

BEETHOVEN'S DEAFNESS AND THE HEROIC ELEMENT IN HIS MUSIC

I would like to stress at the outset that what I propose to talk about is not hard, concrete facts but a working hypothesis. This hypothesis, however, centres on a psychological interpretation of a fact which was of most decisive importance for Beethoven's spiritual development. Let me plunge into medias res!

My hypothesis is, broadly, this - that the heroic element in Beethoven's music in the period from 1803 to 1810 had a very great deal to do with the fact of his deafness and his fight to survive what is a most tragic affliction for any composer, particularly for a composer of Beethoven's stature. I base my assumption on the so-called "Heiligenstädter Testament" of October 1802 which Beethoven addressed to his two brothers. It is a poignant human document which came into being as the result of his realization that his deafness which had begun in 1798, was now incurable. The "Heiligenstädter Testament" is a true "De profundis clamavi" - its whole tone and despairing mood suggest that his realization of the incurable nature of his affliction must have struck him with the force of a traumatic shock, with the impact of a catastrophe. I will read to you the sentences which I consider of special significance for my hypothesis. Beethoven introduces them by saying that he was completely unable to hear the sound of a flute and the song of a shepherd. He then continues:

"Solche Ereignisse brachten mich nahe der Verzweiflung, es fehlte wenig und ich endigte selbst mein Leben - nur sie, die Kunst, sie hielt mich zurück - ach! es dünkte mir unmöglich, die Welt eher zu verlassen, bis ich das alles hervorgebracht, wozu ich mich aufgelegt fühlte" .

And a little later:

"Tugend, sie allein kann glücklich machen, nicht Geld; ich spreche aus Erfahrung. . . Ihr danke ich nebst der Kunst, daß ich durch keinen Selbstmord mein Leben endigte" .

Now, what do these sentences suggest? They suggest that it was by an act of iron will power, by an act of heroic resolve and determination that Beethoven conquered his suicidal thoughts and went on creating. It is my conviction that this heroic struggle left its indelible mark - even more, that it is accurately reflected in the large-scale works he wrote in the eight years after the "Heiligenstädter Testament" - the "Eroica" and the Fifth Symphony, the opera "Fidelio", to some extent in the Fifth Piano Concerto, and the overtures to "Coriolan" and "Egmont". They are all works in which the heroic element - the sense of a most intense struggle followed by ultimate victory - is one of their most characteristic qualities, perhaps the most characteristic quality. Take the "Eroica". Certainly, it was partly inspired by Napoleon while he was Consul of the French Republic. But, as J.W. Sullivan the author of a perceptive book on Beethoven and the ethos of his music, writes:

"No amount of brooding over Napoleon's career could have given Beethoven his realization of what we call the life story of heroic achievement, as illustrated in the Eroica. This is obviously a transcription of a personal experience. Beethoven may have thought Bonaparte a hero, but his conception of the heroic he had earned for himself" .

"A transcription of a personal experience" says Sullivan. This personal experience, I suggest, was Beethoven's shattering realization in October 1802 that he was incurably deaf and that only by an act of heroic will power would he be able to survive and continue composing. It is, of course, true that heroism formed part and parcel of

Beethoven's moral constitution. But it was put to its most challenging test - indeed, it was released into the open by his resolve to fight down his thoughts of suicide and preserve the sanity of his mind by a complete devotion to his art. "Ich will dem Schicksal in den Rachen greifen" Beethoven is reported to have said when composing the Fifth Symphony. This "Schicksal" was his deafness and the "in den Rachen greifen" his heroic determination to fight against its traumatic effect.

I would like to go further and put it to you that there is a very strong and close link between Beethoven's personal tragedy and the drama in "Fidelio". In what we may term his unconscious fantasies, Beethoven may have seen in the wholly undeserved suffering of Florestan his own undeserved suffering as an incurably deaf composer. Just as Florestan was the innocent victim of a political intrigue, so was Beethoven the innocent victim of an intrigue of nature, namely his physical affliction of deafness. As for Pizarro, the direct cause of Florestan's miseries, Beethoven may well have perceived in this character the dramatic symbol or the dramatic personification of the cause of his own miseries. And what of Leonore? I suggest that in his unconscious mind Beethoven equated Leonore's heroic and seemingly impossible task to save her husband from the clutches of the murderous Pizarro - that he equated this with own heroic struggle to vanquish his suicidal thoughts of October 1802 for the sake of his art. Seen in this light, Leonore's final triumph over Pizarro corresponds to Beethoven's own triumph over his personal tragedy. There is a complete identification of Beethoven with the character of Leonore.

Now, if you accept that in his unconscious fantasies Beethoven saw in Leonore, Florestan and Pizarro different aspects of his tragic experience, then it will help to explain why it was that the subject of "Fidelio" attracted him with such magnetic force and engaged his entire personality as an artist. The fact that he made three versions of the opera and that for the third version he offered of his own accord to revise it, is, I think, ample evidence to show what hold this subject had on him. That the commission for the opera came fairly soon after the "Heiligenstädter Testament" was, of course, pure coincidence, but it happened to come at most crucial psychological moment in Beethoven's life.

My hypothesis also helps to account for the singular fact that in spite of continuous and persistent searches for other subjects after "Fidelio" - searches which went on almost to the end of his life - "Fidelio" remained Beethoven's only opera. He considered a number of operatic subjects, and some very seriously and in great detail, but his reaction was always the same - first, great interest and even enthusiasm, then doubts, irresolution and, finally, complete rejection. Why? Because in his unconscious mind these subjects failed to combine a high moral purpose with a story and with characters which were a reflection of his personal tragedy, as was the subject of "Fidelio". I believe that it was this fixation to the trauma of October 1802 which in the last analysis made Beethoven so rigid, so unmalleable when he considered other operatic subjects.

As I said at the beginning, for Beethoven his deafness was a profound tragedy, hence the "Heiligenstädter Testament". But for the history of 19th century music it was a infinite blessing in disguise. For, without this tragic experience it is arguable whether the great heroic works from 1803 to 1810 would have come into being in the form in which we know them; just as it is arguable whether Beethoven's spiritual development would have taken the direction which it did without the traumatic shock of October 1802.