Tolkien and Beethoven

by John A. Ellison

"Even as they reached the Cross-Roads, and took the path to the ghastly city of Minas Morgul, a great darkness issued from Mordor, covering all the lands." So runs the prefatory synopsis before *The Return of the King*. The onset of the Great Darkness, as first perceived by Frodo and Samwise as they reach and then leave the Cross-Roads, clearly has symbolic as well as descriptive and dramatic significance. It reaches Minas Tirith, and Gandalf's immediate reaction to it seems like a momentary expression on his part of absolute despair. "There will be no dawn." The power of evil seems to have got beyond control, and the despair that momentarily touches Gandalf then engulfs Denethor. But the cock crows, as in a later age of the world it will do for St. Peter, and the dawn arrives. In saluting the destruction of the evil power, and the commencement of a Fourth Age, on the Field of Cormallen, "a great Shadow has departed". Gandalf evokes the imagery of darkness dispelled by light, in the same way as Mozart's Sarastro evokes it to salute the "Age of Enlightenment", the passing of the *ancien régime* and the dawn of romanticism, as the evil power of the Queen of Night and her servants is destroyed at the end of *The Magic Flute*. There is no more typical instance of "eucatastrophe", as Tolkien calls it, than this, unless it be the opening of the last movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, which has been interpreted often enough as a symbol of the dawn of the "Age of Enlightenment", of which it is one manifestation. Every music-lover knows the passage: how the first section of the third movement returns at the end of it damped down into a spectral parody of itself, to be followed by "the great darkness" spreading itself like a pall in the strings while the kettle-drum pulsates softly in the distance. Then from afar the key brightens to C major and a sudden crescendo precipitates the listener into the blaze of sound with which the triumphant finale opens.

Everyone who knows Beethoven's fifth symphony also knows how the same passage comes back in a different form in the middle of the last movement, to be swept aside again by the great crescendo and the triumphant opening music of the finale. This time the feeling evoked is a memory of past terror, not its actuality; one cannot experience the same dramatic crisis twice in the same way. Strange to say, Tolkien, in recapitulating the fall of Barad-dûr in counterpoint with the growing comradeship of Éowyn and Faramir, watching on the walls of Minas Tirith, does something very similar. "Another vast mountain of darkness arose, towering up like a wave that should engulf the world [...] 'Then you think that Darkness is coming?' said Éowyn. 'Darkness Unescapable?' But a few lines later, "the Shadow departed and the sun was unveiled and light leapt forth, and in all the houses of the City men sang for the joy that welled up in their hearts from what source they could not tell." This passage represents one of Tolkien's most original formal devices. The reader cannot experience the emotions aroused by the fall of Barad-dûr and the passing of "the great darkness" in the same way twice. The memory of it comes back while Faramir and Éowyn themselves confront it directly. Thereby their subsequent rapprochement and falling in love become believable. Because we have seen them, as they think, together facing the prospect of imminent death, there is no sense of the author's having resorted to an external device as a means of tying up an inconvenient loose end in the plot.

These two pairs of instances of Tolkien's writing and Beethoven's music, seen as analogues, illustrate a community of interest they share as artists. They adopt certain well-defined moral and ethical points of view, and in so doing they appeal to and arouse straightforward emotions of a very similar kind. They are both working, one could say, towards the same ends. This is not to imply that one can, or ought to try to, set up some kind of direct comparison between them as artists. Beethoven is acknowledged as one of the supreme masters in the history of the arts, because for upwards of a century and a half educated people everywhere have concurred in regarding him as such. On these terms, it is too early, historically speaking, to try to predict what Tolkien's eventual status may turn out to be. On the other hand, it is possible to cite instances which lead one to suppose that his status will become established as significant and important, one day. The recapitulation of 'the great darkness' as a means of making real the love of Éowyn and Faramir surely is such an instance, a "stroke of genius", and one of a decidedly Beethovenian cast.

