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Z1.5

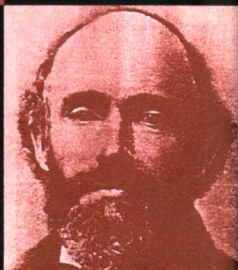
总记登号

BK 303552

*The
Birth of
American
Music
Criticism*

BEETHOVEN'S SYMPHONIES

and J. S. DWIGHT



Of American

L. J.

A FRISHBERG SALOMAN

BEETHOVEN'S
SYMPHONIES
AND J. S. DWIGHT

*The Birth of American
Music Criticism*

ORA FRISHBERG SALOMAN

NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY PRESS • BOSTON

江苏工业学院图书馆
藏书章

MUSIC ADVISOR TO NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY PRESS
GUNTHER SCHULLER

Northeastern University Press
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Saloman, Ora Frishberg, 1938–
Beethoven's symphonies and J. S. Dwight : the birth of American
music criticism / Ora Frishberg Saloman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-55553-216-0

1. Beethoven, Ludwig van, 1770–1827. Symphonies. 2. Beethoven,
Ludwig van, 1770–1827—Appreciation—United States. 3. Dwight, John
Sullivan, 1813–1893. 4. Musical criticism—United States.

I. Title.

ML410.B4S139 1995

784.2'184'092—dc20 94-34213

MN

Designed by Christine Leonard Raquepaw

Composed in Simoncini Garamond by Coghill Composition in Richmond, Virginia. Printed
and bound by Thomson-Shore, Inc., in Dexter, Michigan. The paper is Glatfelter, an acid-
free stock.

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

99 98 97 96 95 5 4 3 2 1



JOHN S. DWIGHT (1813–1893)

Acknowledgments

To the National Endowment for the Humanities, I express my thanks and gratitude for its generous award of a Fellowship for College Teachers and Independent Scholars enabling essential archival research. I am greatly obliged to Provost Lois Cronholm and Dean Norman Fainstein, School of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Baruch College of The City University of New York, for their valued support of this work with a publication subvention. Baruch College also provided a Fellowship Award and several grants of Released Time for which I am grateful.

For their courteous assistance, I acknowledge the staffs of many libraries: these include the Interlibrary Loan Service of the Baruch College Library; the Music Division and Special Collections of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center and the Main Reading Room at 42nd Street; the Music Division, the Rare Book and Special Collections Division, and the Microform Reading Room of the Library of Congress, Washington D.C.; the Rare Book Room and the Music Department of the Boston Public Library; the Harvard Musical Association in Boston; the Houghton Library of Harvard University; the Massachusetts Historical Society; the Rare Book and Special Collections

Library of Columbia University; the Barnard College Library; and the New-York Historical Society.

All source materials from the Dwight Papers are quoted by courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library. Letters from the Autograph File and the Amy Lowell Autograph Collection of Houghton Library are quoted by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University. Archival documents from the Harvard Musical Association are published by permission of the Harvard Musical Association, Boston. A letter from the Bellows Papers is quoted by permission of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Part of Chapter 6 originally appeared in the *Musical Quarterly*; my thanks to the journal, its editor at the time, Paul Wittke, and to Oxford University Press for permission to use the material in somewhat altered form.

I gratefully acknowledge the permission obtained from the Royal Musical Association to use material that originally appeared in the *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, published by Oxford University Press. Parts of Chapters 2, 3, 8, and 9 are used in rather different form. For their thoughtful assistance, I am obliged to the editor of that journal, Mark Everist, to Ian Rumbold, and to the Secretary of the Royal Musical Association, Ewan West.

It is a pleasure to thank reference librarians who rendered particular assistance in the course of research, including Charles Sens of the Music Division of the Library of Congress, Natalie Palme of the Harvard Musical Association in Boston, and Giuseppe Bissaccia and Diane Ota of the Boston Public Library. I appreciate information provided by Kenneth Stuckey, Research Librarian of the Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, Massachusetts.

I am especially indebted to Steven J. Ledbetter, Musicologist, Boston Symphony Orchestra, for his gracious encouragement to pursue this area of research and for his valued advice. My thanks as well to other scholars who expressed particular interest in the

subject, responded helpfully to an inquiry, or engaged in stimulating discussion: these include John Graziano, Maria Rika Maniates, Christopher Hatch, Nicholas Temperley, Conrad L. Donakowski, William S. Newman, William Austin, Carol Berkin, Paul Charosh, Adrienne Fried Block, Pamela Fox, Jacklin Stopp, Ernestine Schlant, and Joel Myerson.

I owe many thanks to William Frohlich, director of Northeastern University Press, for his interest, consideration, and excellent handling of arrangements during the publication process.

For their unfailing moral support I shall always be indebted to my late father, Rabbi Naphtali Z. Frishberg, and to my mother, Lena Nidel Frishberg.

I express particular thanks and appreciation to my husband, Edward B. Saloman. I am immensely grateful for his highly supportive interest in all phases of the project, as well as for his invaluable assistance in resolving computer problems during preparation of the manuscript.

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Introduction

American conceptions of symphonic structure and of Ludwig van Beethoven's symphonies in the 1840s were shaped significantly by the youthful John Sullivan Dwight (1813–1893) in the years before he gained his reputation as the editor of *Dwight's Journal of Music, A Paper of Art and Literature*.¹ As the first major American-born critic of music, Dwight founded that valuable journal in 1852, and it became the earliest long-lived music periodical in the United States. For twenty-nine years, until the *Journal* closed in 1881, Dwight vigorously championed the music of many European composers and the development of concert activity in America.

