

# Replacing Beethoven | Maestro Arts

**[George Jackson](#) conducts the world premiere of the opera [Genia](#) in Vienna on 10 March. Here he explains its themes and questions – including whether a machine could ever compose Beethoven's music**

This opera is a fictional account of the life of Ludwig van Beethoven, told through his famous biographer and secretary, Anton Schindler. One day the Mälzel brothers, who are famous for having invented the metronome, turn up to see Beethoven, and together, they discuss the idea of technology helping the composition process. They want to invent Genia, a machine that composes music in the style of Beethoven. There is also a love interest with the presence of Elise Barendsfeld, known through 'Für Elise', Beethoven's famous piano piece.

One of the most important themes of the work is this relationship between technology and the freedom of art. It is set in the 19th century, but the debate is relevant in the modern age as well. It is the question of whether an mp3 can become more important than live music (expressed in the 1979 pop song 'Video Killed the Radio Star'). This is a central debate within the opera, with Beethoven arguing the case for freedom and the individuality of creating music. I'd like to think that art, freedom and humanity triumph over technology – I'm not a fan of checking out at the automated checkout at supermarkets.

The opera presents these ideas in a musical language that is based on quotation and citation from music history, including lots of Beethoven – at least six of his nine symphonies are quoted. The composer, Tscho Theissing, has stripped Beethoven's music to its simplest forms, whether that's a rhythmic motif, an interval or merely an idea. You realise what a genius Beethoven was, and simultaneously how simple his composition process was, but also how elaborate and complex.

This is all glued together with musical styles including Cuban and jazz – with lots of percussion and syncopation, and groovy dancing on stage. It's a different style to most contemporary 21st century opera. Its tapestry of music serves to put the drama across in a concise way, so I think the audience will be entertained by the storytelling, and it's performed by the fantastic Vienna Chamber Orchestra. As with Berg and Schoenberg, there's a lot of 'Sprechstimme', presenting the text half as song, half spoken. We have a fantastic cast of young singers who are offering developed interpretations of these real life historical characters. It's going to be a great evening.

Opera in two acts (2020)

Music by Tscho Theissing

Libretto by Kristine Tornquist

Vienna Chamber Orchestra conducted by George Jackson

Commissioned by Theater an der Wien at the Kammeroper

Premiere: Thursday, 5 March 2020, 7 pm

Performances: 8, 10, 12, 24, 29, 31 March and 2 April 2020, 7 pm

Photo: Tim Dunk