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Flea Circus on the Keyboard, or Beethoven in Auerbach's Cellar

Political Satire in Beethoven

In a high-spirited joking letter to his violinist friend Karl Holz from 24 August 1825, addressed to “Bestes Maha[g]oni Holz!” (“Best Mahogany Wood!”), Beethoven places the music publisher Carl Friedrich Peters and the former editor of the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, Johann Friedrich Rochlitz, in *Auerbach's Cellar* in Leipzig. The rich imagery of his description of the pair rewards close examination. Beethoven refers to Peters as a “Höllenhund” (“hound of hell”) and to Rochlitz as Mephistopheles. Both Peters and Rochlitz were residents in that city, but the delicious Faustian resonances of Beethoven's fanciful allusions center on Rochlitz:

der Höllenhund [...] kann warten, u. sich derweil mit Mephistophiles [...] in *Auerbachs Keller* unterhalten, welchen letzteren nächstens *Belzebub* der oberste der Teufel bey den ohren nehmen wird. [The hound of hell [...] can wait and chat meanwhile in *Auerbach's Cellar* with Mephistopheles [...]. He will shortly be seized by the ears by Beelzebub, chief of the devils.]¹

The expression “Höllenhund” is not merely a derogatory epithet like “Schweinehund” (“pig dog”) joined to the hellish associations of the demonic Mephistopheles. In mythology, Cerberus is a three-headed hell hound whereas Beelzebub is a demonic fly known as “Lord of the Flies”. Mephistopheles in Auerbach's Wine Cellar of course calls up associations with Part I of *Faust* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. More than two weeks after receiving Beethoven's mischievous letter, on the 9th of September, Holz continued in this vein when he asked Beethoven about Rochlitz, writing in a conversation notebook of the deaf composer:

When should Mephistopheles Rochlitz arrive from Leipzig?²

These references to Rochlitz as Mephistopheles touch on issues that reach far beyond Beethoven's occasional irritation over certain critiques and commentaries published in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* over the years. Direct contact between Beethoven

¹ BGA 2043. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. Beethoven refers to his correspondence with the two “hounds of hell” (the publishers Peters and Mathias Artaria), who are prone to lick and gnaw his brain to pieces. The diabolical ensemble in Beethoven's letter is rounded out by his housekeeper Barbara Holzmann, described as “satanas in der Küche” (“Satan in the kitchen”). For helpful comments on this essay, I am grateful to Manfred Osten, Bruce Rosenstock and Katherine Syer.

² BKh 8, p. 122.

and Rochlitz had begun by early 1804, and the involvement of the Leipzig editor with Beethoven's music extended beyond the composer's death, notably through his intervention in devising a new text for Beethoven's ceremonial cantata *Der glorreiche Augenblick*, which was first published in the 1830s, re-titled *Preis der Tonkunst (In Praise of Music)*. Another clue to the context of Beethoven's humorous allusions is offered by a fragmentary canon also from September 1825, "Uns geht es kannibalisch wohl als wie fünfhundert Säuen," Hess 302, a curious piece that is sketched next to Beethoven's work on the *Große Fuge*, the original finale of his Quartet in B \flat , op. 130.³ This expression of unrestrained hedonistic revelry heightened by *Schadenfreude* challenges adequate translation; an attempt might be "We're happy as cannibals, or as five hundred sows." As we shall see, this vocal piece is also connected to Auerbach's Cellar through Goethe's *Faust*.

Auerbach's Cellar is at once a very real place in Leipzig and a setting for fictional events, blending life and art, *Leben und Kunst*. This wine cellar exists up to the present as a familiar Leipzig landmark, its history and aura much enhanced by the great writer who frequented the establishment during 1765–68 while he was a student. The genesis of Goethe's *Faust* project was long and complex, reaching back to at least 1771–72, if not earlier. By 1775, when the young poet left his family home at Frankfurt for Weimar, he had developed a preliminary manuscript, or *Urfaust*.⁴ Much later, in 1790, this first attempt was superseded by the more extensive, first printed version, *Faust, ein Fragment*, whereas the full publication of *Faust I* took place in 1808.⁵ It is striking that the young Beethoven at Bonn had gained access to Goethe's *Faust, ein Fragment*, so soon after its publication and responded to it musically. In the miscellany of his early sketches known as the "Kafka" Sketchbook, we find part of a setting of Mephistophe's "Flohlied" ("Song of the Flea"), a key episode of the action that takes place in Auerbach's Cellar.⁶

