

Book Review

Zanden, Jos van der. *Beethoven and Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022). xvi + 272 pp. £130.00 (cloth), £38.99 (paper), £35.09 (ebook).

In an anonymous travelogue published in 1828, Karl Postl, better known as Charles Sealsfield, set down his impressions of his native Austria.¹ Among Sealsfield's scathing remarks on the Austrian education system is this description of its censored schoolbooks, 'the most barren and stupid extracts which ever left the printing press' which turned professors into 'ex-officio spies'. In required reports on each student, 'a strict vigilance is paid to his reading; trials are made with classic authors, his opinion is elicited about characters such as Brutus, Cato, and the account thereof faithfully inserted'.² Sealsfield suggests here that the biographies of Marcus Junius Brutus and Cato the Younger, two of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, were offensive to both church and state. The reasons are obvious: both Brutus and Cato opposed Julius Caesar because of their republican principles, and both died by suicide, an act contrary to Catholic doctrine.³

Histories of ancient Greece and Rome have always had political implications; Sealsfield's account suggests that these were particularly intense during the last years of Ludwig van Beethoven's life. This new book by Jos van der Zanden is particularly welcome because its content sits at the intersection of two recent themes in musicology, Beethoven's religion and his politics post-1815.⁴ By choosing this subject, van der Zanden ventures into potentially controversial territory. However, his approach is anything but polemical. He sets out to explore his topic 'in a thoughtful and cautious manner, with sufficient supply of background material' (p. 3). He aims to get closer to Beethoven's actual state of mind and avoid

tangential correlations ... between ancient figures that were known to Beethoven ... and such themes as German idealism (the realm of love, freedom, and beauty), heroism, republicanism, rebelliousness, etc. As will be seen, many of these themes had their actual roots not so much in Beethoven's time, but in the later nineteenth century, predominantly in the second-half. (p. 7)

¹ On Sealsfield and Austria, see Hartmut Steinecke, 'Charles Sealsfield and the Novel as a Means of Enlightenment', in *The Austrian Enlightenment and Its Aftermath*, ed. Richie Robertson and Edward Timms (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 132–44.

² Charles Sealsfield, *Austria as It Is; Or, Sketches of Continental Courts*, (London: Hurst, Chance, and Co., 1828), 79–80.

³ On Austrian censorship and suicide, see Norbert Bachleitner, 'Die Dialektik von Gehorsam und Aufbegehren im Drama und auf den Bühnen des späten 18. Jahrhunderts', *Oxford German Studies* 50/3 (2021): 289.

⁴ Some recent contributions to discussion of Beethoven, politics, and/or religion include Stephen Rumph, *Beethoven after Napoleon: Political Romanticism in the Late Works* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Daniel K.L. Chua, *Beethoven & Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Nicholas Chong, 'Beethoven's Theologian: Johann Michael Sailer and the *Missa Solemnis*', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 74/2 (2021): 365–426.

These exclusions signal to readers that they will not hear about the *Eroica* symphony and two often-cited connections, to Homer and Virgil (Hector Berlioz), or to the Prometheus legend (Paul Bekker).⁵ Also passed over will be the assumed reference to Orpheus in the slow movement of Op. 58 (A.B. Marx).⁶ This clear focus is consistent with van der Zanden's previous work, which tends toward detailed investigations of under-researched questions that can then illuminate Beethoven's stances in general.⁷ The book is full of pertinent detail, and I believe its chief objective is fulfilled. It is clear that Beethoven read widely in Greek and Roman literature (in translation), and that it affected both his personal philosophy and his music. Van der Zanden provides the additional service of disentangling this assertion from Anton Schindler's unreliable influence.⁸ This book will be an invaluable reference for future studies on the intellectual context of Beethoven's life and works.

Among previous discussions of Beethoven and antiquity, two earlier articles from the 1970s stand out. Günter Fleischhauer relied on primary source material for a convincing picture of Beethoven's involvement with antiquity, concluding that 'Beethoven's idea of individual excellence as useful for society comes close to the concept of *virtus* in ancient Rome'.⁹ Several years later, Renate Reschke connected Beethoven's knowledge of Greek and Roman literature with his political liberalism.¹⁰ A new phase of research on Beethoven's intellectual influences was opened by Maynard Solomon, with the publication of Beethoven's *Tagebuch* and associated commentary.¹¹ In his article 'The Quest for Faith', Solomon attempted to harmonize Beethoven's inherited Christianity with other facets of his spirituality: 'nature worship, enlightened ideas', and later 'Eastern and Egyptian ritual, Classical mythology, and Christian theology'.¹² An important article on Beethoven and Plutarch by E. Kerr Borthwick, a specialist in ancient music and Greek drama, was published in 1994.¹³ Lewis Lockwood drew upon

⁵ For Berlioz, see Beate Angelika Kraus, 'Who Is the Hero? The Early Reception of the *Eroica*'; for Bekker, see Leon Botstein, 'The *Eroica* in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', both in *The Cambridge Companion to the Eroica Symphony*, ed. Nancy November (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 190–93, 207–10.

