

Cambridge University Press
 0521862612 - The Symphony in Beethoven's Vienna
 David Wyn Jones
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

Setting the scene

BEETHOVEN PETITIONS TO BE AN OPERA COMPOSER

Late in 1807 Beethoven sent a three-page letter to the directors of the court theatres in Vienna. He had heard from one of them, Prince Lobkowitz, that they might be interested in engaging him as a house composer. Writing in the third person, Beethoven's self-belief and ambition as a composer are evident, mingled with observations on how difficult it was to realize this outlook. 'Since on the whole the aim which he has ever pursued in his career has been much less to earn his daily bread than to raise the taste of the public and to let his genius scale to greater heights and even to perfection, the undersigned has sacrificed to the Muse both material profit and his own advantage.' If the directors of the court theatres, Beethoven continues, were to engage him on a permanent basis and with a fixed income he would commit himself 'to compose every year at least one large opera' plus 'a little operetta or divertissement, choruses and incidental pieces'. Apart from a salary Beethoven made the reasonable and quite conventional requests that he should receive the proceeds of the third-night performance of any of his operas and that he be allocated at least one day a year for a benefit concert. Despite the earlier encouragement of Prince Lobkowitz Beethoven's proposal came to nothing. At a meeting on 4 December the directors noted dryly that the composer would not be engaged without further explanation of his ideas for the opera and other works.¹

Most accounts of Beethoven's life mention this episode as part of a wider picture of the composer's troublesome life in Vienna, without exploring the motivation behind the letter and the likely implications on his career. Had Beethoven's proposal been accepted – and his demands were not, after all, extravagant ones – he would have composed one major operatic work a year

¹ S. Brandenburg (ed.), *Ludwig van Beethoven. Briefwechsel Gesamtausgabe* (Munich, 1996–98), vol. 1, pp. 333–5. English translation from E. Anderson (ed.), *The Letters of Beethoven* (London, 1961), vol. 3, pp. 1444–6.

to add to the existing *Leonore* and a number of other, smaller stage works, which would have allowed little time for the composition of instrumental music, the sonatas, piano trios, quartets, concertos and symphonies that had already marked him out as a composer of supreme achievement. For a brief period towards the end of 1807 the whole direction of Beethoven's career was in question and, it might be rather grandly said, the whole direction of music history. What if Beethoven's request had been accepted and he had devoted the rest of his career to stage music?

Speculation on the 'what ifs' of history are an indulgence, perhaps even an affront when the legacy of a major figure such as Beethoven is concerned, yet the thought processes that are exposed invariably clarify the nature of the historical events that did take place. In the history of the symphony to state that Beethoven's contribution to its development was a defining one is a truism of truisms. By 1807 he had composed only four symphonies and, although the intention of the requested annual benefit was to present major orchestral works, the demands of being a contracted opera composer would almost certainly have precluded the composition of further large-scale instrumental works; Beethoven himself remarked in the letter that the demands of composing and presenting a new opera 'completely excludes every other mental exertion'. At the time Beethoven was nearing the completion of the Fifth Symphony and the notional benefit concert was tied up with plans for its public premiere, as well as that of the Fourth Piano Concerto. But, while securing a position in the court theatres was partly, if impracticably, meant to yield opportunities for public concerts, the wider issue why the composer was so readily seeking to establish a stable career as an opera composer rather than a symphony composer is a tantalizing one that invites investigation.

