

2007

Beethoven's Influence on Modern Musical Thought

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Recommended Citation

David, Avi, "Beethoven's Influence on Modern Musical Thought" (2007). *Undergraduate Research Symposium (UGRS)*. 11.
<https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/ugrs/11>

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Research Symposium: Beethoven's Influence on Modern Musical Thought

Intro: Ludwig van Beethoven is undoubtedly one of the most important and influential composers of Western art music. From a young age, he exhibited considerable talent, independence, and willful nonconformity. Over the course of his life, these themes came through both in his compositions, and in his attitude towards social norms regarding music. Composing symphonies, sonatas, string quartets, concertos, and one opera, Beethoven shattered musical boundaries and set the stage for how musicians and listeners would think about music for the next 200 years, up to modern day. This afternoon I will explore various ways in which Beethoven's conception of music continues to influence our thinking about music, even rock, through analysis of The Beatles' "A Day in the Life," off their 1967 album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

Historical musicologists have suggested various ways in which Beethoven has influenced modern musical thought. It seems to me that these ideals all apply to very well to the Beatles and their music.

- 1) Act of composition more emphasis than performance;
 - a. Compositional idea or concept more important than realization in live performance
 - b. Beethoven wrote music for virtuosos
 - c. Roger McGuinn of The Byrds: "After *Sgt. Pepper* they didn't need to perform. I think that what happened was they got so sophisticated that they really couldn't reproduce their albums on stage anymore, you know, without hiring a full orchestra"
- 2) Composer, as creator, hierarchically above performer
 - a. John/Paul vs. George/Ringo
- 3) Absolute music: Instrumental music can convey what words can't
- 4) Musical museum
 - a. Journalist/Apple Corps Press Officer Derek Taylor: "They are ageless and timeless"

Perhaps the greatest influence has been in terms of...

I. Originality/ Authenticity

A) Enlightenment Ideals

- 1) Universal Appeal, Simplicity, Logic, Reason, the Natural
- 2) Evident in Music of Mozart, Haydn – short, concise logical phrases; resolution of dissonance; smooth musical transitions; temperate dynamic range

B) Rejected by Beethoven

- 1) Musical Innovations: complexity; expanded use of melodic and metrical dissonance; Anton Webern: "The music of a madman"- unexpected melodic movement and harmonic progressions, huge dynamic contrasts, motives and themes create tension & lack proper resolutions

C) Composer's TRUE VISION

- 1) Original sound: He did NOT compose music to appeal to all
- 2) Commercialism = bad; Composer shouldn't 'sell out'

D) The Beatles' "A Day in the Life"

- 1) Created unique sound
 - a. Beethovenian concept- poses a musical problem, challenges listener to solve **Play track 1 (opening of A Day in the Life)**
 - b. Beethoven- key changes, where is he headed? **Play track 2 (Hammerklavier Sonata)**
- 2) Dissonance- building tension, background noise--> no resolution
Play track 3 (buildup #1)
Music of MADMEN?!
- 3) Unexpected progression: Radical shift to bright, upbeat piano chord and alarm clock buzz
 - a. Typical Beatles: violation of norms of rock music **Play track 4**
Where are they going with this...? New song?
 - b. Beethoven- buildup and unexpected shift **Play track 5**
- 4) Transition back to 1st verse
 - a. **Play track 6, talk over:**
 - b. Circle of 5th progression- typical in classical for passage of instability
 - c. *Back to start of song... This must be the resolution.*
- 5) Return to tension building chaos
Now what??
Ends with sharp, bold chord- like finale of symphony
- 6) Album as symphony
 - a) Beethoven composed symphonies as a cohesive unit, much like *Sgt. Pepper's*, which ends with "A Day in the Life"
- 7) End of piece- ambient sounds *WHAT??* → **Intentionally obscure**

The point I would like to make is just how much Beethoven has influenced both

- 1) Musical techniques and composition
- 2) Modern conception of music
 - a. Beethoven forces listeners to confront unconventional musical juxtapositions, and by doing so wrestle with the meaning of the music, and why music can affect us to the extent that it does.

Beatles are just one example of Beethoven's influence on musical thought. Countless musicians have been influenced by Beethoven.

Record Producer George Martin: "They always had enormous confidence that the world was theirs for the taking"

This quote really seems to sum up Beethoven's mentality. He was making a bold grandiose, and very innovative statement, not holding anything back: This is my music, this is my conception, take it or leave it.

The course of history has proven just how influential Beethoven's musical conception has been on modern musical thought.