⁶ This argument is developed further in Owen Jander, 'Beethoven's "Orpheus in Hades": The "Andante Con Moto" of the Fourth Piano Concerto', *19th-Century Music* 8/3 (1985): 195–212.

⁷ Also note that *Beethoven and Greco-Roman Antiquity* is a revision of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Manchester, and he thanks Sieghard Brandenburg of the Beethoven-Haus Bonn for encouraging him to pursue this larger project.

⁸ For a preview, see Jos van der Zanden, 'Republican Beethoven: Fact and Fiction', *The Musical Times* 161/1953 (2020): 27–36.

⁹ 'Beethovens Vorstellung von der gesellschaftlich-nützlichen Tüchtigkeit des Individuums der altrömischen Virtus-Auffassung nähert'; Günter Fleischhauer, 'Beethoven und die Antike', in *Bericht über den Internationalen Beethoven-Kongress 10.–12. Dezember 1970 in Berlin*, ed. Heinz Alfred Brockhaus and Konrad Niemann (Berlin: Verlag Neue Musik, 1971), 478n51.

¹⁰ Renate Reschke, 'Selbst- und Weltverständnis in antiker Dimension: Anmerkungen zum Antikebild Ludwig van Beethovens', *Beiträge zur Musikwissenschaft* 18/1 (1976): 69–106.

¹¹ Maynard Solomon, ed., 'Beethoven's Tagebuch of 1812–1818', in *Beethoven Studies* 3, ed. Alan Tyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 193–288.

¹² Maynard Solomon, 'The Quest for Faith', in *Beethoven Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 220, 223.

¹³ E. Kerr Borthwick, 'Beethoven and Plutarch', *Music and Letters* 79/2 (1998): 268–72.

Borthwick's article, his own study of Plutarch, and Beethoven's exposure to Schiller's early dramas to reinterpret the concept of heroism in Beethoven.¹⁴

Because of its emphasis on primary sources, especially Beethoven's conversation books, van der Zanden's study emphasizes the later periods of Beethoven's life.¹⁵ He addresses this potential bias with two chapters covering Beethoven's life in Bonn and his early life in Vienna. Two different influences on Beethoven are featured there: eighteenth-century neoclassicism, especially prominent in the visual arts, and countercurrents which he could have found in Schiller and Winckelmann.¹⁶ After that, van der Zanden divides his discussion into specific topics. On Greek literature he covers Homer (Chapter 4) and Xenophon, Euripides, and Greek Poetry (Chapter 5); on Roman literature: Plutarch, Horace, and Tacitus (Chapter 6). Homer is particularly important because Beethoven's own copy of the *Odyssey* survives, and van der Zanden adds his own interpretation of Beethoven's markings contained therein to the work of several other scholars.¹⁷

I found Chapter 7, 'The Role of Hellenistic Philosophy', especially intriguing. Here, van der Zanden emphasizes the compatibility of Beethoven's attitudes with Stoicism. In this way, while he seems unconvinced by the more definite assertions of Beethoven's Christian orthodoxy, he can bypass controversy by ascribing core beliefs to him that often coexisted with various forms of Christianity. Enlightenment philosophers influenced by Stoicism include Kant and Rousseau.¹⁸ Specific to Austria, Roger Bauer mentions Plutarch and Seneca as state-sanctioned sources of Stoic thought. Bauer also sees Stoic influence on Heinrich von Collin and his play *Coriolan*, the inspiration for Beethoven's *Coriolanus* overture; and Franz Grillparzer, who knew Beethoven and wrote a libretto for him.¹⁹ Van der Zanden admits that Plutarch was an avowed Platonist

¹⁴ Lewis Lockwood, 'Beethoven, Florestan, and the Varieties of Heroism', in *Beethoven and His World*, ed. Scott Burnham and Michael P. Steinberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27–47.

¹⁵ Beethoven's first surviving conversation book dates from 1818; see *Ludwig van Beethovens Konversationshefte*, vol. 1, *Hefte 1–10*, ed. Karl-Heinz Köhler and Grita Herre (Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1972), 12, 29. The latest edition of Beethoven's correspondence, completed in 1997, contains 2292 letters to, from, or concerning Beethoven; 1237, or approximately 54 per cent, were written in or after 1817. See Ludwig van Beethoven, *Briefwechsel Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 7, *Register*, ed. Sieghard Brandenburg (Munich: G. Henle, 1998), x.

