

## Beethoven's Guide to Being Human

by Larry Rothe

Whenever I think of Beethoven, I want to thank him. Whether I am about to encounter his music in concert, listen to a recording, or happen to read his name or hear it spoken, my initial reaction is the same: gratitude. He was the one who steered me to music. I was a sixteen-year-old with a sixteen-year-old's problems—the kind you feel when you're torn from the womb of your childhood. Even if my friends had also felt these, none of us knew how to talk about this stuff; and the adults in my life demonstrated again and again that they were too old to remember. But I was aware of someone who had run into problems himself, and had dealt with them well. This was Beethoven, forced by a power beyond his control to forsake one life for another: forced by deafness out of a musician's vibrating world and into a cell, where he was compelled to invent music from what he remembered, from sound that existed only in his imagination. To Beethoven, deafness was fate, and *fate* was a word and a concept that appealed to me. Beethoven's struggles made his spiritual victories more impressive. He revealed what music can do and, it seemed, what humans can do. I learned long ago that Beethoven's problems were Beethoven's and not mine, but I still believe that the way he handled his fate can be a model—not a guide such as Dr. Phil might offer, though that's the general idea. Beethoven is, to quote a slogan once adopted by a West Coast chamber music festival, a “center of gravity.” He harnessed music's power and showed the way.

For many of us, Beethoven continues to be the point of entry into a love affair with music. In 2005, when BBC Radio offered free downloads of the Beethoven symphonies, 1.37 million listeners—in one week—loaded their computers and listening devices with the complete set of nine. Those symphonies, especially Nos. 3, 5, 6, 7, and 9, do more than touch listeners with their composer's emotions; in an inexplicable way, they seem to express their *listeners'* emotions, so that each of us, hearing this music, feels in some way its author. Beethoven may not have been the first to outline dramas in his music, but he was the first to make the drama so explicit, to involve us so deeply as co-creators. Almost a century before therapists began assuring their patients that it was OK to value their feelings, Beethoven was telling people that their emotions were worth taking seriously. Who would not be grateful to so good a listener?

For Beethoven *is* a listener—not despite his deafness, but because of it. It has been said that John Milton's blindness compelled or enabled him to conceive the vast spaces he pictures in *Paradise Lost*. No longer limited to actual vision, Milton went beyond its boundaries into the vision of his dreams. Beethoven did something similar with sound. “Deafness,” writes Maynard Solomon in *Beethoven*, his classic biography, “did not impair and indeed may even have heightened his abilities as a composer. . . . In his deaf world, Beethoven could experiment with new forms of experience, free from the intrusive sounds of the external environment; free from the rigidities of the material world; free, like a dreamer, to combine and recombine the stuff of reality, in accordance with his desires, into previously undreamed-of forms and structures.” Yet it is not enough to explain Beethoven's great musical dramas as the inspirations of a deaf man. Beethoven transcribes the sound to which his inner ear leads him. But he also becomes our listener and our guide. He plays the Virgil to our Dante as he leads us through infernos and purgatories toward light.

I used to wonder if one reason we are so drawn to Beethoven is that we know the basic biographical fact of his physical disability. Do we hear him differently because we know he was deaf? Does his having overcome deafness lend extra-musical power to his music? Yes. But while I think such questions may need asking, they aren't ultimately important. Beethoven is a medium who helps us hear and who helps us achieve more completeness. In his music, he gives us a guide to becoming human.

He can be taken at different levels. It is possible to approach his music as something that is beautiful for the sake of being beautiful. Yet while he does not write sermons in his music, he does create structures that can inspire and renew. The ancient Greeks theorized how drama could be cathartic and spiritually liberating. Beethoven achieves those ends in music. Wagner and Richard Strauss both had a superb sense of theater. But Beethoven works on a more comprehensive stage, and as a dramatist who gives us a script for our lives, his diction and timing are unparalleled.

Beethoven was a product of his time—not simply the years of the French Revolution and Napoleon, but the time of the Industrial Revolution. As the manufacture of goods became more mechanized and populations were realigned from countryside to city, the Romantic movement took shape in the culture. Poets attempted to counter the growing threat to personal identity by focusing on the individual, and they advocated a return to the simple life and the natural world. (From this perspective, Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony is the quintessential Romantic work of art.) Undoubtedly, the Romantics themselves knew that the effects of the Industrial Revolution would be irreversible. Even for the most altruistic factory owners and nascent CEOs, the returns ensured by increased production were temptations too potent to resist. What the Romantics sought was some way of maintaining an open channel between head and heart, between the motives of profit and play. There was to some extent a nostalgic art, something that looked back, seeking to reclaim an idyllic, Arcadian past. Beethoven rejected this in favor of its opposite. He maintained his allegiance to the Enlightenment. In his music, he proposed a different kind of ideal world. His was not a world of the irretrievable past, on which men and women could look back longingly but which they could never grasp. Beethoven's ideal world was located in the future, a utopia to which humankind could aspire. One source of his music's energy is purely ethical: It does not mourn what is gone. It celebrates that which can be. From artists such as Beethoven, we derive examples. Their art does more than assure us of a good time. It offers life lessons.

