

Interdisciplinary is how internationally-known Missouri State University Beethoven scholar and music historian Dr. James Parsons describes his scholarship: studying music from a broad cultural perspective including literature, philosophy, and art. On November 6, 2013, Dr. Parsons will present his paper “Once more Beethoven and Schiller: the Choral Fantasy’s Philosophical Program” at the two-day conference “New Beethoven Research.” Held in Pittsburgh, the conference takes place in conjunction with the national meeting of the American Musicological Society (<http://college.wfu.edu/music/events/nbrconference/>).

Parsons’s paper considers Ludwig van Beethoven’s 1808 Choral Fantasy, an unusually-scored work for solo piano, orchestra, vocal soloists, and chorus. When first presented, Beethoven was the piano soloist. As it happened, the night of the performance, December 22, 1808, was the last time Beethoven appeared in public as a pianist.

The place was Vienna. The concert ran from 6:30 to 10:30 and included the premieres of the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, Fourth Piano Concerto, movements from the C-Major Mass, and a concert aria for solo soprano. The temperature outside was bitterly cold. Inside was little better. Beethoven had been irritable during the too-few rehearsals before the concert, the result being that, between the freezing cold and his cantankerousness, his musicians were pretty much out of patience with him.

What should have been one of the most stupendous concerts in all history turned out to be a train wreck, with the collision occurring in the Choral Fantasy, the concert’s last work and the one Beethoven hoped would be its triumphal, grand finale. When things fell completely apart, Ferdinand Ries, the composer’s friend, reported that “Beethoven leapt up in a fury, turned around and abused the orchestra players in the coarsest terms and so loudly that he could be heard throughout the auditorium. Finally, he shouted ‘From the beginning!’ When the concert was over, the musicians fell into a great rage. They swore they would never play again if Beethoven were in the orchestra.”

Parsons contends the Choral Fantasy’s disastrous first performance has distracted listeners and historians from taking the work seriously and, in turn, from understanding what Beethoven had in mind in placing the work last (on an admittedly long program). Parsons believes the work reflects the composer’s lifelong fascination with the writings of the poet-philosophy Friedrich Schiller, the same poet to whom Beethoven turned in his epic-making Ninth Symphony, the first symphony to include words. Interestingly, the Choral Fantasy and the Ninth conclude with the same tune! (This is the only time this happens in Beethoven’s music.) Turning to Schiller’s poetry and philosophy, Parsons builds the case that Beethoven took many of Schiller’s ideas to heart, above all that an artist—in Beethoven’s case, a composer—could serve as a kind of cultural prophet. Such an artist’s aim would be to inspire in the public at large what thinkers—philosophers—of the day most valued: Enlightenment. During Beethoven’s lifetime Enlightenment meant joining the extremes of head and heart or the worldly-here and now and the heavenly above. Many creative individuals from the time had similar ideas. As Percy Bysshe Shelley famously would declare in 1821, “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”

Parsons believes the musical forces of Beethoven's Choral Fantasy unite the extremes of the previously-performed works on that 1808 concert, starting with all of the performing forces the composer assembled on that cold December night in the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies and Fourth Piano Concerto. Beethoven had a hand in writing the Choral Fantasy's text, and, as Parsons will show, Schiller's influence everywhere is in evidence. All of this might have been known 205 years ago had it not been for a frigid night in Vienna and a poorly rehearsed chorus and orchestra.