¹⁶ Much of van der Zanden's chapter on Bonn deals with Beethoven's education and his exposure to Schiller's works. The background on artistic life in Bonn in Élisabeth Brisson's book *Le sacre du musicien: la référence à l'Antiquité chez Beethoven* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2000) is a useful adjunct.

¹⁷ Van der Zanden's focus on detail here is complemented by a more wide-ranging study by Friederike Grigat, 'Die *Odyssee*, Leitbild für Kunst und Leben: Beethoven im Sog der Homer-Begeisterung', in *Beethoven liest*, ed. Bernhard R. Appel and Julia Ronge (Bonn: Beethoven-Haus, 2016), 203–50.

¹⁸ For Kant, see Daniel Doyle and José M. Torralba, 'Kant and Stoic Ethics', in *The Routledge Handbook of the Stoic Tradition*, ed. John Sellars (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 270–83. For Rousseau, see Christopher Brooke, *Philosophic Pride: Stoicism and Political Thought from Lipsius to Rousseau* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 181–202.

¹⁹ Roger Bauer, 'Das stoisch-josephinische Tugendideal in der österreichischen dramatischen Literatur der Grillparzerzeit', *Grillparzer Forum Forchtenstein* (1967): 43–53. Beethoven scholars will know the excellent article on Grillparzer and Beethoven by Peter Höyng, but for others I cite it here: 'For Heaven's Sake, I Will Have You Walk into the Dark: Grillparzer's

and only influenced by Stoicism, and that Beethoven's exposure to verified Stoic sources is conjectural. But he finds one convincing piece of evidence: a series of entries in a conversation book where Beethoven must have been defending the concept of natural law, a key tenet of Stoicism. As T.H. Irwin describes it:

To live in accordance with virtue, therefore, is to live in accordance with human nature, and to live in accordance with the requirements of correct reason. ... since facts about human nature fix the requirements of correct reason, these requirements belong to natural law. Hence, according to the Stoic doctrine of natural law, virtuous people, in following the requirements of correct reason for human nature, fulfill the natural law that applies to all rational agents.²⁰

Chapter 8 discusses Beethoven's music on antique themes. He seems to have been especially drawn to the subject of Bacchus (in Greek, Dionysos) and a god in his retinue, Pan. The purpose of a short musical sketch found in the Scheide sketchbook, an invocation of Pan, has long been a mystery. It is preceded by remarks from Beethoven on 'unresolved dissonances', and a reference to an 'opera'; both have inspired speculation by many scholars since Thayer and Nottebohm. Surely thanks to the ongoing digitization of historical sources, van der Zanden was able to locate Beethoven's text in a dramatic work with music by Friedrich von Drieberg.²¹ He has to share the credit with Federica Rovelli, though.²² Both of them identified the source of the libretto as *Der Mäusefallen- und Hechelkrämer* by Christian Heinrich Spiess, an author of popular adventure novels and ghost stories. Drieberg, who knew Beethoven personally, had investigated ancient Greek music and probably wanted Beethoven to compose something in a clearly differentiated 'antique' style. Since the story does not seem to take place in ancient times, the 'Pan' chorus would have been deliberately retrospective.²³

I have stressed van der Zanden's authorial logic and discipline throughout this review, but he does allow himself one literary flourish. To get the full effect, one needs to start from Chapter 1, where he introduces us to Austrian writer and theatre director Joseph Schreyvogel. Research into Schreyvogel and his works reveals him as a fascinating figure, and he did have connections to Beethoven, though he was not part of the composer's inner circle. Schreyvogel is extensively quoted in

Containment of Beethoven and the Ambivalence of Their *Melusina* Project', *Goethe Yearbook* 17 (2010): 275–302.

²⁰ T.H. Irwin, 'Stoic Naturalism and Its Critics', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, ed. Brad Inwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 347.

²¹ This material was previously presented in Jos van der Zanden, 'Beethoven and Euripides', *The Beethoven Journal* 34/2 (2019): 69–76. The source, at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, is Friedrich von Drieberg, *Arien und Gesänge aus der komischen Oper in drei Akten mit Tänzen: Der Hechelkrämer*, (Berlin, 1813), https://opacplus.bsb-muenchen.de/permalink/49BVB_BSB/1mrtm42/alma991022717659707356 (accessed 16 March 2024).

²² Federica Rovelli, 'Progetti abbandonati, esercizi e letture beethoveniane tra il 1815 e il 1816', in *Cara scientia mia, musica: Studi per Maria Caraci Vela*, ed. Angela Romagnoli, Daniele Sabaino, Rodobaldo Tibaldi, and Pietro Zappalà (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2018), 456–9.