This brings us back to "Mephistophe's" Rochlitz. Friedrich Rochlitz was associated with an effort to encourage Beethoven to write music to Goethe's *Faust*. Various sources document Beethoven's abiding interest in *Faust* over the years. Around 1799 he made

3 The sketchbook is Autograph 9, Bundle 2, held at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preussischer Kulturbesitz; the canon is written on fol. 4 ν .

4 This manuscript has not survived, but a lady of the Weimar court, Luise von Göchhausen, made a copy, which was first published by Erich Schmidt as *Goethes Faust in ursprünglicher Gestalt* and is known as the 'Urfaust'. See Erich Schmidt: *Goethes Faust in ursprünglicher Gestalt nach der Göchhausenschen Abschrift herausgegeben*, Weimar 1888; and Eudo C. Mason: *Goethe's Faust. Its Genesis and Purport*, Berkeley 1967, pp. 39–91. The "Auerbach's Cellar" episode is the third scene in the *Urfaust*, and already contains the series of drinking songs, although it is otherwise written almost completely in prose.

5 For discussions of the genesis of Goethe's *Faust*, see among other sources, Eudo C. Mason: *Goethe's Faust. Its Genesis and Purport*; John Gearey: *Goethe's Faust. The Making of Part I*, New Haven and London 1981, and Jörg Göres: *Afterword to Goethe. Faust Erster Teil*, Frankfurt am Main 1976, pp. 211–266. The "Auerbach's Cellar" scene has roots both in Goethe's early experiences in Leipzig and in his adaption of sources during the formative period of work on the project up to 1775.

6 This sketch is found on fol. 100 r of the "Kafka" Sketchbook, and is transcribed in: Ludwig van Beethoven. *Autograph Miscellany from Circa 1786 to 1799*, ed. Joseph Kerman, London 1970, vol. 2, p. 69.

musical sketches for a setting of Gretchen's "Meine Ruh is hin".⁷ In 1808, the year Goethe's *Faust I* appeared, a writer in Cott's *Morgenblatt* commented that "The clever Beethoven has a notion to compose Goethe's *Faust* as soon as he has found somebody who will adapt it for the stage for him." In August 1814, two years after his direct encounter with Goethe at Teplitz, a report surfaced about plans for an alleged operatic collaboration of the two artists on the *Faust* subject.⁸ Max Unger advanced the idea that Goethe and Beethoven might have discussed operatic plots at their meetings in 1812 and settled on *Faust*. For his part, Rochlitz wrote at some length about three meetings and discussions with Beethoven at Vienna in 1822, but his accounts contain inconsistencies and Maynard Solomon has cast doubt on their reliability, even questioning whether Rochlitz met Beethoven at all.⁹ Solomon is surely too skeptical, since documents such as Holz's conversation-book entry cited above point toward the likelihood of some direct contact in Vienna during the 1820s. Moreover, Beethoven's longstanding fascination with *Faust* had already intersected with Rochlitz many years earlier, which helps explain why the editor became known in Beethoven's circle as "Mephistopheles".

Beethoven's interaction with critics and publishers was admittedly not always smooth. With Carl Friedrich Peters, for instance, the composer experienced aggravation in March of 1823, when the Leipzig publisher emphatically declined to publish Beethoven's set of Five Bagatelles, the pieces eventually issued as op. 119 nos. 7–11. Peters explained to Beethoven that he "imagined having cute little pieces" but was disappointed that these bagatelles were "entirely too small" and claimed that "*not one person* wants to believe me that these are by *you*."¹⁰ One can understand why Beethoven would have felt justified in perceiving not only a lack of aesthetic discrimination from Peters but also an ethical problem, since the publisher raised doubts about the integrity or even authorship of these outstanding miniatures. That Beethoven thought little of Peters' musical judgment is confirmed by conversation notebook entries by Friedrich Wieck (father of Clara Wieck Schumann) from July 1823. Wieck referred positively to the publisher but was clearly put on the defensive by Beethoven's negative reply, whereupon he conceded about Peters that "Musikken[n]er ist er nicht" ("He's not knowledgeable about music").¹¹