As often in Beethoven's career a ruthless pragmatism was at work alongside the haughty idealism. A career in the employment of the court theatres offered financial security of a kind that was not possible for a composer of symphonies in Vienna in 1807. As elsewhere in Europe, opera in the major public theatres in the city, the Burgtheater, the Kärntnertortheater and, since 1801, the Theater an der Wien, was subject to fickle management, financial crises as well as changes of musical taste, from Italian to German, and from serious to comic; for all that it was a permanent presence. For any composer opera was not only fashionable and challenging but offered the prospect of financial security. The success of Beethoven's music for the ballet *Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus*, first performed at the Burgtheater in March 1801, had sown the seeds of his interest in the theatre. Shortly afterwards he was enthused by the first performances (in German translation) of operas by Cherubini and Méhul, was actually appointed composer at

Setting the scene

3

the Theater an der Wien in 1803 and began work on an opera, *Vestas Feuer*, before turning to *Leonore*; the first version was performed in November 1805, a revised version a few months later in March 1806. Although the composition, rehearsal and production of *Leonore* were plagued with problems, some of them of Beethoven's own making, the composer retained his enthusiasm for the theatre and the petition to the directors of the court theatres at the end of 1807 was an entirely natural development.

The part that the symphony had played in Beethoven's career up to 1807 was not as dominant as one might assume, given that he had completed four symphonies to date. The composer had first arrived in Vienna in November 1792 to receive lessons from Haydn, the acknowledged master of the genre who was preparing for his second visit to London by composing symphonies Nos. 99 and 101 ('Clock'). But there was no hint of a symphony from the young Beethoven. As his career as a pianist and composer unfolded in Vienna in the 1790s, composition of symphonies was not a priority. A symphony in C major was begun in 1795–8 but was eventually abandoned.² He returned to the genre in 1799 and completed his First Symphony in readiness for a benefit concert, his first, at the Burgtheater in April 1800. Encouraged by the success of this concert Beethoven formulated the plan of presenting an annual benefit concert at which he would present himself as a performer, particularly as a soloist in a piano concerto, and with a new symphony. Over-ambitious in conception the plan was continually undermined by the difficulties of securing free evenings at the court theatres for concerts. Beethoven's second benefit concert, at the Theater an der Wien, did not take place until April 1803. A further five years were to elapse before the third benefit concert took place, in December 1808, when the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies were given in public for the first time. Meanwhile Beethoven's contact with well-to-do patrons in Vienna (Prince Lobkowitz and the banker Joseph Würth) and beyond (Count Franz Joachim Oppersdorff in Silesia) had led to private performances of symphonies Nos. 3–6.

In the absence of a regular public concert series in Vienna Beethoven's symphonies were not at the centre of musical life in the city in the way that Haydn's symphonies had been in London a decade earlier and they certainly did not constitute a repertory. Part of the lure of permanent employment at the court theatres, as Beethoven's letter seeks to ensure, was that free evenings for benefit concerts and the continued presentation of symphonies, concertos and other orchestral works, as well as vocal works, could be easily secured. While Beethoven's predicament in 1807 was an

² B. Cooper, *Beethoven* (Oxford, 2000), p. 61, p. 64, pp. 67–70.

individual and peculiarly intense one, its governing characteristics were apparent in the creative lives of other composers of the time.

GYROWETZ, HAYDN AND VANHAL: THREE
 SYMPHONIC CAREERS

The career of Gyrowetz, only seven years older than Beethoven, is especially instructive. Born in Bohemia in 1763, he studied law in Prague and entered the employ of Count Franz von Fünfkirchen as a court secretary.³ As was common practice in the Austrian territories, functionaries, from court officials to servants, were often capable musicians and Gyrowetz, who played the violin, joined his colleagues in a small court orchestra to provide regular concerts. It was for this orchestra that he wrote his first symphonies. His reputation spread quickly through the network of nobility and soon his career gravitated towards Vienna. He met Mozart who included one of his symphonies in the 1785 subscription series held in the Mehlgrube, alongside his own works and, probably, some symphonies by Michael Haydn.⁴ Gyrowetz was now employed as a secretary by Prince Ruspoli who took him on a three-year journey to Italy, where he continued to compose. During a visit to Paris in 1789 he struck a valuable deal with the publisher Imbault that led to the publication of a series of his symphonies; less pleasingly he discovered that another publisher, Sieber, had issued an early symphony in G (G1) as the work of Joseph Haydn (Hob.I: G3). The uncertain circumstances following the outbreak of the French Revolution encouraged Gyrowetz to move to London, another major centre for the performance and publication of symphonies, where his career reached a notable highpoint. For the Professional Concert he composed three symphonies, subsequently published by Longman and Broderip and dedicated to the Prince of Wales (D7, F4 and C3); in addition his symphonies were regularly performed alongside those of Haydn in Salomon's concert series in 1791 and 1792.⁵ The damp English climate compelled him to leave London in February 1792, armed with the proceeds of a benefit concert. By 1793 he was back in Vienna.