²³ The names of the characters have been changed and, as far as I could tell without a detailed examination, only a couple of elements from the original plot were retained. The original novel is available in the digital collections of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek: C[hristian] H[einrich] Spiess, *Der Mäusefallen und Hechelkrämer: eine Geschichte sehr wunderbar und doch ganz natürlich* (Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1793), <https://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/details:bsb10120415/> (accessed 16 March 2024).

Chapter 7 on Hellenistic philosophy, particularly on Stoicism. But his main role is found in Chapter 8, on Beethoven's music. There we find a long discussion of the never-composed oratorio *Der Sieg des Kreuzes*. Van der Zanden draws a connection between the libretto of this work and the biography of one of Schreyvogel's protégés, the young Franz Grillparzer. He observes that the subject matter of this oratorio, the emperor Constantine's victory at the Milvian bridge, can be connected to Grillparzer's poem 'The Ruins of Campo Vaccino' through the symbolism of Christ's cross. This poem was condemned as blasphemous by the Austrian establishment, with a major negative effect on Grillparzer's career. Van der Zanden argues that this could have caused Beethoven to abandon the oratorio project, perhaps because he thought his independence as an artist could be compromised.²⁴

In his review of Carl Richard's *The Founders and the Classics. Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment*, John Buckler dismisses a debate among historians: were the classics 'a fashionable façade' to the Founding Fathers, or 'a sage guide to politics and life, one that combined civic duty with private morality'? Buckler sees all this as accessory to a principal goal: 'The main reason to read a book on the Founders and the classics is to determine the use made of classics in the framing of the Constitution'.²⁵ I would not put it in so peremptory a fashion, but in the final analysis, how does *Beethoven and Greco-Roman Antiquity* contribute to our understanding of Beethoven's music?

Chapter 8 gives a list of 35 works; the majority, especially among those considered 'directly related to antiquity' are sketches, canons, or 'unrealized'. Initially, the contents of this list seem out of balance with the scope of this study. But keep in mind that the synopsis of an unrealized symphony, starting with the words 'Adagio Cantique – Pious song in a symphony in the old modes' is often thought to be an early programme for the Ninth Symphony.²⁶ The 'unrealized' category also contains some of Beethoven's most ambitious plans for dramatic works. Any one of the projected operas or oratorios would have been a major addition to his catalogue.

I submit that we see Beethoven engaged here in a quest for new sounds. The 'Adagio Cantique' would have featured Beethoven's imagined music for Greek religious services and Bacchic revelry. Drieberg's 'Pan' chorus and *Der Sieg des Kreuzes* would have given him an opportunity to contrast Christian and pagan music. How do these antique elements fit with suggestions of Romantic influence in Beethoven's late music? We might consider the works mentioned in Solomon's *Late Beethoven*, or in Richard Kramer's recent *From the Ruins of Enlightenment*.²⁷ Some scholarship on Goethe's rather ambiguous concept of *Weltliteratur* sees it

²⁴ On Grillparzer see Ritchie Robertson, 'Poetry and Scepticism in the Wake of the Austrian Enlightenment: Blumauer, Grillparzer, Lenau', *Austrian Studies* 12 (2004): 17–28. On Grillparzer's poem 'Die Ruinen des Campo Vaccino' ('The Ruins of Campo Vaccino') Robertson directs the reader to August Sauer, 'Proben eines Commentars zu Grillparzer's Gedichten', *Jahrbuch der Grillparzer-Gesellschaft* 7 (1897): 30–135.

²⁵ John Buckler, review of Carl Richard, *The Founders and the Classics. Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment*, in *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 2/2 (1995): 305–6.

²⁶ For instance, in David Benjamin Levy, *Beethoven: The Ninth Symphony*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 30; and William Kinderman, *Beethoven*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 291–2.

²⁷ Maynard Solomon, *Late Beethoven: Music, Thought, Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Richard Kramer, *From the Ruins of Enlightenment: Beethoven and Schubert in Their Solitude* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023).

as an attempt to maintain the privileged place of the classics in dialogue with a more historically informed, cosmopolitan Romanticism.²⁸ Could this have also been Beethoven's view? Could he have been thinking, in analogy with Goethe's *Weltliteratur*, of reaching over boundaries of time and space with 'Weltmusik'?

I don't know how van der Zanden might respond to these questions, but my final task here is to recommend the conclusion of his book, an object lesson in how to demarcate a huge topic that could have been unworkable. Many of his 'paths not taken' will be well worth pursuing. It is clear that this study, despite its many highways and byways, began and ended with devotion to Beethoven's life and music. Congratulations to Dr van der Zanden on this achievement, and let's hope he has a new project already started with the same enthusiasm he displays in this one.

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²⁸ See Stephanie Dumke, 'Neither Healthy nor Sick: Goethe's Classical-Romantic Distinction Revisited', *Publications of the English Goethe Society* 85/1 (2016): 15–27, and the sources cited there.