Tolkien, both in his letters and in his imaginative writings, frequently makes his own love of music evident. There is no need for any attempt to establish or identify any sort of direct "influence", but it may all the same be instructive to look for the kind of musical experience he may have had - indeed, in one direction, must have had. Experience, that is, apart from the music of his Church, in particular, Gregorian plainchant, which he seems to have regarded as a real-life equivalent of "Elvish song". This would represent, rather, a "foreign" or "exotic" element in the musical world of Middle-earth, in the same sense as "foreign", or "exotic" idioms of which composers of the classical and romantic periods have frequently made use in order to define particular atmospheres; the ancient "liturgical" chants that frequently appear in Russian opera, for example. The significant fact is the extent to which, before and between the two world wars, and even after the second one, Beethoven's music dominated the musical scene in England and the experience of the musical layman. This is difficult to recall today. It is equally difficult nowadays, just after Mozart's centenary year, to recall a time when his music was still regarded as "Dresden china stuff", pretty but superficial, unworthy in comparison with the high seriousness and sublimity of the three giants, Bach, Beethoven and Brahms (the latter's first symphony was sometimes spoken of as "Beethoven's tenth"). The reverence accorded to J.S.Bach was of a different, quasi-religious kind, attendance at Passions or oratorios ranking as a sort of secular substitute for attendance at church. Haydn was treated more as an advance-guard for Beethoven than as a great master in his own right; Schubert's music was often hopelessly misunderstood, and in any case, few of the general musical public were acquainted with more than a handful of his works.

How might Tolkien have related to all this, and how far could Beethoven's music have formed part of his experience? In one field - the piano sonatas - it must have done. Edith Tolkien, so Humphrey Carpenter tells us[1], was, prior to her marriage, at one time set for a career as a piano teacher, and possibly as a soloist. If she was able even to contemplate the latter option, she must have been an unusually gifted player, something far more than an enthusiastic and talented amateur. Carpenter goes on to say that though in consequence of her marriage she had to give up any thought of a professional career in music, "she continued to play regularly until old age, and her music delighted Ronald."[2] The mainstays of the pianist's repertoire then were, firstly, the waltzes, nocturnes and ballades, etc., of Chopin, and secondly, the sonatas of Beethoven. It is interesting to note that these two composers are mentioned in Tolkien's published letters, together with - by implication, not by name - Verdi (so also are Elgar and Walton, but not a propos of their music). It is also difficult to believe that Tolkien, as an avowed music-lover, was unfamiliar with at least some of the standard orchestral works of Beethoven, such as the *Eroica* and *Pastoral* symphonies, or the fifth or the seventh. Obviously he was not a consistent listener and concertgoer as C.S.Lewis was; we know quite a lot about Lewis's musical interests from the diaries kept by his brother Warren Lewis.[3] There were probably at this time more opportunities available in Oxford for hearing music of various kinds performed than in any other place in Britain with the exception of London, particularly after the Oxford Subscription Concerts were re-established in the 1920s through the generosity of Sir Thomas Beecham. Most twentieth-century music, however (other than that of British composers led by Elgar and Vaughan Williams) remained very much off-limits as far as the British musical public was concerned. It seemed to be difficult, discordant and cacophonous.

It may possibly be that the Ainulindalë reflects something of this whole background. Probably such composers as Bartók or Stravinsky (assuming that he ever encountered them) would have appeared to Tolkien like real-life counterparts of Melkor, sowers of discord and tumult in the midst of the Music of the Ainur. The whole concept of "the themes of music" propounded by Iluvatar and then developed by the Ainur, hints at an intelligent layman's understanding of musical form, presumably derived from commentaries or analytical programme notes. The best known of such sources was (and in many ways still is) represented by the essays of Donald Tovey. These started life individually as concert programme notes, mostly dealing with standard orchestral or choral works; eventually these were collected and published as a whole.[4] In that form they have become enormously influential and widely quoted; Tovey's brilliance as an expositor and the wit and clarity of his style have resulted in their being widely read by laymen as well as musicians (it was Tovey, incidentally, who applied the phrase "the great darkness" to the passage at the end of the third movement of Beethoven's fifth symphony). Edith Tolkien would no doubt have been familiar with Tovey's analyses of Beethoven's piano sonatas, but we cannot, of course, know if Tolkien himself ever dipped into any of his writings. There are one or two turns of phrase in the published letters, which nevertheless lead one to suspect that this could have been the case. Had he ever wanted to read any kind of commentary on music which he heard or expected to hear, they would have provided exactly what he required.

