



Why Beethoven

by Mark Wigglesworth

Beethoven is the archetypal romantic composer. The celebrated personality that history has selected for him fits the stereotype of what we think a tormented heroic artist should be. He was indeed irritable, untidy, clumsy, rude, and misanthropic – ‘utterly lacking in self-control’ according to Goethe – and a restless eccentricity resulted in him moving house in Vienna over forty times. He was even once arrested by police who mistook him for a tramp. But from his letters and diaries we know that he could also be witty, caring, mischievous, generous, and kind. And the thousands of musical sketches he made show that he was even more critical of himself than he was of others. His unpredictable mood swings would certainly have been diagnosed today. ‘Doves and crocodiles’ was the best a contemporary could come up with.

We actually know a lot less about Beethoven than we imagine. And the things we do know never really resonate in his music. In fact there is a glaring lack of connection between specific events of his life and the music he composed at the time. His Heiligenstadt Testament, the suicidal cri de cœur that he wrote to his brothers, coincided with arguably the sunniest of his symphonies, the Second. The boisterous Fourth Symphony was conceived during the tail-end of a disastrous love affair. And the elegant and dispassionate wit of the Eighth Symphony could not be further removed from the obsessive and self-pitying tone of the letters he was currently writing to a woman he called his ‘Immortal Beloved’. Beethoven was never so self-conscious or sentimental that his music became a reflection of his own experiences. Like Shakespeare, he speaks for so many of us because his works are not about him.

Beethoven’s iconic persona may be a harmless entry point, but ultimately his music is the reason he almost invariably tops any poll to decide the world’s greatest composer. Except that I am not sure it is the actual music that lies behind his popularity. Many composers are famous for a specific quality in their work but with Beethoven it is not his melodies, harmonies, or rhythms that particularly stand out. Yet precisely because no single feature dominates, each acts in perfect balance, allowing us to immediately hear the emotions he is expressing rather than any of the ingredients that have gone into doing so. We hear beyond the music more readily, somehow less distracted by the music itself. The thread that connects us to him, to his work, and through that to each other, is invisible – and all the more powerful for that.

Music exists to unite all who hear it through the telling of stories as old as humanity, tales that reach out to our deep psychological needs, freely crossing borders of time and place through their continued relevance to who we are as people. Beethoven reminds us what it is to be human. And he does so with such authenticity that we trust his music to be meaningful for us. The problems he describes seem real. And because the journeys he takes us on sound familiar, we garner hope from the victories he achieves. When Berlioz wrote of the Fifth Symphony that it revealed all the secrets of Beethoven’s ‘most private grief, his fiercest wrath, his most lonely and desolate meditations, his midnight visions, his bursts of enthusiasm,’ we feel these are our secrets too, validated even more by listening to them with others. Beethoven knew the power of art to reduce our fears through acknowledging and sharing them. ‘All evil is mysterious and appears greatest when viewed in solitude,’ he wrote. ‘Discussed with others it seems more endurable because one becomes entirely familiar with that which we dread, feeling as if it has been overcome.’

When Beethoven was born, Handel and Bach had only been dead twenty years. Mozart was just fourteen. Considering that by the end of Beethoven's life there were steam engines, gaslights, concrete, photography, telegraph communications, and the electric motor, it's hardly surprising that music underwent an equally seismic change. And just as revolutionaries and explorers completely redrew the political map of the world, so too did Beethoven lead a fundamental transformation in what music sounded like and who it was for.

Most eighteenth century orchestral music was written for the aristocratic courts of Europe. He who pays the piper calls the tune. But Beethoven's music broke with the artistic decorum of that society and touched a wider audience than had been privileged enough to listen to it up till then. It may have still been commissioned by rich and generous patrons but there is nothing patronising about who it was written for. His music appealed to the masses because everyone could hear that the music was for them, that it was about them, regardless of class or education. You only need to compare the handful of people who witnessed Mozart's funeral with the 20,000 who watched Beethoven's coffin being led through the streets of Vienna to appreciate the huge broadening of society's connection with music that he inspired. Beethoven's belief in liberty and equality struck a chord with the age. That both those beliefs are still under threat is one of the reasons his music is still important.

The most well-known fact about Beethoven is that he was deaf. Once a lover of company, the retreat from society that his hearing loss necessitated wasn't something he accepted easily. Many of us can now relate to the frustration of social distancing and it's understandable that having this imposed upon him for the rest of his life turned Beethoven into the impatient, intolerant, irascible man that, against his better nature, he became infamous for. But as appealing as it is to imagine the tragic irony of a man who spent his life organising sounds he was unable to hear, it was perhaps precisely because of his deafness that he could become the composer he was.

On a practical level the onset of deafness cut short Beethoven's flourishing piano career, enabling him to devote all his time to composition. And just as Haydn's closeted life at the court of Count Esterhazy facilitated the uniqueness of his compositions, so did Beethoven's condition give him little choice but to be original. Being deaf forced him to reach inwards, to listen inwards, and stay true to who he was. Without intrusions, away from the real world, he was freer to dream, to create a new reality on his own terms. In that sense, surrounding silence might have helped him discover the very essence of feeling.

Beethoven's ability to be deeply personal unlocks the universal, connecting us all through a recognition of the Jungian archetypes that define us. There is great solace in that, fulfilling the need humans have to search inwards and embrace outwards. His music creates a unity between our private and public lives. Its combination of emotion, intellect, and spirituality offers us a complete form of consciousness and it gives permanent value to experiences that may have otherwise seemed transient.

Beethoven said that 'only art and science give us intimations and hopes of a higher life.' At a time when many are losing faith in both art and science we need Beethoven's music more than ever. It renews our desire to be better and braver human beings and encourages a force for change in relations between us. That these are endless challenges is why Beethoven's music is so ubiquitous, and why it never goes out of date. Until his mission to lead us to an inner harmony, and a social order of freedom and peace is accomplished, his music will always be necessary. We need to believe in the heroism of the Eroica Symphony. We have to hope that the triumph over adversity expressed in the Fifth Symphony is possible. We must adapt our relationship with nature if we want to hold on to the life of the Pastoral Symphony. And above all we should celebrate the Ninth Symphony's joy in what happens when people come together to solve difficulties they face. Only through the fellowship of humanity can populist isolationism, the politics of fear, the ideology of extremism, and the hijacking of truth for personal gain be proved wrong. Beethoven has always been relevant. Never more than now.