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Art Mimics Art: Anthony Burgess's Napoleon Symphony: A Novel in Four Movements

Kendra Leonard (Humble, TX)

"Show me a family of readers, and I will show you the people who move the world."

—Napoleon Bonaparte

Ludwig van Beethoven greatly admired the young [Napoleon Bonaparte](#) while the latter was serving as First Consul of France. The composer thought that Napoleon represented the three ideals of the [French Revolution](#)—liberty, equality, and fraternity—and so Beethoven dedicated his Third Symphony to him, calling it the "Symphony Buonaparte." However, Napoleon himself was not so much into the equality part of the Revolution's goals, and in 1804 declared himself emperor. Furious, Beethoven tore out the dedication and reinscribed it as being "composed to celebrate the [memory of a great man](#)." The phrase "great man"—rendered by Beethoven as "heroic" or *eroica*—has stayed with the piece ever since, but even Beethoven admitted that the work was about Napoleon before his power grab: when Napoleon died in 1821, the composer commented that he had already written the now-exiled emperor's funeral march as the second movement of the 1804 symphony.

In 1974, author and composer [Anthony Burgess](#) wrote a novel called *Napoleon Symphony*. He structured this experimental novel on Beethoven's *Symphony No. 3, the "Eroica."* The intersection of music and the written word in *Napoleon Symphony* is more complicated than an [author including songs in her work](#), or [musicians being inspired by an author's work and creating music based on it](#). Burgess wanted to write a fictionalized life of Napoleon, and, according to the text on the cover of one edition of *Napoleon Symphony*, believed that "in the fusion of musical and literary form lies a possible future for the novel."

How, exactly, does the author combine the two? Burgess begins by writing the novel in an introduction plus four parts, mirroring the [symphony's](#) two dramatic opening E-flat major chord and its four movements. Each movement is dedicated to a specific period in Napoleon's life, but his [invasion of Egypt](#) and memories of his time there run through the entire book: in the first movement, readers track the emperor's desires for his wife Josephine and his military maneuvers through letters, interspersed with scenes of Josephine having an affair, engaging in Parisian gossip, and plotting to leave her husband. In the second, funereal movement, Burgess chronicles Napoleon's ill-fated march on Russia; the third movement shows the now dethroned emperor exiled to and then escaping from his island prison of Elba but suffering defeat at Waterloo. In the last movement, Napoleon is an old man waiting for death on another island prison, this time St. Helena.

[As Burgess scholar Adam Roberts has noted](#), the novel can be mapped even more specifically to individual elements of the symphony. He finds that the novel's first movement is written as an introduction and 21 following sections, just as the [first movement](#) of the symphony can be analyzed as the statement of a musical theme followed by 21 variations on that theme. Each of the 21 sections of the novel has its own flavor, its own setting, its own narrative voice. Some sections focus on a specific place in Napoleon's Egyptian campaign;

others offer brief vignettes of characters and their views on the action. Burgess incorporates poetry about the campaign into the sections and uses different rhyme schemes and contrasting poetic forms to give further definition and individuality to each section while still maintaining the focus on Egypt and Napoleon's desire to conquer it. And just as the symphony's first movement repeats itself at the end in the recapitulation, Burgess repeats his own prose verbatim from the very beginning to reinforce its importance and to resolve the problems it set out.

In his essay "[Napoleon Symphony \(1974\): a Third of Beethoven](#)," Roberts suggests that readers and listeners can match up individual pages or even lines with musical lines and voices:

... as the cellos bring out the first iteration of the theme (spring, desire, sex), the second violins saw out some more nervy semi-quavers on G ('throbs and frets in frustration'). The brass section comes back in at bar 22, which here speaks to martial affairs ('busy with maps and protractor and chief of staff'), but the whole score rises to the first, full-orchestra recapitulation of the main theme, and it's the anticipation of bliss. up and down the lover's body: 'I slaver at the thought of you, hunger to chew your very toes, to munch your delta of silk in the valley of bliss'. I'm thinking that pages 15-19, in which Napoleon's staff officers grumble about his plans, and his passion for this one woman, is a prose elaboration of section A's [sic] series of descending triplets shared amongst the woodwind.

Here the descending triplets (groups of three notes that span a single beat) represent Napoleon's fingers and lips cascading down Josephine's body.

