

The creation-story behind...

Exordium

a Preface to Beethoven's Septet, op. 20

Commissioned by the Chamber Music Society of Central Virginia

by **Antonio J. García**

for septet:

clarinet, horn, bassoon, violin, viola, cello, bass

I. Ode to Punk & Rock

II. Brass Band & Swing

III. Bluegrass

IV. Chorale

V. Ode to Punk & Rock

(A CMSCVA performance of Exordium, followed by the first movement of the Beethoven, can be seen and heard at

<https://vimeo.com/1098987770?autoplay=1&muted=1&stream_id=Y2xpcHN8MTc1NTY1OT_E3fGlkOmRlc2N8W10%3D>.)

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Invitation

“Exordium” was commissioned in May 2024 by the Chamber Music Society of Central Virginia (<www.cmscva.org>) and its Artistic Director, James Wilson, as one of a number of pieces related to the number 20, including the Beethoven Septet, op. 20 that would be performed on the same program in CMSCV’s 2025 season. Wilson asked me to create a new work that would lead into the Beethoven Septet, op. 20 in a manner that “introduces the septet...and places the piece or the seven players into the time and place of Richmond in 2025.... It’s a way to get from contemporary Richmond music/culture back to the party music of 1805 Vienna.” With no other parameters than a five-minute limitation, I was inspired to research the Beethoven more closely and draw from it intensely.

“Exordium” (Latin for “preface”) works as a stand-alone piece, as a prelude to the Beethoven Septet, op. 20, or as a prelude to any number of other works. It draws constantly from op. 20’s resonant musical themes and countermelodies—though I often displaced them from their original meter, key, rhythmic locale in a measure, instrument, or even elongated or shortened the given phrase. Sometimes I “promoted” what had been an inner line to what now is melody.

Richmond’s musical history spans so many genres, including gospel, spirituals, folk, blues, bluegrass, jazz, rock, funk, punk, latin, brass band, hip hop, rap, and more. Focusing on even a half-dozen would be

impractical in this short piece! The titles of the movements reflect more odes or tributes to a given genre rather than actual duplication of the style: “Ode to Punk & Rock,” “Brass Band & Swing,” “Bluegrass,” “Chorale,” and a reprise of “Ode to Punk & Rock” so as to bookend this preface with RVA 2000-era music before potentially segueing to Vienna in 1800 and Beethoven’s opus.

While I have written music that I believe is enjoyable to perform and to hear without further explanation, I hope the following provides context that enhances that enjoyment.

Compositional Process

The op. 20 was one of Beethoven’s most popular works, the “party music” of its day—so much so that he came to resent its existence. Key to its appeal to the public were its resonant musical themes and countermelodies: fertile ground from which I then derived themes for “Exordium.” My score annotates inspirations drawn directly from the 1800 opus.

My first decision was to begin the piece with as much of a rock ethic as I could muster from this instrumentation and Beethoven’s concepts, then work backwards in musical history. “Ode to Punk & Rock” quotes and paraphrases op. 20, Mvmt. VI, m. 98 (<[Ex.1. m.AP \(op. 20, Mvmt. VI, m. 98\).mp3](#)>) and following almost literally for several measures, but at a much more aggressive tempo, raising the clarinet melody an octave, and evolving in ideas, resulting in <[Ex.1a. m.A.mp3](#)>. At letter B what had been a Violin melody in Mvmt. VI, m. 121 (<[Ex.2. m.B \(op. 20, Mvmt. VI, m. 121\).mp3](#)>) becomes a French Horn anthem, resulting in <[Ex.2a. m.B.mp3](#)>.

As Letter C approaches, Mvmt. VI’s m. 189 (<[Ex.3. m.B5Q5 \(op. 20, Mvmt. VI, m. 189\).mp3](#)>) is re-orchestrated (resulting in <[Ex.3a. m.B5.mp3](#)>) in its transition from punk and rock to “Brass Band & Swing” extending Beethoven’s I-VI-ii-V progression into a jazz or brass band vein (<[Ex.3b. m.C.mp3](#)>). Letter D’s clarinet clearly refers to op. 20, Mvmt. I’s m. 18 (<[Ex.4. m.D \(op. 20, Mvmt. I, m. 18\).mp3](#)>), with Beethoven’s Violin melody moved to Clarinet while employing an elision of several measures of material along the way (<[Ex.4a. m.D.mp3](#)>). Strings reprise the tune at E, as the winds approximate group improvisation over the chord progression (<[Ex.4b. m.E.mp3](#)>). This new form becomes the framework for a Bass solo at F before G’s transitional Cello/Viola duo draws from op. 20, Mvmt. II, m. 37 (<[Ex.5. m.GHK \(op. 20, Mvmt. II, m. 37\).mp3](#)>), adapting what had been a Violin theme now for the Cello, prompting a reply from the Viola (<[Ex.5a. m.G.mp3](#)>).

