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By David B. Dennis. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1996. Pp. xii + 251. \$30.00. ISBN 0-300-06399-7.

David Dennis's study of the political exploitation of Beethoven's image and music by a succession of none-too-imaginative German politicians over the past century leaves one with a heightened respect, even something of a longing, for objective scholarship. His own, I should hasten to clarify, is impeccable, and the book is from start to finish full of fascinating new material drawn from the ephemera of political campaigns and spectacles, middle-brow magazines, forgotten fan clubs, and the cultural pages of political-party weeklies. This is cultural history in a delightfully scavenging mode; moreover, Dennis's topic, which has the virtues of being both natural and highly original, covers the entire range of the cultural hierarchy, from elite to popular, high to low, and of the political spectrum, from left to right, red to black to blue to brown. The commonality that links together evidence from such diverse fields of cultural activity in Germany is not only the figure of Beethoven, in a limited set of poses, but the symbol-devouring character of modern politics itself—and though Dennis does not push this point, a distinctively German self-consciousness about cultural tropes that represent profundity, difficulty, struggle, and of course, transcendence. Indeed, Dennis's study is marked throughout by a tension between his commitment as a scholar to pluralistic and nondeterministic modes of understanding German history—he wishes, for instance, to depict “oscillations” in Beethoven's meaning through a century of “political turmoil and change” (p. 6)—and the tendency of the historical actors, the Germans, to behave in entirely predictable, even clichéd ways. Who is surprised, for instance, to learn that for the East Germans, Beethoven's revolutionary credentials were all-important, or that the Nazis made great efforts to prove the biological soundness of his drunken father, or that, perhaps least surprising of all, the Germans of the Gründerjahre found something peculiarly euphonious about the alliterative pair, Bismarck and Beethoven? Despite his impressive efforts, then, to depict a wide range of attitudes toward and uses of Beethoven among Germany's political men, a great deal of Dennis's material resists efforts to make counterintuitive discoveries or surprise endings. Perhaps Dennis ought to have made more room in his analysis for speculation about the persistence and seemingly irresistible power of such cultural patterning. In any case, what we learn from the study is finally that being truly great (and deep and profound and complicated and devilishly difficult), as Beethoven was and his music is, provides no protection against, indeed is something of an invitation to—especially if you are German and all those things—being exploited, travestied, distorted, hyperbolized, oversimplified, and otherwise taken advantage of, when you are no longer around.

This brings me back to my original observation, about the virtues of scholarship. In 1980, in a seminal article on new directions that musicology ought to take, Joseph Kerman suggested that the great tradition of German musicology, its aspirations to scientific analysis notwithstanding, carried an ideological cast which was “Viennese or Pan-German in origin, and certainly profoundly guided by nationalistic passions” (“How We Got Into Analysis, and How to Get Out,” *Critical Inquiry* 7 [1980]: 314). This sounded like a challenge to free the study of music from the hidden grip of politics, and a number of musicologists have followed up on it in the realm of Beethoven criticism, whether by generating their own form of politically correct analysis

of his works or by demonstrating the vested political interests at work in previous musical analyses. Dennis's book both will and will not please the internalist critics of the New Musicology. Certainly he does not hesitate to place music in its social and political context, something the new musicologists have been calling for. But as a historian he does so the better to understand the history, not the music. One senses in Dennis an unreconstructed music lover, someone unlikely to call the local Rape Crisis Center on hearing the strains of the Ninth's choral finale. Moreover, actual scholars make only rare appearances in Dennis's parade of eager Beethoven interpreters: indeed if they were in the audiences of these Beethoven extravaganzas Dennis describes, one senses them thinking to themselves, just shut up and get on with the music. The most explicit version of that attitude might be found in the musical idealists, like the cultural historian Karl Lamprecht or the musical scholar Paul Bekker, whose own politics seem the most uncertain and appear in the book mainly to argue for the nonpolitical or politically transcendent nature of the compositions. Among all the voices one hears in this book, theirs, in more and less sophisticated versions, I suspect will be the most lasting.

Added material

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