³ For an account of Gyrowetz's career see J. A. Rice (ed.), *Adalbert Gyrowetz (1763–1850). Four Symphonies. The Symphony 1720–1840*, ed. in chief, B. S. Brook, B/XI (New York, 1983), pp. xiii–xviii. Gyrowetz's own autobiography, published in 1848 (two years before his death), is especially informative on his life up to the first decade of the nineteenth century. A. Einstein (ed.), *Lebensläufe deutscher Musiker von ihnen selbst erzählt. 3/4 Adalbert Gyrowetz (1763–1850)* (Leipzig, 1915).

⁴ N. Zaslav, *Mozart's Symphonies. Context, Performance Practice, Reception* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 392–6.

⁵ 1 April 1791, 29 April 1791, 3 June 1791, 17 February 1792, 2 March 1792 and 1 May 1792. H. C. Robbins Landon, *Haydn: Chronicle and Works. Haydn in England 1791–1795* (London, 1976), *passim*.

Setting the scene

5

At the age of thirty Gyrowetz had composed nearly thirty symphonies, widely distributed in the Austrian territories and an established part of the repertoire in Paris and London. He might reasonably have expected to continue his career in Vienna as a composer of symphonies. Over the next ten years, however, no more than half-a-dozen symphonies were composed (C4, D9, E♭6, G3, A1 and A2) as Gyrowetz turned his attention to piano music and, especially, string quartets. Only one public concert in Vienna in the 1790s included a symphony by him, Josepha Auernhammer's benefit concert at the Burgtheater on 25 March 1795.⁶ His training as lawyer and his skills as a linguist (Latin, Italian, French, English and Czech as well as his native German) enabled him to acquire a post in the imperial bureaucracy, where he had special responsibility for the army archives, and for a few years he was essentially a part-time composer.

A decisive turning point occurred in 1804 when he was offered the post of Vice-Kapellmeister at the court theatres. Apart from an opera seria on a popular text by Metastasio, *Semiramis*, composed in London in 1791, Gyrowetz had not previously composed anything for the stage. His autobiography makes no mention of this lack of experience but dwells on an even more fundamental dilemma, whether he should remain a civil servant or try his luck as an artist.⁷ After considerable prevarication he accepted the position of Vice-Kapellmeister and devoted the remainder of his long life to the composition of stage works. As outlined in his autobiography his duties were not dissimilar to the ones Beethoven was to seek three years later. Gyrowetz was to compose one opera a year and one ballet (equivalent to Beethoven's 'divertissement'); but there is no mention of an evening for a benefit concert. At the age of forty-one Gyrowetz had turned his back on a career as a composer of symphonies. By the time of his death in 1850 he had become one of the most revered figures in Viennese musical life and, although much of this reverence was based on the fact that he represented a link with the Vienna of Haydn and Mozart, it did not extend to performing any of his symphonies. It was as an elder statesman rather than an acknowledged master of the genre that he served as one of the judges in a competition for a new symphony, held in Vienna in 1835.⁸

⁶ M. S. Morrow, *Concert Life in Haydn's Vienna: Aspects of a Developing Musical and Social Institution* (Stuyvesant, NY, 1989), p. 286.

⁷ Einstein (ed.), *Gyrowetz*, pp. 115–6.

