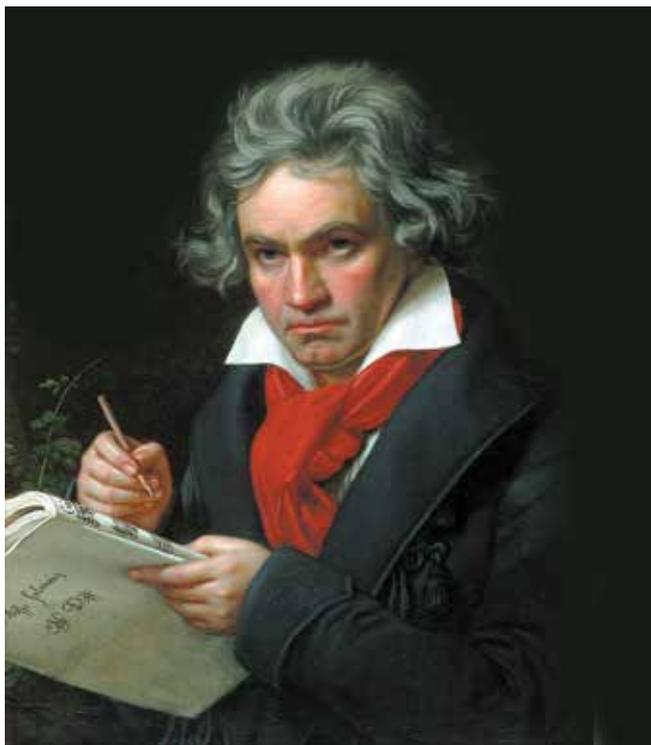


A HERO'S TALE

HOW BEETHOVEN BECAME BEETHOVEN.

BY EDDIE SILVA



The hero's narrative is as old as storytelling itself. Whether those stories are told around fires, or on stages, on paper, on projection screens, or on the internet—the narrative arc remains the same. The hero is almost always the protagonist—an old word meaning that the central character goes through agony. On the other side of that agony—and the trials and obstacles that the hero endures—there is something of value attained. Gilgamesh, Job, Jesus, Jane Eyre, Katniss Everdeen—they suffer, and through their suffering there is triumph.

A Hero's Tale

Many hear in the music of Ludwig van Beethoven this narrative arc. In his “Eroica,” or “Heroic” Symphony, the music seems to be clashing violently against itself. American conductor/composer Leonard Bernstein—something of a heroic figure himself—describes in a YouTube video the opening movement as a series of “thunderblows,” of “stabs, *sforzatti*,” of “stamps and howls.” And yet this clash gives way to a triumphant resolution “uniting all contradictions into a single, perfect entity.” It gets there through changes of mood, through lyricism, through melodic forms, through rhythmic and harmonic invention, through all that makes up music, and perhaps much that makes up the struggles of the human spirit.

It is hard not to talk about Beethoven’s music in this way, although it is worthwhile to remind ourselves that the composer is not telling a story. We know that “Eroica” was initially dedicated to Napoleon, but after Beethoven recognized the tyrant that Napoleon was, he scratched out the dedication. He kept the “Heroic” name, but not because he’s telling a heroic story, but because that’s how the music sounds and feels.

The music isn’t “about” anything. However, it seems as though it is. It’s in our makeup to discern meanings, stories, patterns. This is part of what makes us human. “The Universe is made of stories, not of atoms” wrote the poet Muriel Rukeyser.

We are also influenced by the story of Beethoven himself. Most central to that story is Beethoven’s courage and determination, his relentless will as he confronted the cruelest ob-

stacle in his path: his deafness.

In modern parlance, “overcoming adversity” is the message that gets green-lighted for most Hollywood films. These are the stories most “liked” on Facebook. You can be sure that NBC is working on the “overcoming adversity” theme for the most heart-rending profiles of Olympic athletes come Sochi 2014.

It is easy to become cynical over the mass-marketing of this theme. Some of those Olympian tales may be produced with Beethoven music, or Beethoven-like music, in the background.

However, the hero’s journey is elemental to us. In relation to Beethoven, it humanizes the monument that he has become. Rather than edifice, he is a man who suffered, and who overcame his suffering.

Beethoven had been aware of a progressive hearing loss for some time. He masked this, as anyone would, by appearing aloof, or even, at times, monstrosly difficult. He raged at others to hide his personal fears.

At a low point in his career, when he felt he was not receiving the recognition he deserved, and feared he might never receive, a doctor prescribed a retreat to the village of Heiligenstadt, along the Danube in the Vienna woods. There Beethoven might recover, rest, take time out from his ambitions, and walk in the restorative forest. He was 31.

It was at this time, in this place, Beethoven confronted what he most feared. On a walk with a friend, the

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companion remarked to Beethoven on the sounds of birdsong, and of a shepherd's flute.

The composer who would write a symphony of birdsong and shepherd's flutes in his "Pastoral" Symphony, could hear neither.

Beethoven would spend six months in Heiligenstadt, the longest break from Vienna he would ever take in his life. It was during this time he would reconcile with silence.

In October 1802, he wrote to his brothers: "Oh you men who think that I am malevolent, stubborn, or misanthropic, how greatly you wrong me. You do not know the secret cause which makes me seem that way to you."

What has come to be known as the "Heiligenstadt Testament" is a kind of confession. Beethoven explains the cause of his abusive behavior, not just to his brothers, but dramatically, to mankind: "Yet it was impossible for me to say to people, 'Speak louder, shout, for I am deaf.' Ah, how could I possibly admit an infirmity in the one sense which ought to be more perfect in me than in others..."

A deaf composer. A joke. No wonder his paranoia, his rages.

His letter becomes a farewell, a leave-taking of this world. He would end his life, and the world would know the reasons why.

A DEAF COMPOSER. A JOKE. NO WONDER HIS PARANOIA, HIS RAGES

Biographer Maynard Solomon summarizes the "Heiligenstadt Testament" as "the literary prototype of the 'Eroica' Symphony, a portrait of the artist as hero, stricken by deafness, withdrawn from mankind, conquering his impulses to suicide, struggling against fate, hoping to find 'but one day of pure joy.' It is a daydream compounded of heroism, death, and rebirth..."

It was a letter Beethoven never sent, but preserved among his papers throughout his life. It is not hard to understand that by writing out his terrors, Beethoven passed through a symbolic death. By stating his greatest fears, he could confront them. Freud figured this out late in the same century.

In notes that accompanied drafts of his "Razumovsky" Quartets, composed during his time at Heiligenstadt, Beethoven wrote: "Let your deafness no longer be a secret—even in art."

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