There was one twentieth-century composer whose music proved an exception, as far as the "isolationist" state of the British musical public was concerned. This was Sibelius, a composer Tolkien is known to have admired, although how much of his music he actually heard is not clear. Sibelius of course is the outstanding representative in music of that "Northern-ness" which is so much a part of Tolkien's artistic make-up. His particular significance in the present context is that English writers on music at the time tended to see him as a lineal descendant of Beethoven, the only one of their contemporaries deserving of such an accolade. Bernard Shaw indeed described him as "carrying on Beethoven's business". The two most popular symphonies of Sibelius, the second and the fifth, the only ones frequently played at that time, are the very two that clearly display the same progression from conflict and doubt to triumph, from darkness to light, as Beethoven - especially in his fifth symphony - evokes, and as Tolkien evokes in *The Lord of the Rings*.

The progression "from darkness to light", as the outcome of a conflict between the power of good and the power of evil, provides Tolkien's history and mythology with a moral foundation, and *The Lord of the Rings* with a dramatic focus. It also provides an underlying background for the whole "classical" period in music (that is to say, music of the age of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven) and affects a very large proportion of the music written subsequently up to the middle of the twentieth century (the proportion of "classical" and "romantic" works which end in doubt, tragedy or defeat, as for instance Brahms's fourth symphony does, is relatively small). This is because it is "built into" all tonal music, that is to say music written in keys related to each other in a specific order, in effect comprising nearly all the music written between the late seventeenth and mid-twentieth centuries. Major keys and simple harmony equate with positive values, with "good"; minor keys with sadness or tragedy; dissonance with the forces of evil: the most dissonant interval in tonal music, the augmented fourth, was called *diabolus in musica* in the Middle Ages. Wagner widened the range of dissonance that could be accepted within the boundaries of tonal music, and in doing so greatly increased music's scope for expressing evil specifically. Tolkien in the Ainulindale is, in effect, presenting all this in the guise of a parable. When Ilúvatar speaks of the "secret thoughts of [Melkor's] mind" as "but a part of the whole and tributary to its glory", the parable may be said to take on a Wagnerian dimension.

The theological implications of Tolkien's imagery of light amidst darkness have been instructively explored by Verlyn Flieger in *Splintered Light*, relating the mythology, particularly as presented in *The Silmarillion*, to Tolkien's religious faith. In this connection it is worth bearing in mind that Beethoven's faith in a personal God, unconventional though it may have been in a doctrinal sense, is as essential to an understanding of his music as Tolkien's is to his mythology. The characteristic response of the artist of the period of "the Age of Enlightenment", of Haydn in *The Creation* and of Beethoven in the Mass in D, the *Missa Solemnis*, to the requirement of presenting the essential articles of their faith, is to do so in the most dramatic terms possible. Beethoven's statement of what to Tolkien is the ultimate "eucatastrophe", the *Et resurrexit* of the Mass in D, is one sentence only, a single shaft of blinding light into the darkness; by contrast, its equivalent in Bach's B minor Mass is a large fully developed formal movement.

