

ABSTRACT

BEETHOVEN AND LATENESS: A MEDITATION

I begin with Brahms, with Opus 122, the eleven chorale preludes for organ, composed in 1896—his very last work. Here is a work that has lateness written all over it, and yet this richly austere music stands apart almost self-consciously from the rhetoric, the modes of expression that otherwise define late style. It constitutes a leave-taking—“O Welt, ich muss dich lassen” is set twice—and is yet devoid of self-pity, of bathos, of the sentimental. Quite distinct from this valedictory work, there is yet a quality of lateness, an aura of belatedness, in much of Brahms’s music, and this, obviously, has nothing to do with age or infirmity, but only with a longing for, a belonging to, the past—a sense of composing as a consequence of its legacy. Shrouded in an umbra of lateness, these chorale preludes offer a canvas against which to contemplate the late works of Beethoven, who from his earliest years often took that legacy as a challenge to compose against the past.

The very idea of lateness in works of art puts us before the classic dilemma: whether the grain of lateness is written into the work, inherent in its mode, its message, its style; or whether this attribution is a construct of the critical imagination, an effort to write the work into a history, into the chronicle of a life that we know too well in its documentation but never well enough in the obscure interiors of the creative mind contemplating, or refusing, its lateness. Two ways of thinking about lateness, these are, that seem ever in dialectical conversation.

Reflections inspired by several notoriously abstruse passages from Adorno’s “Spätstil Beethovens” will lead to thoughts on the music of Beethoven’s final months: a few bars from the *Lento assai* of Opus 135; a late draft for an alternative closure of Opus 131; and the conundrum of the two authorized and in some sense contradictory finales for Opus 130. What can these projects tell us about final Beethoven and the condition of lateness?

Richard Kramer
Graduate Center of the City University of
New York