To support these goals, he wrote extended original essays on styles and composers and provided his own or other translations of German and French critical works. He published news of concerts and correspondence from abroad, as well as reprinting valuable material from English and Continental sources. Dwight pioneered in describing and reviewing numerous scholarly biographies, instruction manuals, and books on music. Subjects ranged from aesthetics, music criticism, and the psychology and

sociology of music to acoustics and the state of education in music in conservatories and universities.

He also invited contributions to the *Journal* from other prominent writers on music. One of these was the respected American biographer of Beethoven, Alexander Wheelock Thayer,² who contributed about 325 articles, reviews, and letters from America and Europe. Dwight was the first to translate any part of Thayer's biography from the German back into English and to impress on his readers the significant scholarly achievement that it and similar European studies represented.³

Despite Dwight's stature in the cultural life of nineteenth-century America, however, very little is known about the formation of his approach to music criticism. By tracing his beginnings as a writer on Beethoven in the period following the composer's death in 1827, we can discover a dramatically new perspective on Dwight as critic. It offers a marked contrast to the existing literature, which is based almost exclusively on the readily accessible writings of Dwight's later years in the *Journal*.

This book identifies for the first time, and provides evidence of, specific European critical, biographical, musical, historiographical, literary, and historical foundations on which Dwight constructed his initial thought pertaining to Beethoven's symphonies. Four underlying and connected ideas shaped the research. First, Dwight's American reception of Beethoven's symphonies is comprehensible only from a perspective informed by his growing knowledge and transformation of related European intellectual traditions and critical approaches. A study of Dwight's musical learning connected to Beethoven provides a natural focus for that association.⁴

Second, he earned distinction by communicating to a literate but musically unsophisticated American public about the structure and importance of the symphony as a new kind of concert music.

Dwight chose Beethoven's symphonies as his prime modern exemplars of the genre before 1847.

Third, Dwight's search for, and development of, a higher criticism of music was unprecedented in the United States and was distinct from the journalistic chronicling of performances characteristic of the daily press. It evolved from his independent effort to understand music in its multiple facets as moral force, aesthetic art, and technical-scientific field. As a part of this process, he led in introducing a musical discourse and fostered the significant educative function of the music critic in American society.

Fourth, Dwight disseminated an idealistic vision of a universal Beethoven whose symphonic music he hoped would become emblematic of a new era marked by the amelioration of society. He also conceived of the symphony orchestra as a cooperative, rather than a competing, entity. This broad utopian view excluded the term "Romanticism," as Dwight will be shown to have used it, from any application to Beethoven's symphonies. However, he introduced to Americans a new Romantic outlook emphasizing the significance of symphonic music combined with constructive suggestions to guide readers in becoming informed listeners.

Dwight's texts are cultural documents. His interpretative comments, as well as references to books he read and other internal evidence, can be found in his manuscripts, unpublished letters, archival papers, and published articles and essays scattered in diverse, largely inaccessible periodicals or newspapers. Dwight's musical learning between 1835 and 1847 will be revealed to have been more extensive than has been known. As an examination of the European sources associated with American Beethoven criticism, this book opens an area that has not been treated previously in older twentieth-century assessments of the composer's impact on the Romantic imagination⁵ or in more recent studies exploring

the European criticism,⁶ reception,⁷ mystique,⁸ or image⁹ of Beethoven.

The earliest regular series of public orchestral performances of Beethoven's complete, rather than excerpted, symphonies in the United States occurred concurrently in New York and in Boston beginning in 1841.¹⁰ These concerts coincided with a change in Dwight's career from Unitarian minister to a life in music as author, critic, and teacher. Among the small group of American-born writers in that era who attempted to create a listening public for Beethoven's music, only Dwight dared ultimately to forge a career in music.

He confronted formidable obstacles. In the 1820s and 1830s, American readers had learned of Beethoven's fame as a symphonic composer before they heard the music. Articles in the press and periodicals had reprinted or borrowed reports primarily from English publications that signaled the earlier popularity of his symphonies in London.¹¹ However, with few exceptions, these works presented complex challenges for performers, audiences, and writers in America before midcentury because of a relative absence of established musical and educational institutions, performance traditions, and a critical framework within which to locate symphonic and orchestral issues.

Dwight's musical curiosity and linguistic fluency equipped him to find and incorporate, but also to reject, varied European approaches to this new repertory. He developed a discourse attempting to extend beyond the level of superficial, or "acquaintance," knowledge to convey "discursive" knowledge as well.¹² In communicating with others for the common good, he hoped to instill in his compatriots a sense that music was a stimulating field of artistic and "scientific" significance rather than merely a pleasing diversion. Dwight's interest in European art music reflected his universal commitment to its concerns with moral and cultural idealism

as part of what he conceived to be a shared heritage. Dwight also contributed in the nineteenth century to the general development of aesthetic perception and pleasure, considered, from a broad perspective, as an important phase in the history of civilization.¹³

It has been little recognized that when Dwight created his *Journal*, at the age of thirty-nine, he was then concluding the most optimistic and open-minded part of his career. Dwight's disappointment at the outbreak of the Mexican War in 1846 was compounded by a strong sense of loss on the closing in 1847 of Brook Farm, the experimental utopian community in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, which had been his home since 1841. In the early and mid-1840s, by contrast, he had flourished in musical as well as literary, educational, and reform activities. During those years of learning, Dwight had formulated his musical convictions as he heard many of Beethoven's large-scale works in orchestral performance, primarily in Boston. A review of the documents from the period before 1847 illuminates Dwight's pioneering role in articulating a musically progressive outlook atypical of that era in America.

PART ONE



*Approaches to
Beethoven's Symphonies,
1835–1842*