The defeat and destruction of the power of evil may be expressed at one level in abstract terms and at another in theological ones. In *The Lord of the Rings* it comes about, not exclusively through the operation of divine providence, but as a result of divine providence working through and interacting with the human attributes of faith, courage and endurance that are called "heroic". These attributes belong, of course, not just to the likely "heroes", such as Aragorn and Éomer, but to the unlikely ones, Frodo and Samwise, Éowyn, Merry and Pippin. They also provide the subject-matter of Beethoven's one opera, *Fidelio* ; as this work is a drama concerned with a particular story, it defines the identity of Tolkien's and Beethoven's aims in much more detail. I do not know whether Tolkien knew the opera or ever saw it, but on internal evidence alone one would be at least as justified in deducing some kind of influence or link as one would be in regard to most of the works, literary or other, which have at one time or another been put forward as possible influences on his works. At this point I will outline its plot briefly:

Florestan, the "hero" of the opera, has been illegally imprisoned for political reasons. The person responsible is his political opponent Don Pizarro, the governor of the prison in which the action is set. Florestan is kept in solitary confinement and semi-starvation, below and away from the cells in which the other prisoners are housed. Leonora, Florestan's wife, in order to obtain access to the cell in which she believes her husband to be held, disguises herself in men's clothing and enters the service of the prison in the character of an assistant to Rocco, the head gaoler. A message is brought to Don Pizarro that a Minister will shortly arrive on a visit of inspection on behalf of the state authorities. This will result in the illegal action's being exposed. He has not so far nerved himself to attempt Florestan's murder, but now plans to carry it out before the Minister's arrival. He gives orders for a trumpeter posted on the tower gateway to signal the Minister's approach as soon as this is seen. Rocco is ordered to dig a grave under Florestan's cell.

The second of the opera's two acts shows us Florestan alone in his cell, the entry of Rocco and Leonora, who commence to dig the grave, and then the appearance of Don Pizarro, intent on murder. In the quartet which provides the opera with its dramatic climax, Don Pizarro advances on Florestan, dagger in hand, is checked by Leonora, who darts forward to confront him, points a pistol at his head and throws off her disguise, exclaiming, "Tod' erst sein Weib!" ("Kill his wife first!"). Before Don Pizarro has time to recover from his amazement, the trumpet fanfare sounds offstage, signalling the Minister's arrival. Don Pizarro's scheme collapses and he is ushered out. In the

final scene of the opera, set in the prison courtyard (it should be brilliantly lit in contrast to the scene before it), the Minister enters, proclaims universal justice and brotherhood, and recognises an old friend in Florestan. Don Pizarro is removed to await such punishment as may be thought suitable, and everyone else on stage, the other principals, the released prisoners and the local populace, join in "praising with great praise" the courage and heroism of Leonora as the saviour of her husband's life.

One or two features of this tale are easily recognisable as being reminiscent of scenes or episodes in *The Lord of the Rings*. Likewise the relationship of the hero and heroine may perhaps be thought to mirror that of Beren and Lúthien, notably as regards the episode of the rescue of Beren from Tol-in-Gaurhoth. In general terms it is, to start with, clear that the tale is almost intentionally non-realistic (incidentally, the opera as it is now known and performed is a re-working of an initial version called *Leonora*, in which a number of "realistic" features were eliminatedu. The precise timing of the Minister's arrival, at the point at which the crisis of the action takes place, is of course an outrageous coincidence; so is the timing of the moment of the Ring's destruction to happen after the battle of the Morannon has begun, but before it has had time to do any serious damage to the Gondorian-Rohan force. The details of Florestan's "political" offence are left in obscurity, as are the nature and constitution of the apparently benevolent state of which the Minister is the visible representative. The story is a means of symbolising positive and negative human attributes; good and evil are starkly opposed, much more simplistically than in *The Lord of the Rings*. Florestan and Leonora are unrelievedly "good", and Don Pizarro is unrelievedly "evil", and it is not their business to be anything else.