⁸ The prize was given to Franz Lachner (1803–90) for his *Sinfonia passionata* in C minor. M. Handlos, 'Die Wiener *Concerts spirituels* (1819–1848)', *Österreichische Musik – Musik in Österreich. Beiträge zur Musikgeschichte Mitteleuropas*, ed. E. T. Hilscher, Wiener Veröffentlichungen zur Musikwissenschaft, 34 (Tutzing, 1998), p. 310.

The last decade of the eighteenth century also witnessed the culmination of Haydn's career as a composer of symphonies. From the late 1750s he had devoted himself consistently to the genre, first as Kapellmeister at the court of Count Franz Ferdinand Morzin at Lukavec (Dolní Lukavice) in Bohemia, then as Vice-Kapellmeister, later Kapellmeister, at the court of two successive Esterházy princes, based mainly in Eisenstadt and Eszterháza with occasional visits to Vienna and Pressburg (Bratislava). His symphonies became known throughout Europe and from this esteem arose commissions for new works from London (symphonies Nos. 76–78) and from Paris (the so-called 'Paris' symphonies, Nos. 82–87, and Nos. 88–92, also written for the city), works that could be performed too at the Esterházy court. The most supportive of the Esterházy princes, Prince Nicolaus, died in September 1790, and was succeeded by his son Prince Anton who, with a keen eye on court expenditure, set in motion his plans to curtail musical life there. The resident opera company and the court orchestra were summarily dismissed with only three people retained, Haydn, Tomasini (the principal violinist) and Leopold Dichtler (singer, double bass player and occasional copyist), partly in recognition of their long-standing service, partly because they were to be responsible for engaging musicians for any occasion that might require them. If, for Haydn, this represented a rather sudden and disconsolate end to nearly thirty years of service, it also enabled him to accept an invitation to travel to London. Two visits were made, in 1791–2 and 1794–5, the principal products of which were twelve symphonies (Nos. 93–104), a glorious expansion of the genre.

One of the startling aspects of Haydn's career as a composer of symphonies is that not a single work was commissioned by an institution in Vienna and very few – Nos. 6–8, for instance, performed at the Esterházy palace in the Wallnerstrasse in 1761 – were given their first performance there. In the most circumscribed sense, Paris and London were more important than Vienna in Haydn's symphonic career. When Vienna rather than Eisenstadt and Eszterháza became the composer's principal residence in the 1790s he interacted more consistently with musical life in the city, notably for the composition and many performances of two oratorios, *The Creation* and *The Seasons*; significantly, this interaction was never to yield a new symphony.

Following each of the two visits to London Haydn organized a single concert in Vienna to present some of the London symphonies. On 15 March 1793 he gave a benefit concert at the Kleiner Redoutensaal in front of 400 to 600 people where three symphonies from the first London visit were

Setting the scene

7

presented.⁹ As Haydn's pupil, Beethoven was almost certainly present, as also, one imagines, was Gyrowetz. A similar event in the same venue followed the second visit: on 18 December 1795 when, again, three symphonies were played.¹⁰ These two concerts were the only ones organized by Haydn in this last stage of his life. Throughout this period, from 1795, when Haydn returned from London, to 1802, when he effectively retired from composition, there is not the merest hint that Haydn was to compose a new symphony for Vienna.

At the Esterházy court, meanwhile, a new prince, Nicolaus II, had assumed control. Gradually music came once more to assume a prominent role, without reaching the level of activity of his grandfather's time. Church music was fully supported, with a natural high point in September of every year when the name-day of Princess Marie Hermenegild was celebrated; Haydn six late masses were all, to a greater or lesser extent, associated with this occasion. In the weeks surrounding the name-day there were opera performances by visiting troupes, balls and the occasional informal concert when Haydn would accompany a vocal performance on the piano; but symphonies were noticeably absent and Nicolaus did not commission any.