A glib judgment of another kind is lodged in the judgmental closing words of a review that appeared in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* in August 1811, almost certainly by the editor Friedrich Rochlitz. The review concerns Beethoven's six songs of op. 75, three

7 Gustav Nottebohm: "Liegegeliebene Arbeiten", in: Zweite Beethoveniana, Leipzig 1887, p. 575.

8 See concerning these reports Thayer's *Life of Beethoven*, ed. Elliot Forbes, Princeton 1964, pp. 602–603; Max Unger: *Goethes Faust und Beethoven*, in: *Österreichische Musikzeitschrift* 9 (1950), p. 182; and Rudolf Pečman: *Beethovens Opernpläne*, Brno 1981, pp. 20–21.

9 See Solomon's chapter "Beethoven's Creative Process: A Two-Part Invention," in his *Beethoven Essays*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1988), pp. 126–138, esp. 134–36. Rochlitz's account of his alleged meetings with Beethoven is found in *Beethoven: Impressions By His Contemporaries*, ed. O. G. Sonneck, New York 1954; first published 1926, pp. 120–129.

10 *Letters to Beethoven and Other Correspondence*, ed. and trans. Theodore Albrecht, Lincoln 1996, vol. 2, L. 313 (dated 4 March 1823).

11 BKh 3, p. 367.

settings of Goethe joined with other songs based on texts by two other poets. About nos. 5 and 6, strophic settings of texts by Christian Ludwig Reissig, Rochlitz writes the following:

Nos. 5 and 6, which . . . present entirely simple little songs, shall be passed over by this reviewer, since he must admit that he cannot develop a taste for them. In any event they are rather insignificant.¹²

Soon thereafter, in a letter of 9 October 1811 to Breitkopf & Härtel (the publishers of the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*), Beethoven expressed irritation over this review of op. 75 as well as Rochlitz's critical response to the Soldiers Chorus (No. 4) of his oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, op. 85.¹³ Beethoven elaborated here on his negative view of critics more broadly: "one sees how the most wretched scribblers are praised by such critics and how they speak in the harshest way of works of art, and are indeed forced to do so, because they have no proper standard." Continuing in an ironic fashion, he then invites such writers to "criticize as long as you like, I wish you much pleasure; it may give one a little prick like the sting of a gnat, and then it becomes a nice little joke."¹⁴ Beethoven is alluding slyly here to the "Song of the Flea" in *Faust*, substituting the sting of the gnat for the bite of the flea.

Although Beethoven took exception to some of Rochlitz's opinions, he had good reason to be pleased with the critic's enthusiastic and insightful commentary about that very song, his op. 73 no. 3, "From Goethe's *Faust*," composed in 1809. This is his definitive realization of Mephistopheles' "Song of the Flea," based on the same text from the Auerbach's Cellar scene that had attracted Beethoven's attention as early as 1790 at Bonn and again during his initial period at Vienna starting in 1792.¹⁵ It is clear that this part of *Faust* fascinated the composer and became firmly absorbed in his later years into the lore of his jovial circle of friends and colleagues. If Beethoven had ever actually undertaken an opera on *Faust* he likely would have assimilated his "Flea Song" into the larger unfolding narrative, just as Goethe had done in expanding the contents of his early *Urfaust* into the monumental work we know. Something of the larger literary context is reflected in the aforementioned canonic vocal piece "We're as happy as cannibals, or as five hundred sows," a short drinking-song also drawn from Auerbach's Cellar in *Faust*, following the "Song of the Flea". Goethe's original text, "Uns ist ganz kannibalisch wohl/ Als wie fünfhundert Säuen!" is slightly varied in Beethoven's

¹² "No. 5. und 6., die ebenfalls ganz einfache Liederchen enthalten, übergeht Rec., denn er muss gestehen, ihnen keinen Geschmack abgewinnen zu können. Auf jeden Fall sind sie ziemlich unbedeutend." (AmZ 13 [1811], columns 593–595), cited from Ludwig van Beethoven. *Die Werke im Spiegel seiner Zeit*, ed. Stefan Kunze, Laaber 1987, p. 210.

