

Coda

Sinfonia Eroica (To Sylvia.)

My Love, my Love, it was a day in June,
A mellow, drowsy, golden afternoon;
And all the eager people thronging came
To that great hall, drawn by the magic name
Of one, a high magician, who can raise
The spirits of the past and future days,
And draw the dreams from out the secret breast,
Giving them life and shape.

I, with the rest,
Sat there athirst, atremble for the sound;
And as my aimless glances wandered round,
Far off, across the hush'd, expectant throng,
I saw your face that fac'd mine.

Clear and strong
Rush'd forth the sound, a mighty mountain stream;
Across the clust'ring heads mine eyes did seem
By subtle forces drawn, your eyes to meet.
Then you, the melody, the summer heat,
Mingled in all my blood and made it wine.
Straight I forgot the world's great woe and mine;
My spirit's murky lead grew molten fire;
Despair itself was rapture.

Ever higher,
Stronger and clearer rose the mighty strain;
Then sudden fell; then all was still again,
And I sank back, quivering as one in pain.
Brief was the pause; then, 'mid a hush profound,
Slow on the waiting air swell'd forth a sound
So wondrous sweet that each man held his breath;
A measur'd, mystic melody of death.

Then back you lean'd your head, and I could note
 The upward outline of your perfect throat;
 And ever, as the music smote the air,
 Mine eyes from far held fast your body fair.
 And in that wondrous moment seem'd to fade
 My life's great woe, and grow an empty shade
 Which had not been, nor was not.

And I knew
 Not which was sound, and which, O Love, was you.
 Amy Levy¹

We began with Beethoven's Fifth, and end with his Third. What's the use of Beethoven for queers? Or, more precisely, what would it mean to think about Beethoven and queer forms of use? How have queers made use of Beethoven? What might it mean to use music to build a queer home in the world? Sara Ahmed's *What the Use? On the Uses of Use* (2019) encourages us to think about how things are put to use in ways other than those which they were intended for.² In doing so, she draws on George Chauncey's observation that there is 'no queer space; there are only spaces used by queers or put to queer use [. . .] Nothing illustrates this general principle more clearly than the tactics developed by gay men and lesbians to put the spaces of the dominant culture to queer use.'³ Amy Levy's 'Sinfonia Eroica' (1884) – a queer poem that creates a space for lesbian desire – can be used to help us think this through. As Linda Hughes has observed, the poem was apparently inspired by Levy's love for Jennie Wetton Stanford, a classically trained singer who was married to the composer and conductor Charles Villiers Stanford. It may recall a specific performance of Beethoven's *Eroica* given by the Cambridge University Musical Society in the Cambridge Guildhall on 25 May 1880.⁴ Indeed, its dedication 'To Sylvia' is in itself something of a musical joke, inviting the reader to ask 'Who is Silvia?', echoing the first line of Shakespeare's song from *Two Gentlemen of Verona* – familiar to contemporary musical readers from Franz Schubert's setting 'An Sylvia', D. 891 (1826).

Amy Levy's poetry draws extensively on the imagery of music to render her speakers' queer orientations in the world: how their sense of marginalization emerges from rubbing up against a society built to reinforce heteronormative imperatives, but also how their sense of desiring selfhood springs from the ephemeral pleasures of a body that sashays its way through space. In 'A Minor Poet', her suicidal, tortured poet-composer is 'a note / All out of tune in this world's instrument', whose 'life was jarring discord from the first'.⁵ The poem puns relentlessly on the language

of musical structure to figure the speaker's sense of alienation, imprisonment and displacement: 'I turn the key / Sharp in the lock', he notes as he shuts himself in his room before taking his own life. His self-declared 'minor' status not only signals his apparent lack of artistic recognition, but also gestures to the insistently pessimistic affective colouring of his worldview: 'In a Minor Key' reminds us that 'Soul has its tone and its semitones / Mind has its major and minor keys.'⁶ Yet elsewhere, as in 'A June-Tide Echo', musical performance allows for the appearance of a momentary glimpse of queer possibility:

For one, for one fleeting hour, to hold
The fair shape the music that rose and fell
Revealed and concealed like a veiling fold;
To catch for an instant the sweet June spell.⁷

This musical reverie of touch, texture and movement – dreamt of 'After a Richter Concert' – requires of the listener a haptic sensitivity to the body in motion, conjuring up a Salome-like dancer whom one might almost reach out 'to hold', '[t]o catch' through the 'veiling fold[s]' that '[r]eveal' and 'conceal' her desired flesh. Levy's poem 'A Wall Flower' similarly fixates on the 'perfect music' of the dancing body, as its speaker yearns for an erotic union expressed as the wish '[to] move unto your motion'.