By 1801 the full-time music establishment of the Esterházy court numbered eight singers and an orchestra of twenty, but their duties were to provide liturgical music and to provide Harmoniemusik.¹¹ Haydn seems never to have considered writing a symphony for these Esterházy forces. The virtual absence of the symphony at the Esterházy court continued when Hummel (1778–1837) was appointed Concertmeister in 1804; he willingly took on the duties of composing liturgical music and directed a regular season of opera at the court, including works of his own (*Endimione e Diana* and *Die vereitelten Raenke*, both 1806).¹² But he never composed a symphony.

One of the most prolific near contemporaries of Haydn was Johann Vanhal. Born in Bohemia in 1739, seven years after Haydn, he died in Vienna in 1813, four years after him.¹³ He had moved to Vienna in 1760 or

⁹ Landon, *Haydn in England*, pp. 215–6.

¹⁰ H. C. Robbins Landon, *Haydn: Chronicle and Works. Haydn: The Years of 'The Creation' 1796–1800* (London, 1977), pp. 59–60.

¹¹ H. C. Robbins Landon, *Haydn: Chronicle and Works. Haydn: the Late Years* (London, 1977), pp. 63–7. R. Hellyer, 'The Wind Ensembles of the Esterházy Princes, 1761–1813', *Haydn Yearbook*, 15 (1985), pp. 32–6.

¹² M. Horányi, *The Magnificence of Eszterháza* (London, 1962), pp. 174–90.

¹³ The following provides a comprehensive account of Vanhal's life and his contribution to the symphony. P. Bryan, *Johann Wanhal, Viennese Symphonist. His Life and His Musical Environment* (Stuyvesant, NY, 1997). See also D. Heartz, *Haydn, Mozart and the Viennese School 1740–1780* (New York, 1995), pp. 453–63.

1761 where, apart from a two-year visit to Italy in 1769–71, he was based for the remainder of his life. Unlike Haydn he never held a full-time post as a Kapellmeister but enjoyed the patronage of two members of the nobility on a regular basis, Baron Riesch (about whom little is known) and Count Ladislaus Erdödy (1746–86), the brother-in-law of Prince Anton Esterházy, Haydn's first patron. Active as a composer until the very last few weeks of his long life Vanhal wrote large quantities of instrumental music and sacred music. Seventy-six symphonies are safely attributed to him, mostly composed for Riesch and Erdödy and, subsequently, as in the case of Haydn, disseminated throughout the Austrian territories; for instance, the Clam Gallas and the Waldstein families in Bohemia, as well as the Esterházy family regularly acquired them. Again like those of Haydn, Vanhal's symphonies were published in Amsterdam, Berlin, London and Paris. Stylistically, the works have many parallels with those of Haydn from the 1760s and 1770s, especially the cultivation of the minor mode c.1770, the use of concertante movements and a predisposition toward monothematicism in sonata form.

Although little detail is known about when and where individual symphonies by Vanhal were composed, what is notable about his symphonic career is that it stops abruptly c.1780; for the remaining thirty years or so of his life he concentrated instead on piano music and sacred music. Not a single symphony is known to have been played in public in Vienna during this period. He had become a totally different kind of composer.

STUDYING THE SYMPHONY IN BEETHOVEN'S VIENNA

Consideration of the musical lives of three individuals, Gyrowetz, Haydn and Vanhal, who were prolific composers of symphonies for a significant part of their lives before turning away from the genre, suggests that Beethoven's contemplation of a change of emphasis in his career in 1807, towards opera and, by implication, away from the symphony, would not have been viewed as eccentric by his contemporaries.

Using the biographies of three selected composers to interpret a speculative plan of a fourth, a plan, moreover, that never materialized, might appear a shaky foundation for historical enquiry; after all, Beethoven went on to complete his Fifth Symphony in a matter of weeks, followed by four further symphonies. Broadening the outlook even this far, from one composer to four, does, nevertheless, draw attention to certain insistent questions that need to be explored. Was the symphony as central to music making in Vienna and its environs c. 1800 as it had been a few decades earlier? Are there some common factors that explain why Gyrowetz wrote only

Setting the scene

9

a couple after c.1795, Haydn none after 1795, Vanhal none after c.1780, and Beethoven none until 1800? Beethoven was clearly a more tenacious and restless creative figure than Gyrowetz and Vanhal, qualities that would have almost certainly brought to an end any contract with the court theatres. What were the tensions between such creative impulses and the musical environment? Did they impact on the number of symphonies that Beethoven composed, even their nature? Are similar patterns evident in the careers of other composers?