“From my earliest childhood,” wrote the forty-one-year-old Beethoven in a letter quoted by Maynard Solomon, “my zeal to serve our poor suffering humanity in any way whatsoever by means of my art has made no compromise with any lower motive.” Now, Beethoven could be a boor, an egotist who boasted of using his friends, a less-than-scrupulous businessperson who passed off old works to publishers as new. He drank too much. In his personal habits, especially as he grew older, he was a slob. Yet, as Solomon tells us, he never lost sight of the Enlightenment and Revolutionary “ideals of fraternity, freedom of thought, social justice, and moral improvement that were prevalent in the cities of the Rhineland” from his boyhood in Bonn.

Politics shaped Beethoven's music, too. The Vienna in which Beethoven settled in 1792 was repressive and repressed—waiting, though its citizens did not know it, for a Beethoven to unlock their idealism. The progressive Emperor Joseph II had died in 1790. In his place came Franz, who looked to the bad old days for his model of government. His regime controlled the press and monitored citizens' movements as they moved around the country. Spies reported on conversations overheard and seditious behavior imagined. Those who criticized the governments were ignored, imprisoned, or executed.

Other than those in the privileged upper strata of society, the populace felt powerless and reacted with a kind of fatalistic hedonism. Picture a nation hanging out at the mall, and you get an idea of a society primed for Beethoven's message that life has more to offer. To quote Solomon again: "Vienna was to find in Beethoven its mythmaker, . . . one who was prepared to furnish it with a model of heroism as well as beauty during an age of revolution and destruction and to hold out the image of an era of reconciliations and freedom to come."

As Solomon puts it, Beethoven "permitted aggressive and disintegrative forces to enter musical form." He fuses comedy and tragedy into a "concept of heroism" that "encompass[es] the full range of human experience—birth, struggle, death, and resurrection." In nine symphonies that expanded the possibilities of what orchestral music could convey, Beethoven gathered in a world. This music is seemingly inexhaustible, and we return to it again and again. Yet the symphonies are only part of the story with Beethoven, and if we stay with them alone, we deny ourselves a huge part of what he has to offer.

Every period of Beethoven's music—early, middle, and late—is worth attention, but I want to say a bit about some of his late works since their reputation can put some listeners off—as for many years I was put off. Beethoven died in 1827. The late period began, as Joseph Kerman says, around 1816. Thus only one of Beethoven's symphonies—his Ninth, first heard in 1824—is from the late period. Those of us who confine our relationship with Beethoven to his orchestral music therefore don't have the chance to hear some of his greatest creations. Take, for example, the late string quartets (Opuses 127, 130, 131, 132, and 135, plus the *Grosse Fuge*, which was the original finale of the Opus 130 Quartet). This is music I avoided for years, out of timidity. I believed what I'd read about its difficulty and abstruseness. For too long, I bought the notion that only those with highly developed musical knowledge—a conservatory degree would be best—could *get* it. I know I will never understand it as a trained musician does, but that's OK. Beethoven wrote his music for trained musicians to play; he wrote it for *everyone* to listen to. In listening at last, I am struck by how, of all Beethoven's music, the late quartets seem most comprehensible to a 21st-century sensibility. When these quartets were new, many dismissed them as too far-out, as the sorts of things to be expected from someone who had lost not just his hearing but his connection with reality.

These are works revolutionary in form and filled with eccentricities—eccentricities, that is, for listeners in the early years of the nineteenth century. Yet the introspection, sometimes odd harmonies, the sense of searching and aspiration—listen to the coda of the fourth movement of Opus 127—make it, I think, more immediately appealing to us than the more conventional beauties of the early Opus 18 string quartets. The late quartets are indeed "spiritual," but they are also full of humor, and they refuse to be solemn. They invite listeners in because they are so

passionately communicative, and we have to wonder if it was Beethoven's deafness—which by the time he wrote these works was essentially total—that drove his almost obsessive need to reach out. For in the late quartets, he had discovered a new language with which to express his deepest insights and emotions. And here, as in his late piano sonatas, he reveals his heart.