“Bluegrass” acknowledges that important history in Richmond, adapting the Violin melody into a folk style from the earlier source of op. 20, Mvmt. II, m. 37 (<[Ex.5. m.GHK \(op. 20, Mvmt. II, m. 37\).mp3](#)>), resulting in <[Ex.5b. m.H.mp3](#)>. The fiddling multiplies at Letters I and J (albeit in a nontraditional 6/4), where what had been harmonic underpinnings in op. 20, Mvmt. II, m. 88 (<[Ex.6. m.IJ \(op. 20, Mvmt. II, m. 88\).mp3](#)>) are now the framework for the song (<[Ex.6a. m.IJ.mp3](#)>). The 4/4 return at K again references Mvmt. II, m. 37 (<[Ex.5 m.GHK \(op. 20, Mvmt. II, m. 37\).mp3](#)>), this time starting in Violin pizzicato (<[Ex.6b. m.K.mp3](#)>).

Richmond’s vocal, choral, and liturgical roots are deep; and to this day it seems a house of worship arises every half-dozen blocks. These vocal styles have also influenced instrumentalists and their ensembles through the years. “Chorale” pays tribute to these traditions at letter L, initially referencing op. 20, Mvmt. IV, Var. 5, m. 1 (<[Ex.7. m.LMNO \(op. 20, Mvmt. IV, Var. 5, m. 1\).mp3](#)>) while taking what had been a Cello countermelody and Clarinet melody into now a devout Horn melody (<[Ex.7a. m.L.mp3](#)>). Its third phrase, led by Bassoon, draws from Var. 5, m. 9 (also heard within <[Ex.7 m.LMNO \(op. 20, Mvmt. IV, Var. 5, m. 1\).mp3](#)>) by promoting what had begun as a Beethoven’s Bassoon/Clarinet countermelody to now a Horn melody (<[Ex.7b. m.L9.mp3](#)>). With each repetition of the Chorale, the number of notes in its melody shrinks—though at letter M it takes longer for the Bassoon (now complemented by a soft Clarinet countermelody) to spin it forth (<[Ex.7c. m.MN.mp3](#)>). As letter O approaches, the Afro-Cuban-inspired oscillations of 12/8 strings support the Clarinet’s rendition of the tune, peppered by Horn/Bassoon comments of theme fragments, perhaps creating a “fantasie” on the Chorale (<[Ex.7d. m.O.mp3](#)>). A final layering of thematic statements sets the conclusion of the movement (<[Ex.7e. m.O7.mp3](#)>).

A reprise of “Ode to Punk & Rock” recaps the opening, with a slight shift in the ending (<[Ex.8a. m.PQ.mp3](#)>), in order to bookend this preface with RVA 2000-era music before potentially segueing to Vienna in 1800 and Beethoven’s opus. If it did, the transition from García’s conclusion to Beethoven’s start might sound like <[Ex.9a. m.PQto Beethoven.mp3](#)>.

Recommended Listening for the Ensemble

- Punk & Rock
 - “East on Main” (<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=90BW3UmphUY>>) by Avail (2002) bears many parallels to a hypothetically sped-up [Beethoven op. 20, Mvmt. VI, m. 98](#) and following. A hardcore band from Richmond, Virginia, their lyrics often draw from RVA.
 - Other Richmond-based punk-rock bands include Strike Anywhere, Down to Nothing, and Broadside.
- Brass Band & Swing:
 - “Runaround” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5RRzIIE_P0&t=7s>) by the No BS! Brass Band in Richmond offers a sample of the brassy sass.
 - “World on a String” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1048L_Ar7I>) by vocalist Desiree Roots Centeio and saxophonist James “Saxsmo” Gates provides a swing sample from two musical mainstays of RVA.
 - “Exactly Like You” (<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0Wz8S8j83s&t=2s>> at 10’57”) and “I Thought About You” (at 17’47”) by saxophonist/vocalist Roger Carroll showcase swing by a staple in Richmond since even before his college days at Virginia Commonwealth University.
- Bluegrass:
 - The WRVA Old Dominion Barn Dance broadcast out of Richmond from 1946 to 1957 (following decades of similar shows) included such bluegrass artists as The Stanley Brothers, with “Keep a Memory” (<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSEqHSSRNK4>> at 13’57”) or “Sunny Side of the Mountain” (<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JesyR9qTr0>> at 19’39”) fine examples.
- Chorale:
 - Of Richmond’s many vocal, choral, and liturgical genres, one sample would include the “Evensong Service” (<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oIdq5XbmNjo&t=763s>>) at St. James’ Episcopal Church in Richmond as jointly performed by the Norfolk State University Concert Choir and St. James’s Episcopal Church Choir. Check out recordings of any brass or chamber ensemble performing Bach chorales or similar so as to observe that vocal influence in the instrumental genre.
 - While “Exordium” doesn’t include gospel music, “He Has the Power” (<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAYqYSSI5Wk>>) by the Ebenezer Baptist Church in RVA shows the influence of such style on the jazz and (though even-eighth) swing music of Richmond.

With Appreciation

My thanks go to James Wilson and each of the CMSCVA musicians bringing this new music to life. I am honored to have been a part of this opportunity to bring musicians together towards the realization of a new work.

—**Antonio J. García**