¹³ BGA 523.

¹⁴ This translation is based on the version by J. S. Shedlock in *Beethoven's Letters*, ed. A. C. Kalischer, New York 1972; first published 1926, p. 123–124.

¹⁵ See Douglas Johnson: *Beethoven's Early Sketches in the 'Fischhof Miscellany'* Berlin Autograph 28, Ann Arbor 1980, vol. 1, pp. 399, 441; vol. 2, p. 104.

wording: “Uns geht es kannibalisch wohl als wie fünfhundert Säuen”.¹⁶ Comparison of the colorful language of Goethe's wine cellar scene with the prankish puns of Beethoven and his friends shows further striking points of correspondence. The wooden table that yields wine through the spells of Mephisto is “Der hölzerne Tisch,” whereas the frequent nickname of Karl Holz was “Der Hölzerne” or “the wooden one,” a pun on “Holz” meaning “wood”. For that reason, Beethoven addressed his friend as “Mahagony Holz” in the aforementioned letter.¹⁷ The references to Rhine and Tokay wine and to champagne would have resonated with the composer's drinking parties with his friends.¹⁸ And even the striking expression “Höllenhund” (“hound of hell”) directed toward Peters may owe something to Faust's later, bitter accusation directed at Mephistopheles: “Hund! Abscheuliches Untier!” (“Hound! Execrable monster!”). Mephisto had initially appeared to Faust in the shape of a black poodle, so the canine category applies to him as well.

In *Faust*, Mephisto's *Flohlied* is one of several bawdy drinking songs in Auerbach's Cellar. Immediately before Faust and Mephistopheles enter, the student Brander sings a satirical song, “Es war eine Ratt im Kellernest” (“There was a Rat in the Cellar Nest”), in which his drinking companions Frosch, Siebel and Altmayer enter boisterously as a “chorus” for the concluding rhyming line: “Als hätte sie Lieb im Leibe!” (“As if wasted by love”).¹⁹ The rat feasts gluttonously on butter but then on poison. Following this ironic tale of the demise of the swollen rodent, Faust and Mephistopheles make their entrance, with Mephisto's strophic song, starting “Es war einmal ein König” (“There was once a king”), focusing on a much smaller creature: a flea. Mephisto's *Flohlied* serves as a counterpart to Brander's song, once again involving an emphatic shouting chorus to reinforce the last lines:

Wir knicken und ersticken
Doch gleich, wenn einer sticht.
[But we snap and smother
At once, if someone bites.]

The closing couplet—sung in this instance by the group only at the end of the entire song—encapsulates the political meaning of the *Flohlied*. For the worthless flea is the king's special favorite, who is dressed up and accorded undeserved honors. The flea rises to the rank of minister and bears a star of state, whereupon all his flea relations become courtiers, rich and great, immune from all critique. The last stanza of the song can be

16 This text is supplied in Goethe's original wording rather than Beethoven's in Douglas Johnson, Alan Tyson, and Robert Winter: *The Beethoven Sketchbooks*, Berkeley 1985, p. 430.

17 Beethoven is praising Holz, since mahogany is an esteemed type of wood. Beethoven also dubbed him “Best Splinter from the Cross of Christ,” and “Best lignum crucis.” He once observed to Holz that “wood is a neuter noun,” adding: “So what a contradiction is the masculine form, and what other consequences may be drawn from personified wood?” See BKh 8, pp. 122, 172, and vol. 9, p. 300.

18 In his letter to his nephew Karl of 11 August 1825, Beethoven describes Holz as a heavy drinker: “er trinkt stark unter unß gesagt” (“just between us, he's a heavy drinker”); BGA 2029.

19 This passage appears near the end of *Faust*, Part 1, following the Walpurgis-Night's Dream.

provided with a different, less literal translation of the closing pair of lines conforming to the rhyme:

Solo: At court they were distressed
as the queen and her maidens
were bitten by the pests.
And yet they dared not scratch them,
Or chase the fleas away.
If we are bit, we catch them
And crush without delay.

