John Clubbe writes an ode to an enigmatic composer

July 26, 2019 10:00 AM

By Glenn Altschuler

On March 26, 1827, a storm dropped snow and hail on Vienna. Ludwig van Beethoven roused himself, shook his fist at the heavens, muttered “Applause, friends! The comedy is over,” and died. The thunder, lightning and raised fist, John Clubbe suggests, can serve as symbols of a man who supported freedom and liberty, respected power, and who, like Napoleon Bonaparte, was a conqueror.

In “Beethoven: The Relentless Revolutionary,” Mr. Clubbe, an emeritus professor of English at the University of Kentucky, presents Beethoven “as a revolutionary, not only in his music, but also, and not least, in his social and political thinking.” Beethoven, the author argues, was animated by French Enlightenment ideas, excited by the promise of the French Revolution, and obsessed with Napoleon: “at the heart of his being roiled a radical core that on occasion could (and did) erupt.” And his political principles inhabited his operas, sonatas and symphonies.

In advancing his thesis, Mr. Clubbe faces daunting challenges. Beethoven, he acknowledges, was “reticent and sometimes enigmatically reserved.” He spent most of his adult life in Austria, an authoritarian state, where censors and spies were everywhere. Most of his patrons were conservative or reactionary aristocrats. Political views are more difficult to discern in music, of course, than similar sentiments expressed in words. Beethoven rarely commented on the “extra-musical” ideas in his works, and when he did his remarks were “more cryptic than enlightening.”

Mr. Clubbe, alas, does not overcome these challenges. He does not define the key concepts in his book — revolution, freedom, liberty, equality — or elaborate on Beethoven’s understanding of them. Mr. Clubbe insists that Beethoven was a revolutionary but also indicates he had faith in “inevitable, slow progress.” Although he preferred a republic, we learn, Beethoven “was willing to accept a monarchy with a liberal and constitutional base.” Mr. Clubbe maintains that Beethoven “did not believe in equality among individuals,” but also that the notion of equality “appealed” to him.

“Beethoven: The Relentless Revolutionary” depends too much on speculation. Employing a phrase that recurs throughout the book, Mr. Clubbe writes that Beethoven “must have” sensed that Dresden and
Leipzig offered better “urban and musical possibilities” than Vienna; he “must have relished German cities in which repression was less in evidence.”

Beethoven, he guesses, was influenced by “Gracchus” Babeuf’s notion that society should support artists. Because Johann Gottfried Seume’s “political views are close to what we know of Beethoven’s own,” Mr. Clubbe concludes that Seume’s book, “A Walk to Syracuse,” influenced the composer’s understanding of Vienna’s stultifying atmosphere and provides “clues” to why the “Eroica” Symphony begins with two monumental chords.

Joseph Stieler’s portrait, Mr. Clubbe indicates, “revealed the composer’s revolutionary sympathies.” The painter used red, the color of revolution, for Beethoven’s scarf and on his chin, fingers, cheeks and lip. The composer’s determined, uncompromising facial expression “conveys the need for social reform as well as increased personal freedom.”

Mr. Clubbe also insists on attributing Beethoven’s embrace of freedom, liberty and equality to his “fairly constant” faith in the French Revolution and, despite wildly oscillating mood swings toward Napoleon (commenting in 1826 that he had been “mistaken toward that [expletive]”), to the man he regarded as Europe’s “savior” and “the age’s Messiah.”

It seems to me, however, that although, like many of his contemporaries, Beethoven drew on turn-of-the-century humanitarian and progressive ideals and current events, his political philosophy, such as it was, remained sufficiently vague as to be attributable as well (as he once did) to Jesus and Socrates.

In the Ninth Symphony, Mr. Clubbe tells us, Beethoven chose stanzas from Friedrich von Schiller’s “Ode to Joy” that emphasized the union of humanity based on the love of an eternal heavenly Father. And the composer dedicated the Ninth first to Tsar Alexander I of Russia, and when he died, to Prussia’s King Frederick William III, a monarch “whose always tentative constitutional inclination had declined markedly.”

The author is surely right to remind us that Beethoven “was determined to create music worthy of a new age.” And that “largely working within inherited forms but transforming them utterly,” he produced music of pioneering, heroic, “often revolutionary significance.” His music did, on occasion, give voice to the liberal ideals struggling to take hold in Europe. But, above all, Beethoven gave generations and generations a music of transcendent greatness.

*Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.*