The completeness with which Tolkien, through Éowyn's disguise as "Dernhelm", takes over the well-known operatic convention of "the woman dressed in man's clothing", is particularly striking. No doubt it is the product of common ancestry; Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* is almost a handbook of operatic conventions before they became established as such. I am not simply referring to the incident at which Éowyn, like Leonora, throws off her disguise and reveals her femininity at a crucial point of confrontation. The crisis that occurs at this point in the story embraces the confrontation of Gandalf with the Nazgûl-Lord, during which the latter's threats are uttered in very much the same sort of language as Don Pizarro employs while advancing upon Florestan. It occurs, as does the crisis of *Fidelio*, at the finish of a race against time. The horns of Rohan strike in at cock-crow with the same kind of timing, and the same kind of emotional effect, as does the trumpet-blast from behind the scenes, cutting through the tumult in Florestan's cell which results from the revelation of Leonora's identity. The race against time has been in progress, in *The Lord of the Rings*, from the moment of the arrival of the messenger of Gondor before Théoden at

Dunharrow, and in the opera, from the point, midway through the first act, at which Don Pizarro received the dispatch warning of the Minister's impending arrival.

Both the opera and *The Lord of the Rings*, in the way they each employ the imagery of darkness in opposition to light, intensify it as crisis draws near. In the latter, this is particularly evident in the section which describes the passage of Frodo and Samwise through Shelob's tunnels, where the palpable nature of the darkness, more intense than anything the hobbits have yet experienced, is vividly evoked. Its equivalent in the opera is the orchestral introduction to the second act which "paints" the shifting darkness in Florestan's cell, on which the curtain rises. The opening words of Florestan's solo "Gott! Welch Dunkel hier! ..." ("God! What darkness here! ...") accurately reflect the emotions of horror and loneliness experienced by the hobbits in their desperate extremity. In the final section of the aria which follows, he imagines himself to be seeing a vision of Leonora as a hope and inspiration bringing light amid the darkness, as Frodo lifts the phial of Galadriel and beats off Shelob and the demons of doubt and despair which she symbolises.

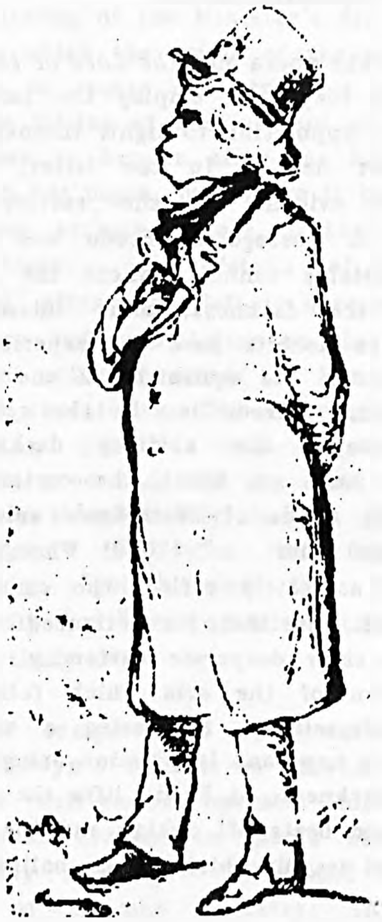
The ordeal which Frodo and Samwise undergo, after the breaking of the Fellowship, is a particularly private one, and seems to become even more so after they have parted company with Gollum, complex and ambiguous as their relationship may have been. The ceremonial scenes on the Field of Cormallen and the crowning of King Elessar throw this, by contrast, into relief, particularly when, in the first of them, much to their confusion and embarrassment, the hobbits are publicly honoured. These scenes are like set pieces which provide the action of *The Lord of the Rings* proper with a ceremonial finale; the rest of the book fulfils, in a structural sense, the function of an epilogue[5]. Their purpose is to give the eucatastrophe, the defeat and destruction of Sauron's power, time and space in which to realise its proper emotional impact; likewise the opera ends with an oratorio-like final scene, in which the chorus hymns Leonora's courage and endurance, supplying an exact counterpart of the host's "Praise them with great praise!" as the hobbits are led before them. Not everyone has been able to take these scenes in the spirit in which they were originally intended. An early German commentator on Tolkien[6] complained that the tone of the second of these scenes was over-optimistic, being full of what he was pleased to call "party rally bombast". Present day producers of the opera likewise seem unable to resist the temptation to meddle with the finale in an effort to cast doubt and depression over its mood of triumphant optimism. This parallelism of the two finales, of the opera and of *The Lord of the Rings*, is nevertheless highly significant as regards the latter. It brings to the fore one of its major themes, one that so far does not seem to have received much attention from writers and commentators on Tolkien's work generally. This is the theme of human freedom, which is to be developed in his "structural epilogue".