Chorus: If we are bit, we catch them
And crush without delay.

whereas the original London edition of the song issued in 1810 provides yet another translation:

Solo: Court dames and lords debating
He lov'd to tease and vex,
Of Queen and maids in waiting
He spar'd nor arms nor necks.
Tho' queen nor lords attack it
Shrug, scratch, nor make a fuss,
We smother or we crack it
When'er a flea bites us.

Chorus: We smother or we crack it
When'er a flea bites us.²⁰

Fleas are tiny parasitic creatures with prodigious jumping abilities. It is remarkable how Beethoven has devised motives reflecting these distinct qualities. The swift and nimble, diminutive being that can leap: in the opening ritornello in the piano, those features are adroitly mirrored in the semitone turn figure (the motivic tag for the flea) which springs across entire octaves from the treble into the bass. The detached articulation of the falling octaves embody the imagery of the little leaping flea. Figure 1 shows the first page of the song in Beethoven's autograph score, which is held in the collection of the Beethoven-Haus as Manuscript NE 220.

Mephistopheles can serve to deliver humor in Goethe's *Faust*. Yet even as he brings others in Auerbach's Cellar to lusty laughter, he himself hardly laughs. And he certainly is no great singer.²¹ Consequently, Beethoven keeps the vocal part rather simple, almost in the manner of recitative, with frequent repeated pitches. The text unfolds as a ballad-like narrative, in which, as we have seen, the last sentence is repeated emphatically at the

20 See Alan Tyson: *The Authentic English Editions of Beethoven*, London 1963, pp. 68–71; and Helga Lühning (ed.): *Beethoven. Lieder und Gesänge mit Klavierbegleitung NGA XII/1*, Munich: Henle, 1990, Critical Report, p. 49.

21 John Gearey: *Goethe's Faust. The Making of Part 1*, p. 68.

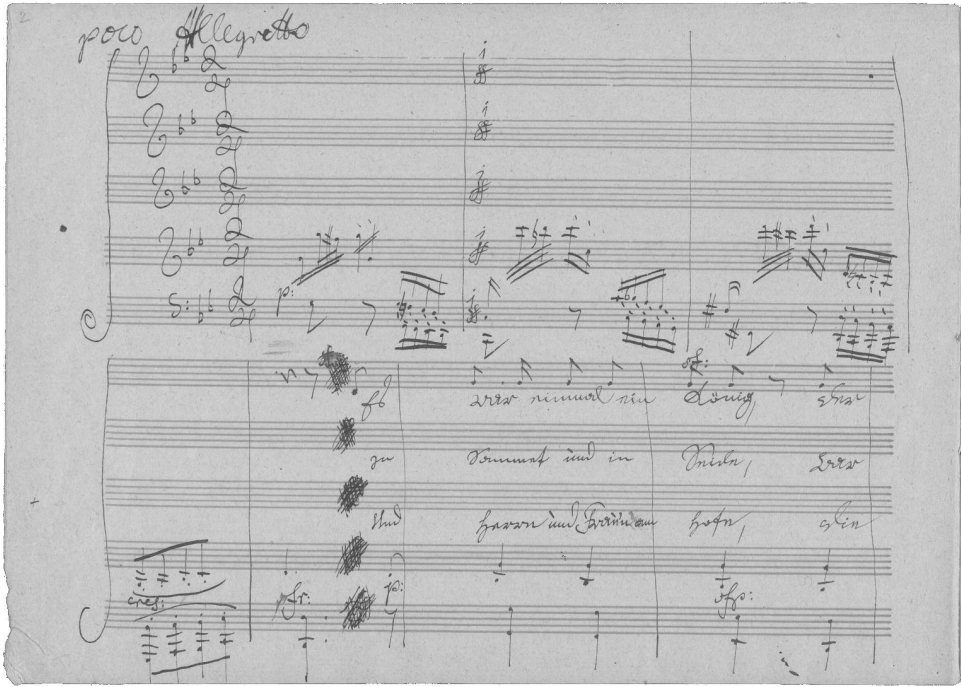


Figure 1: first written page of music in NE 220, Beethoven-Haus

conclusion by the chorus of drinkers: “Wir knicken und ersticken doch gleich, wenn einer sticht.” Beethoven decisively weights the end of each strophe through an accented harmonic shift from G minor to G major, with the voice landing with emphasis on B natural. This closing four-measure phrase of each strophe shifts to *forte*, and a grotesquely parodistic echo follows in the piano, with strident grace-notes and a trill on B \flat , leading into restatement of the ritornello.