To search for answers to these and similar questions in the biographies of individual composers is too limited an approach, axiomatically emphasizing particular circumstances at the expense of broader trends: thus Gyrowetz can be said to have lacked the creative will to explore the genre further; Haydn was too busy with the composition of the six late masses, *The Creation* and *The Seasons*; Vanhal's music had not kept pace with the times; and Beethoven was anxious to absorb the legacy of Haydn and Mozart before embarking on the symphony. Biographical information, particularly for lesser known composers, even occasionally for major figures such as Haydn and Beethoven, is limited or patchy, making it hazardous to draw conclusions; even Gyrowetz, in what is often an engagingly written autobiography, mentions only one identifiable symphony (the one that was printed and performed in Paris as the work of Haydn, G1) and says nothing about why he stopped composing symphonies in the 1790s. Finally the chronological imperative of the biography will always emphasize the new and the emergent at the expense of the old and the continuing. It is a mistake to assume that musical life in Vienna at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century was always seeking new instrumental works. There is ample evidence that this was the time when reception history of older music began to fold into music history, with marked consequences over time for the nature and status of the symphony. Taken together the inherent liabilities of musical biography suggest that a broader, more flexible approach to the investigation of the symphony in Beethoven's Vienna is needed, one that balances repertoire, performance and reception but does not ignore creative individuality.

Keeping the focus on Vienna and its musical hinterland of Lower and Upper Austria, Bohemia, Hungary and Moravia is entirely appropriate. Instrumental music in Vienna had always been largely self-sufficient in composers and works, lacking the cosmopolitanism that characterized musical life in London and Paris. As the capital of the Holy Roman Empire until Napoleon forced its disbandment in 1806 and of the Austrian Empire from 1804 Vienna acted as a focal point for music, as it did for trade, politics and

government. Gyrowetz and Vanhal were only two of many musicians from Bohemia who gravitated towards Vienna; Haydn worked for a noble family, the Esterházy family, who played a skilful mediating role between the Habsburg court and Hungary; and Beethoven in 1792 moved from Bonn, an electorate in the Holy Roman Empire ruled by Maximilian Franz, to the capital, where Maximilian's brother, Leopold, was the emperor.

Coupled with this self-sufficiency there was a commercial and economic conservatism in the imperial city that ensured that music publishing, public concert life and the musical press (in the broadest sense) were less developed than elsewhere in Europe. In the Napoleonic period self-sufficiency turned first to insularism and then virtual stagnation as the Habsburgs imposed strict censorship in order to preserve identity and to ensure survival, and the cost of the war effort unleashed rampant inflation. From the nineteenth century onwards scholarship has tended to undervalue the increasingly inward nature of the city in which Beethoven the symphonist lived and worked, preferring to view him from a European perspective, someone whose music was first published in Leipzig, London and Mainz, whose reputation was fashioned by the Leipzig *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* and who addressed libertarians in all countries. While Beethoven was acutely conscious and proud of his wider reputation he was also aware, sometimes painfully so, of the immediate circumstances that governed his compositional life from day to day, from month to month, and from year to year. He was, first of all, a Viennese composer, only then a European one.

Also undervalued in most discussion of musical life in Vienna is the rapid change in musical practices in the years after the end of the Napoleonic Wars. It was still a watchful city as Metternich continued to impose an iron grip on society, but there was a new ambition and a new confidence that impacted on all aspects of musical life, and it was only during this period that the symphony assumed an assured and permanent position in musical life.