It has long been commonplace for scholars and writers dealing with Beethoven's life and music, to regard the theme of human freedom, and his known sympathy with the "revolutionary" ideals of his time, as being of cardinal importance. There is the well-known story (though doubts have been recently expressed as to its authenticity) of how Beethoven tore up the title-page of the *Eroica* symphony, with its dedication to Napoleon, after hearing that Napoleon had had himself proclaimed Emperor. The association has remained ever since. During the Second World War the fifth symphony was seen throughout occupied Europe as symbolising the world-wide hope for the eventual defeat and destruction of Nazism. Much more recently the destruction of the Berlin Wall was celebrated by a special performance of the ninth symphony by players drawn from the orchestras of the former East and West German states.

"As for me, I pity even his slaves." The immediate outcome of Sauron's passing and the destruction of Barad-dûr is that far and wide the human slaves of Mordor are released from their servitude. The theme had already surfaced in *The Silmarillion*, with the destruction of Sauron's power in Tol-in-Gaurhoth: "Then

Lúthien stood upon the bridge, and declared her power; and the spell was loosed that bound stone to stone, and the gates were thrown down, and the walls opened, and the pits laid bare; and many thralls and captives came forth in wonder and and dismay, shielding their eyes against the pale moonlight, for they had lain long in the darkness of Sauron." In the last chapters of *The Lord of the Rings* the universal nature of the theme of freedom is demonstrated by the way in which it is related to local events and happenings on a small scale. The corruption and enslavement of the Shire is one local result, seen in close-up, of the world-wide threat which the Ruling Ring had represented. The Scouring of the Shire results, among everything else, in the release of the prisoners confined in the Lockholes, who come stumbling out of their dark and gloomy cells into the sunlight, just as does the chorus of prisoners in one very famous passage in *Fidelio*, in which they are released temporarily from their cells, and the music describes their shuffling forward gradually into the sunlight. The opera relates the local and humble to the universal, exactly as does *The Lord of the Rings*. The prison is a small local lock-up in a remote district; the first act opens on a scene of everyday domestic activity; Leonora's resolve to save the life of her husband, before she has identified him, becomes a resolve to save another's life "whoever you are". It is precisely this relation of the local and particular to the universal, shared by *Fidelio* and *The Lord of the Rings*, that renders the theme of freedom, common to both, so powerful. It is an especially contemporary theme, with Tolkien as Beethoven, during a time which has so recently witnessed the spectacle of the vassal states of Eastern Europe achieving independence, and the collapse and disintegration of the monolith of power and tyranny within the former Soviet Union itself.

"O.K., Ilúvatar - my turn now."



Notes

1. Carpenter, H. *J.R.R.Tolkien: a biography* Allen and Unwin, 1977 p.158.

2. *Ibid.* p.153.

3. *Brothers and friends: the diaries of Major Warren Hamilton Lewis* ed. C. S. Kilby and M.L.Mead. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982.

4. Tovey, D.F. *Essays in musical analysis* (6 vols.) Oxford University Press, 1935-9.

5. In a structural sense, i.e. not in the sense of an "epilogue" asTolkien uses the term to describe the passage following the end of the work (but originally left unpublished) in which Sam is shown, years afterwards, in his family circle.