At the end of the entire song, the humorous effect is heightened through variation of the text. After the chorus has sung Mephisto's closing lines once, Beethoven adds the word “ja” (“indeed”) in mm. 73 and 75, as we hear a syllabic setting in sixteenth notes up to the final word “sticht” (“bite”), which is strikingly prolonged: “ja, wir ersticken doch, doch gleich, wenn einer sti-----cht”. Figure 2 shows the last page of Beethoven's autograph score.²²

The dramatic reinforcement of the conclusion is lent power through figurative gestures in the piano: the characteristic grace-note figure C-B \flat at “stik-[ken]” in m. 71 recurs melodically in the voice and piano in mm. 73-76 before it is *replaced* by the highly emphatic repeated semitone C-B natural played *fortissimo* in thirty-second notes in m. 79.

22 Helga Lühning adopted the original version of these bars in the *Neue Gesamtausgabe* (NGA XII/1, p. 106 and Critical Report, p. 50). Some singers prefer the version with a closing of “wenn einer sticht” that appeared in a Breitkopf edition in 1827 and in the *Old Gesamtausgabe*.



Figure 2: last page of music in NE 220

The music has now settled decisively into G major, which underlines the message of the ending, shifting the level of discourse from that of a legendary ballade to the present here-and-now, while the ironic tone from the end of the first two stanzas is heightened to sarcastic glee. Yet the motivic stress on the C-B step corresponds precisely to the opening ritornello in the second measure. The gestural subject remains the tiny flea, whose nimble jumping animates each statement of the ritornello.

As fingering for the last two measures Beethoven writes “1 1” over all of the two-note figures. Herein lies the core of the joke. He thereby instructs the pianist to “knicken und ersticken” (“snap and smother”) at exactly those spots on the keyboard where a flea has leapt. The flea circus is thereby brought to an abrupt end through physical annihilation of the parasite! A very specific technique is required to squash the flea(s): two adjacent notes are depressed simultaneously, as the weight of the thumb settles on the lower note. In a few fleeting moments of targeted manual action, the piece is finished and the irritating flea(s) dispatched.

According to a report from Anna Pessiak-Schmerling, Beethoven himself drew attention to the comic character of this song and especially its ending:

Once Beethoven came with the manuscript of his song from *Faust*: “There was once a king who had a great flea”. Aunt and mother needed to try it out. When they came to the end,

Beethoven while laughing showed them how it had to be played, and took always two tones with the thumbs just as one would squash a flea.²³

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We are now in a position to evaluate “Mephistopheles” Rochlitz’s commentary about Beethoven’s *Floblied*:

Dies einzige Stück, wie es Hr. v. B. hier aufgefasst und von der ersten bis zur letzten Note festgehalten hat, ist mehr werth, als ganze Bände mittelmässigkeit untadelhafter Lieder. Man muss sich dabey die ganze wilde Scene und ihre Absicht, auch die geniale Teufelej und Laune des Rhapsoden denken: es steckt das wirklich alles in der abenteuerlichen, burlesken, aus schwerfällig gemüthlicher Antiquität und ganz moderner Malerey (besonders im Chor bey dem *Knicken*.) zusammengesetzten Musik.²⁴ [This single piece, as Mr. v[an] B[eethoven] has shaped it here from the first to the last notes, is worth more than entire volumes of mediocre songs. One must bear in mind thereby the whole wild scene and its meaning, the brilliant diabolical mood and the rhapsodic character: everything is contained in the adventurous, burlesque-like combination of music embracing the characteristic old-fashioned aura and an entirely modern pictorial imagination (especially in the chorus at the *squashing*).]

The composer surely appreciated Rochlitz’s grasp of the larger context of the song and its highly evocative response to Goethe’s work. For all its irony, the epithet “Mephistopheles” in relation to Rochlitz would not have been meant merely negatively, as a put-down, and it implies as well that Beethoven understood Rochlitz to be the author of the review of op. 75 published under his editorship in 1811 in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*.