I guarantee you: You need no special training to grasp this language. Although in such late compositions as the string quartets and piano sonatas Beethoven can seem focused on working through formal challenges, he always weds content to form. Listening to the second movement of the two-movement Opus 111 Piano Sonata, for example (this is the last of the piano sonatas, No. 32), I am amazed by how we can never know where Beethoven will lead us, any more than we know what the next second of our lives will bring. No melodic line of this movement, so “simple and song-like” (to quote Beethoven's directions), goes in a direction we might expect, yet he convinces us of the momentum's inevitability. Here as elsewhere, he affirms life by convincing us that he has captured its rhythms and transcribed its themes—all without hearing them in any physical sense. While some of the late piano sonatas include moments that suggest proto-Schubert or Chopin or Schumann, so much of Beethoven is not about melody. It's about rhythm, about energy, about invention and re-invention.

From an earlier period in Beethoven's life, I look to *Fidelio*, his only opera. This music tells us of his ideals and dreams—and of ours. In many ways, *Fidelio* defines how Beethoven put ethics into music. Here he makes clear what he was trying to do in his “abstract” music, which is as much *about* something as is this work for the stage: about how we can know our duty and ourselves, and what we must do with that knowledge. This message, implicit in all of Beethoven, is explicit in *Fidelio*. The opera tells the story of Leonore, who disguises herself as a young man—called Fidelio—to gain access to her husband, Florestan, who has been imprisoned for his politics by his arch-enemy Pizarro.

Splendid and confident, the brief overture suggests that something momentous is about to happen. Yet the opera's opening scenes belie this mood. The domesticity depicted here reminds us that, just as evil can grow out of banality, greatness can arise from equally prosaic circumstances. If acts of viciousness can take place against such ordinary backgrounds, so can acts of moral courage. Behind the homely banter of the first half-hour is the recollection of that overture, that suggestion of a world on a different scale. Pizarro re-introduces that world. He presents himself in a firestorm of anger. Pizarro—self-important, as loathsome as he is terrifying—is larger than life only if we believe that life does not include figures like Stalin or Hitler. Opposition to Pizarro demands greatness equal to his depravity. His thirst for revenge on Florestan seals his fate. He has learned that the governor plans a surprise inspection of the prison, and it will be bad for Pizarro if Florestan is discovered. The solution: Kill Florestan. Just as Pizarro's hatred consumes him, it convinces Florestan's wife that this barbarian must go, and that she must be the engine of his destruction. *Fidelio* is about identity concealed and revealed. Leonore, disguised, is not yet fully in possession of self-knowledge. Countering Pizarro's darkness with her light, she is led by love of her husband into a struggle that will have larger implications and result in the liberation not just of an individual, but of a people. Hers is a story like Beethoven's: a story of how personal needs can be turned to the general good.

The Second Act is the operatic equivalent of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, a movement from the gloom of Florestan's dungeon to the sunlit courtyard, from struggling, day-seeking music to a hymn of affirmation. As she descends to the prison's depths, Leonore reveals who she is—not just to the others, but to herself. For just as she has assumed a disguise, greatness is itself a persona, something we take upon ourselves, something we must practice until it becomes a habit, which is to say as long as we live. It is also the cup we pray to be lifted from us, the burden we must lift. Leonore has only one chance. Will her courage fail her, or will she seize the moment? As she points her pistol at Pizarro, she understands she has crossed the line. She has thrown off her disguise and knows she has it within her to kill him. At this moment, a trumpet call signals the arrival of Don Fernando, the compassionate leader to whom Pizzaro reports. But the trumpet announces not just the success of a mission; it confirms that, having revealed her identity and all she is capable of, Leonore has found grace with a higher power, as yet unseen—much as a voice is said to have been heard from the sky, proclaiming love and acceptance, at the baptism of Christ.

Today, as we long to change the world, *Fidelio* and Beethoven tell us that the potential is ours. We know the trumpet call does not sound for everyone who puts himself on the line; but we know too, through what Beethoven has shown us, that love and personal honesty are as close to absolute good as we may get. That music can convey such a moral position is Beethoven's doing.

He does it not just in a stage drama, but also in his “absolute” music. And how does abstract music wield ethical power? We all know it does, as naïve as it may seem to say so. I'm not suggesting that music can make us better people. I am, however, willing to bet that some day, science will demonstrate that the world resonates with a collective hum and pulses with discernible rhythms. Research will show how completely we all sense, just below the level of consciousness, a natural polyphony whose elements are earth's seismic and volcanic forces, blood pounding against arterial walls, nature's generative and regenerative power—what Dylan Thomas called “the force that through the green fuse drives the flower.” And when this is proven, we will understand that Beethoven's music is synchronous with this sound, and we will know why he touches us so completely. Until that day comes, we can take Beethoven on faith, grateful for what he has to say about being human.

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