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And a happy birthday (#244) to Glorious LVB

By [David Post](#)

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Beethoven is a singularity in the history of art—a phenomenon of dazzling and disconcerting force. He not only left his mark on all subsequent composers but also molded entire institutions. The professional orchestra arose, in large measure, as a vehicle for the incessant performance of Beethoven's symphonies. The art of conducting emerged in his wake. The modern piano bears the imprint of his demand for a more resonant and flexible instrument. Recording technology evolved with Beethoven in mind: the first commercial 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ r.p.m. LP, in 1931, contained the Fifth Symphony, and the duration of first-generation compact disks was fixed at seventy-five minutes so that the Ninth Symphony could unfurl without interruption. After Beethoven, the concert hall came to be seen not as a venue for diverse, meandering entertainments but as an austere memorial to artistic majesty. Listening underwent a fundamental change. To follow Beethoven's dense, driving narratives, one had to lean forward and pay close attention. The musicians' platform became the stage of an invisible drama, the temple of a sonic revelation.

Many reasons to celebrate Beethoven, on this, his 244th birthday (or on any other day, for that matter). To my ears, nobody else has ever captured in any medium the overwhelming power of human freedom better than he did. Is there another work of art that could have better [celebrated the fall of the Berlin Wall](#) than the 9th Symphony? Maybe only Beethoven's 7th Symphony – if you don't know it (or even if you do), [check out this performance of the last movement, by Carlos Kleiber conducting the Amsterdam Concertgebouw \(I think\)](#) among many, many other such examples. When those French horns come in (at around 5:40 in this clip), I always see Beethoven, fist in the air, speaking truth to power, truth about the indestructibility of the human soul and the human spirit. According to legend, LVB originally dedicated his 3rd symphony, the Eroica, to Napoleon, thinking that he embodied the high ideals of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity of the French Revolution – a dedication he removed when Napoleon declared himself Emperor; his secretary, Ferdinand Ries, wrote:

In writing this symphony, Beethoven had been thinking of Buonaparte, but Buonaparte while he was First Consul. At that time Beethoven had the highest esteem for him, and compared him to the greatest consuls of Ancient Rome. Not only I, but many of Beethoven's closer friends, saw this symphony on his table, beautifully copied in manuscript, with the word "Buonaparte" inscribed at the very top of the title-page and "Ludwig van Beethoven" at the very bottom ...

I was the first to tell him the news that Buonaparte had declared himself Emperor, whereupon he broke into a rage and exclaimed, "So he is no more than a common mortal! Now, too, he will tread under foot all the rights of Man, indulge only his ambition; now he will think himself superior to all men, become a tyrant!" Beethoven went to the table, seized the top of the title-page, tore it in half and threw it on the floor. The page had to be recopied, and it was only now that the symphony received the title Sinfonia Eroica.

That's the Beethoven – the Beethoven who flings the manuscript, at least metaphorically, in Napoleon's face — that I hear in the finale of Symphony #7. There is no more stirring and life-affirming music on earth than that – and it may be that there never will be. So [happy birthday](#), old man. My guess – my hope, at least – is that in 500 years, hardly anyone will remember who Napoleon was or what he did, but Beethoven and his music will live on. And if that turns out not to be the case, so much the worse for our species.

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