idea so that all the material divided among the different instruments is combined and ordered in the most complete unity. Such is the structure of the whole; but in this artistic structure the most wonderful pictures, in which joy and sorrow, melancholy and ecstasy, appear side by side, change in restless succession. Strange shapes begin a merry dance, now dissolving in a blur of light, now sparkling and flashing as they separate, chasing and following one another in kaleidoscopic groups; and in the midst of this unlocked spirit-world the ravished soul listens to the unknown language and understands all those mysterious premonitions by which it is possessed.

Only that composer penetrates truly into the secrets of harmony who is able to stir the soul of man through harmony; to him, the mathematical proportions which to the grammarian without genius are only dry arithmetical problems, are magic combinations from which he can build a world of visions.

In spite of the geniality which predominates in the first trio, not excepting the emotional Largo, Beethoven's genius, as a whole, remains serious and religious in spirit. It seems as if the Master thought that one could not speak of deeply-hidden things in common words but only in sublime and noble language, even when the spirit, closely penetrating into these things, feels itself exalted with joy and happiness; the dance of the priests of Isis must take the form of an exultant hymn.

Instrumental music must avoid all senseless joking and triviality, especially where it is intended to be taken as absolute music and not to serve some definite dramatic purpose. It explores the depths of the soul for the presentiments of a joy which, nobler and more beautiful than anything experienced in this narrow world, comes to us from the unknown land; it inflames in our breasts an inner, rapturous life, a more intense expression than is possible through words, which are appropriate only to our limited earthly feelings. This seriousness of all Beethoven's instrumental and piano music proscribes all those breakneck passages for both hands up and down the piano, the curious leaps, the laughable capriccios, the skyscraper notes with five and six ledger line foundations, with which the latest piano compositions are filled. If it is a question of mere finger facility, the Master's piano compositions are not difficult, for such scales, trill figures, etc., as are found in them should be in the fingers of every practiced pianist; and yet the performance of these compositions is certainly difficult. Many a so-called virtuoso condemns the Master's piano compositions adding to the criticism, "Difficult," the reproach, "and most ineffective!" — The difficulty lies in this, that the proper, unforced, performance of a Beethoven work requires nothing less than that one shall thoroughly understand it, shall penetrate into its deepest being, that the performer conscious of his own consecration to his purpose must dare boldly to enter into the
circle of mystical visions which its powerful magic calls forth. He who does not feel this consecration, who only considers this sacred music as an entertainment, as something to pass the time when there is nothing else to do, as a mere temporary sensuous pleasure for dull ears, or for the benefit of showing himself off — he should leave this music alone. Such a one sympathizes with that criticism: "And most ineffective!" The genuine artist throws himself into the work, which he first comprehends from the point-of-view of the composer, and then interprets. He scorns the exploitation of his personality in any way whatever, and all his poetic imagination and intellectual understanding are bent towards the object of calling forth into active life, with all the brilliant colors at his command, the noble and enchanting images and visions which the Master with magic power has shut up in his work, that they may surround mankind in bright, sparkling rings and, enflaming his fancy and his innermost feelings, carry him in wild flights into the distant spirit kingdom of sound.