

ARTS & LETTERS

hard work, and honesty—the virtues extolled in the stories of Horatio Alger—no longer guaranteed material success. In this new society, inheriting wealth seemed the only way to individualism and freedom; it “repudiated the crushing social environment and affirmed individual possibility and special fate in a world otherwise determined.”

The image of inherited wealth drawn by such authors as James represented an escape from the “frantic acquisitiveness” that dominated American life. Characters were catapulted into wealth and high status, as Zanger points out, in a way that carefully avoided “any realistic examination of the practical and moral problems attached to the accumulation of money.”

Ultimately, says Zanger, an aristocracy of inherited wealth contradicts the American ideal of the self-made man. Yet as long as fame and fortune appear out of reach to all but a select few, the popular longing for instant success will remain.

Romanticizing Beethoven

“The Beethoven Mystique in Romantic Art, Literature, and Music” by William S. Newman, in *Musical Quarterly* (Summer 1983), Circulation Office, 48-02 48th Ave., Woodside, N.Y. 11377.

“Mystic prophet of music” is how Victor Hugo described Ludwig von Beethoven. The mere mention of the composer’s name brings to mind the wild hair, rumpled clothes, and intense gaze of a tormented artist.

Such images of Beethoven, however, are largely fictitious, writes Newman, professor emeritus of music at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. They are the product of a Romantic movement “aroused to accept him in terms of its own concerns.”

In fact, Beethoven (1780–1827) represents two distinct periods, the late 18th-century “classical” era and the start of 19th-century Romanticism. His brilliantly unconventional music lent legitimacy to the longing of Romantic composers, writers, and artists for self-expression and freedom from classical artistic forms. In turn, they portrayed Beethoven in art and literature as a redeemer or prophet, a magician, a social revolutionary, and an innocent “wild child.” In short, they made the composer into all the things they saw as necessary to create great art, all the things they wanted to be.

Beethoven at the piano “looks like a wizard, overpowered by the demons whom he himself has called up,” declared British writer (and Prime Minister) Sir John Russell in 1825. Artist Friedrich Geselschap portrayed Beethoven with a choir of angels in the background; his French colleague, Antoine Bourdelle, simply inscribed his sculpture of the composer with the words, “to the man and to the God Beethoven.” Toward the end of the 19th century, Newman observes, some European writers came to view the joyous finale to the Ninth Symphony as “the Marseillaise of Humanity,” a revolutionary call to brotherhood and socialism.

World War I brought the end of the Romantic movement and a more

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A heroic 1892 portrayal of Beethoven. The composer's increasing deafness after age 20 made his achievements seem all the more awesome.

sober artistic assessment of Beethoven. The French composer Claude Debussy, while admiring the German's musical genius, failed to discern godlike qualities. "Beethoven hadn't two cents of literary worth in him," he remarked.

The Romantics' Beethoven mystique lingers, however, in popular perceptions of the composer. Today's audiences still enjoy the fantasy, Newman writes, along with such masterpieces as the *Moonlight Sonata* and the Fifth Symphony.

OTHER NATIONS

The Swiss Army

"The Swiss Army" by John McPhee, in *The New Yorker* (Oct. 31 and Nov. 7, 1983), 25 West 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036.

For nearly 500 years, Switzerland has stayed out of Europe's wars by relying on what the Swiss call the "Porcupine Principle." The formula is simple, reports McPhee, a *New Yorker* writer: The tiny nation bristles with arms and its people stand ready to fight.

Topography—the Jura mountains and the Alps—makes Switzerland