'Sinfonia Eroica' makes use of Beethoven to '[g]iv[e] [. . .] life and shape' to otherwise inchoate 'secret' same-sex desire. This music discloses new possibilities of self-understanding to its listener while simultaneously presenting a challenge to the coherence of that self. Levy's listener experiences erotic reverie not simply as a result of voyeuristically observing the 'face that fac'd mine'. Rather, she finds her most intense pleasures in the moment of masochistic dissolution: the visceral '[m]ingl[ing]' of self, other, music and environment, ultimately unable to distinguish 'which was sound, and which, O Love, was you'. At the same time, this is a poem that is carefully attentive to the orientation of the queer body in space. Dwelling like much of Levy's writing on the experience of the isolated individual in the 'thronging' urban crowd, the poem traces how music works to transform queer subjects' sense of intimacy, proximity and contact. Levy's speaker cruises the concert hall as her 'aimless glances wande[r] round', drawn by 'subtle forces' – a late-Victorian gaydar? – to a woman's beautiful face in the distance. The speaker traces the 'outline' of her beloved's 'perfect throat', and her eyes 'h[o]ld fast' this 'body fair' in a manner that collapses the distinction between the visual and the tactile.

At the same time, Levy's poem also uses Beethoven to conjure the sadness that leaves its trace in queer lives. The text locates its queer future in a 'measur'd, mystic melody of death': the Funeral March that forms the *Eroica's* second movement. As this movement commences, Levy suspends the forward march of straight time. Our breath is held momentarily transfixed by an inverted foot ('Slow on the waiting air'), and we feel the speaker's pain 'quivering' through a passing metrical irregularity. The music sustains a 'wondrous moment' in which the speaker's 'great woe' seems to 'fade'. But that which takes its place is a spectral presence defined only by absence and negation, hovering awkwardly between past, present and future: 'an empty shade / Which had not been, nor was not.' The final line is similarly poised between consummation and doubt. Is this a moment of Sapphic intensity, the beloved merging with the speaker as they are enveloped in sound? Or is it rather a moment in which the speaker confronts her self-delusion? Is it merely sound, perhaps, that has led her on? Levy's queer use of music allows for both.

'Sinfonia Eroica' may be placed alongside other examples of Beethoven's surprising queer utility that have been explored in *Music and the Queer Body*. E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, for instance, transform the drawing-room piano from its use as a mechanism for disciplining the female body into one in which this technology of touch allows for a surer sense of the desiring body. Edward Prime-Stevenson makes queer use of Beethoven's music and biography as the starting point for the self-consciously speculative modes of gossip and rumour that mark a distinctly queer form of sociality. Indeed, this study has traced in its case studies a variety of ways in which music is put to use for surprising, perverse and antisocial ends. Its heteroclitite range of genres – a purposeful step to the side of literary realism – shows music as it misbehaves. Its methodologies – whether inclined to psychoanalysis, phenomenology or affect studies – are ill-disciplined enough to describe music's queer repurposing. The account that *Music and the Queer Body* offers is sure of the place of music in offering community, solace and joy for queer folks, whether at the *fin de siècle* or today. Yet it is also alert to the fact that queer theory allows us to rethink what's at stake in certain liberal humanist accounts of coherent subjectivity – and that music might be a valuable tool for testing the pleasures (or otherwise) of certain strategies of incoherence. In this respect, it asks us to rethink how embodied encounters with music – whether spatial, temporal or sensory – reorient the self beyond its material boundaries and allow for the emergence of new forms of desiring subjectivity.