While this seems to be in the eye and ear of the person experiencing the book and music, there is a compelling case to be made that Burgess equates the lush sounds of the strings with sexuality and desire, and the brass with the military and its activities.

In the second movement of the novel, Burgess equates Napoleon's ill-fated march on and retreat from Russia with Beethoven's slow and sober [second movement](#) from the symphony. Here Beethoven leaves behind the triumphant major key of the first movement and moves into C minor. The musical movement is a kind of [minuet](#), complete with a trio—a contrasting section—in C major, but in a tempo far slower than one would dance to. In the book, Napoleon is not yet dead, but is unnerved by his defeat in Russia and the deaths of more than half of the soldiers who had traveled with him to fight. His melancholy is lifted briefly during the C major trio section, during which he has erotic dreams and remembers the sexual encounters of his past. When the minor-key theme returns, Burgess gives it lyrics that are at first dark but soon become filled with puns and noises that mimic the sounds of the orchestral instruments:

There he lies
Ensanguinated tyranny
O bloody bloody tyrant

See
How the sin within
Doth incarnadine
His skin
From the shin to the chin

becomes
Dumdy DUM
Dee dum dee dundy
DUM
DUM
DUM diddum diddum
DUM
DUM.

At this point, the main melodic idea from the beginning returns, and Burgess sets the words above to it. Burgess's words fit it exactly.

As with the first movement of the novel, Burgess divides the second movement into sections matching the subdivisions and sometime even the phrases of Beethoven's music. Minor key segments are matched with stories of death, divorce, and other unpleasant events, while major key parts pair with text in which Napoleon's army is given hope, or in which Napoleon himself feels somehow uplifted. Alliteration—a literary device where words that begin with similar sounds are repeated—hints at groupings of instruments in the music: strings together, making similar bow-strokes, or the brass, breathing as a single player.

In the exuberant third movement of the novel, Napoleon is in exile on Elba, but nonetheless enjoys his company, the lavish food and theatre provided him, and happily plots his escape and return to Paris. "Dance dance dance!" writes Burgess, giving readers the breathless feeling of Beethoven's *scherzo*. Rather than trying to tie too much of a plot to the music, Burgess imagines Napoleon's *stream of consciousness* as he dines, and then recounts a performance of the *Prometheus* legend, about which Beethoven also wrote a *ballet*. Burgess's words run on and on, a kind of jazz-like improvisation of sounds, all moving quickly along. By the end of the *scherzo*, Napoleon is on a horse, on his way back to reclaim power.

Beethoven's **fourth movement** begins with a dramatic cascade of sound; Burgess envisions Napoleon on a rough sea, on his way to exile on another island. He's tried to poison himself, and his mind is trying to be in multiple places at once. When he does get his mind and mouth together, he can only speak simply, although his mind often whirls about him, finding homonyms between the "loo" of Waterloo, where he suffered his final military defeat, and the *l'eau* or water, which surrounds the island and keeps him a prisoner. He experiences periods of rage, pomposity, passion, and exhaustion, each mirroring a section of the symphony's last movement. Ultimately, he thinks of Voltaire's *Candide*, and of France as his Imperial Garden, which he tried so hard to make grow. At the end of the last movement, Beethoven recalls the theme from the beginning, and doctors look over the body of Napoleon and recall its place in the world. The spirit of the emperor wings away on exultant memories fashioned by Burgess as a litany of striking words encompassing the universe, a delight of the mind and tongue.

This experimental novel tries to mimic and parse the form of music, the sounds of music, and the meaning of this particular musical work in words alone. Burgess reported that he had "elephantine fun" writing the book, and it stands as a testament to the ways in which we can think in multiple art forms and media and join them in various ways to create new works and/or to explicate old ones. Later in his career, Burgess repeated his experiment by writing *Mozart and the Wolf Gang* in the form of Mozart's Symphony No. 40. Other writers-composers have conducted similar trials of **blending musical form and language**. But Burgess's *Napoleon Symphony* is probably the most successful of these experiments in that it so closely follows Beethoven's piece. In *Napoleon Symphony*, we see exactly what make a leader seem unheroic even as he is being abstracted into a musical work about a "great man."

For Discussion

1. What other pieces of instrumental music can you fit a story—from history or fiction—to?
2. How would you approach turning a composition into a text-based work? How closely would you follow the musical material in design and word?