We have not yet touched on some important dimensions of Beethoven’s response to Goethe’s scene set in Auerbach’s Wine Cellar. There is unmistakable authorial self-irony lodged in Mephisto’s description of the flea at once becoming minister and wearing a big star, since Goethe himself spent a decade as chief minister of state in Weimar, having been abruptly placed in that office by Duke Carl August in 1775. Napoleon Bonaparte had of course installed his own family members in exalted positions, including his younger brother Jérôme, who became King of Westphalia in Kassel and who in turn offered a position to Beethoven in 1808. The drinking song in Auerbach’s Cellar narrating the rise of the flea and his relations contains an critique of such undeserved nepotism.

What is Beethoven’s own implied role amid the colorful cast of characters he assembled in his imagination in 1825? Apart from “Mephistopheles” Rochlitz, a pair of publishers is mentioned, including not only Carl Friedrich Peters but also Mathias Artaria, both of whom appear transformed into *Höllenhunde*, “hounds of hell,” with Peters transported into the environment of the wine cellar. According to legend, such creatures guard the gates of the underworld, and seeing hellhounds (like Cerberus in Greek mythology) is a

²³ Ludwig van Beethovens Leben von Alexander Wheelock Thayer, vol. 4, ed. Hermann Deiters and Hugo Riemann, Leipzig 1923, Appendix 2, p. 518.

²⁴ Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung 13 (1811), columns 593-595, cited from Kunze: Ludwig van Beethoven. Die Werke im Spiegel seiner Zeit, p. 210.

sign of imminent death. At this stage of his life, facing virtually complete deafness and seriously failing health, Beethoven may indeed have felt pressured by the demands of his publishers and his unfinished artistic projects. There remained to him just fifteen months of productive work before the collapse of his health in early December 1826.

Whether or not Rochlitz urged Beethoven to compose a setting of *Faust*, as he claimed, it is clear that while writing to Holz in August 1825, the composer imagined himself in a kind of Faustian role, if not even as the victim of a Faustian pact. His musical setting of “We’re happy as cannibals, or as five hundred sows” adds a further perspective. Goethe’s reference to the “five hundred sows” harbors a Biblical allusion, to the Gospel according to St. Matthew, chapter 8, beginning in verse 28. Christ is met here by two fierce beings possessed by devils coming out of tombs, and blocking his path. Christ said unto the demon-possessed men: “Go. And when they were come out, they went into the herd of swine: and behold, the whole herd of swine ran violently down a steep place into the sea, and perished in the waters.”²⁵ In this last of the Auerbach drinking songs, Goethe inverts one part of the dark Biblical image, with the herd of swine becoming the “fünfhundert Säuen” of the happy drunken revelers, who paralleled in real life those carousing friends like Holz who consorted with the composer in drinking locales in Vienna. The other part of the Biblical image—a confrontation with two demon-possessed men—seems to have been imaginatively transformed by Beethoven into an encounter with two diabolical beings of a specific sort: the *Höllenhunde*, one of which lurks in the underground environment of Auerbach’s Cellar. This Faustian allusion involves a graphic self-reference to death and damnation, with such “hounds of hell” ready to pounce and destroy by stages the basis for Beethoven’s creativity, licking and then chewing to pieces the composer’s brains. We can carry this extravagant analogy still further, if we observe that in Greek legend, Orpheus pacifies Cerberus through music, lulling the hell hound to sleep. An unmusical *Höllenhund*—such as Beethoven held Carl Friedrich Peters to be—is an even more formidable threat.

Another model for a pair of weird supernatural beings is found in the immediate continuation after the cellar scene in Goethe’s *Faust*: the *Hexenküche* or Witches’ Kitchen episode, in which two strange talking animals appear, creatures described by Goethe as *Meerkatzen* or long-tailed monkeys. A further parallel with the *Hexenküche* scene is lodged in Beethoven’s aforementioned letter to Holz with which we began this essay. In closing his letter, Beethoven urges Holz to come to him on Friday, when “*satanas* in der Küche noch am erträglichsten ist” (“*Satan* in the kitchen is most tolerable”). This is one of Beethoven’s derogatory comments about his housekeeper and cook at the time, Barbara Holzmann, whom he elsewhere describes as an “old witch” or more generously as “Frau Schnaps”. Such exaggerated negative comments surely owe something to the composer’s immersion in Goethe’s *Faust*. Sardonic humor arose from his startling analogies made between that artistic world and the real world, with Beethoven’s own kitchen becoming a *Hexenküche* and uncongenial publishers *Höllenhunde*, while Friedrich

²⁵ The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments (King James Version), New York, 8.

Rochlitz was assigned the role of Mephistopheles. Characteristic of such dark comedy is the incongruous pairing of apparently incompatible elements: the serious and the absurd, the obvious and the obscure. Two normally incompatible levels of experience are momentarily fused. It goes without saying that such comments by Beethoven are not to be taken at face value, any more than his writing on the copy of his masterful C# minor Quartet to the publisher Schott “Zusammengestohlen aus Verschiedenem diesem und jenem” (“Put together from pilferings from one thing and another”), a deliberately deceptive humorous inscription made in 1826 in response to the publisher's requirement that the quartet be an original one.²⁶

Commentators have pondered over the conflict between the increasing disorder in Beethoven's everyday life and the impressive artistic achievements of his last years. In their psychoanalytical study, for instance, Editha and Richard Sterba argued that “at this period, when he was achieving his last and most profound creations, his personality had changed for the worse in many respects. . . The difficulty in producing was . . . a retreat from the free bounty of the creative genius to a withholding. . . He met the pressure of the outside world with evasions and fantasies which show that his capacity for truth had diminished.”²⁷ Such an assessment fails to grasp the richly imaginative and paradoxical aspects of Beethoven's creativity, which surface even in a pithy letter like the one sent to Karl Holz in August 1825. The “evasions and fantasies” we have explored are not delusional ravings, but embody conceptual blending and imaginative synthesis. Beethoven's readiness to draw connections knows no bounds and no taboos; a free association of ideas is the point. This glimpse into his imaginative disposition sheds light on the psychology of his working methods and his engagement with Goethe's *Faust*.

A final point relates to the political relevance of this context and especially the “Flea Song” to the repressive Metternich era of the 1820s. A political tone is struck ironically already at the outset of the Auerbach's Cellar scene in Frosch's two-line song “Das liebe Heilige Römische Reich, Wie halts nur noch zusammen?” (“The endearing Holy Roman Empire, how holds it still together?”) to which Brander replies dismissively: “An ugly song! Yuck! A political song!” Concerning Austria, Beethoven's conversation books hold many bitterly critical comments about the regime of Emperor Franz. During Beethoven's conversation with the publisher Moritz Schlesinger at Baden in early September 1825, the emperor is described as “ein dummes Vieh” (“a dumb beast”), and Schlesinger adds the following:

In *allen* landen nimmt die Dummheit Überhand
Prinzip der *Minister*²⁸

26 Misunderstanding did indeed ensue, and Beethoven was obliged to write reassuringly to the alarmed publisher that “as a joke I wrote on the copy that it was put together from pilferings. Nevertheless, it is brand new.” (Thayer's *Life of Beethoven*, p. 983, note 21).

27 Beethoven and His Nephew: A Psychoanalytical Study of Their Relationship, trans. Willard R. Trask, New York 1954, p. 211.

28 BKh 8, p. 104.

[In *all* countries stupidity gains the upper hand
principle of the *ministers*]

This mention of a “*principle* of the ministers”—presumably meaning the unmerited advancement of stupid government officials—comes quite close to the second stanza of Goethe’s text of the *Flohlied*, whereby the worthless flea “war sogleich Minister und hatt’ einen großen Stern” (“immediately became minister and wore a large star”).

Beethoven’s “Song of the Flea” displays his delight in critiquing such stupidity with caustic wit from a protected distance, without any need to pretend or court favor from those in power. In this case, the conviction is expressed not merely through words or tones but through physical action—the symbolic squashing of the unworthy on the keyboard itself. In the shared aesthetic space afforded by the *Flohlied* and its closing chorus, Beethoven raises a spirited protest against the shortcomings of political life.