

Quote from
Beethoven – His Spiritual Development

By J.W.N. Sullivan
Pages 165-174

Followed by a copy of Beethoven's
The Heiligenstadt Testament

[bolding is mine, as are the italicized blue insertions in braces. – Gary]

*[About the author of ***Beethoven – His Spiritual Development***]*

John William Navin Sullivan, the son of a poor Irish sailor, was born in 1886 (59 years after Beethoven's death – 1827 at age 56); Sullivan died at the age of 51 in 1937 in England. Educated at University College, London, he was a mathematician, philosopher of science, reviewer for *The Times* (London), and an amateur pianist. Among his numerous publications are *Aspects of Science* (1922 – age 36), *History of Mathematics in Europe* (1923 – age 37), *Three Men Discuss Relativity* (1926 – age 40), ***Beethoven (1927 – age 41)***, *Present Day Astronomy* (1930 – age 44), and *Science: A New Outlook* (1935 – age 49).

The Final Stage (beginning page 165)

There seems to be no reason to doubt that the great bulk of Beethoven's work is of permanent value. The greatest function of a work of art is to present us with a higher organization of experience. It is on this that its claim to "greatness" depends. It does not seem that the "greatness" and the "beauty" of a work of art are identical. What constitutes the beauty of a work of art is a hitherto unresolved problem with which, in this book, we are not concerned.

That **Beethoven's music** is more *beautiful* than any other music we are not inclined to assert; *[however,]* that it **is greater than any other music has been, on the whole, the general opinion ever since it appeared**. Its **greatness** depends on what we have called its **spiritual content**, and this is something that the **listener perceives directly**, although he may be entirely unable to formulate it. Beethoven's work will live because of the permanent value, to the human race, of the experiences it communicates. These experiences are valuable because they are in the line of human development; they are experiences to which the race, in its evolutionary march, aspires.

At a given period certain experiences may be current, and may be given popular artistic expression, which are *[however,]* *not* valuable. In our own day, for example, a certain nervous excitability and spiritual weariness, due to specific and essentially temporary causes, has informed a good deal of contemporary art. **Small artists can**

flourish in an age which is not fit for heroes to live in. But such manifestations are of *[merely]* quite local importance.

[However,] The *great* artist achieves a relative immortality because the experiences he deals with are as fundamental for humanity as are hunger, sex, and the succession of day and night. It does not follow that the experiences he communicates are elementary. They *[the experiences communicated by the artist]* **may belong to an order of consciousness that very few men have attained** but, in that case, they must be in the line of **human development**; we must **feel** them as **prophetic. Beethoven's late music communicates experiences that very few people can normally possess.** But we value these experiences because we feel that are not freakish. **They correspond to a spiritual synthesis which the race has not achieved but which, we may suppose, it is on the way to achieving.** It is only the very greatest kind of artist who presents us with experiences that we recognize both as fundamental and as in advance of anything we have hitherto known. With such art we make contact, for a moment, with

The prophetic soul of the wide world
Dreaming on things to come.

It is to this kind of art that Beethoven's greatest music belongs and it is, perhaps, the greatest in that kind.

In Beethoven's earlier work we are dealing, for the most part, with experiences which are not only fundamental but universal. This is what is meant by some writers when they call this music more "objective" than his latter work.

The **spiritual content of the most characteristic of Beethoven's "second period" work** may be summed up as ***achievement through heroism in spite of suffering.*** This music is probably still what the bulk of listeners mean when they speak of Beethoven. To the majority of people, suffering is still one of life's major characteristics, and it is that characteristic, more than any other, that determines our attitude towards life.

The **spiritual essence of life, as presented by Beethoven**, is, we feel, consistent with **our deepest experiences**, and the **solution he presents is one consistent with our loftiest aspirations.** This music has the note of authenticity. Its sorrow is real, and so is its heroism. The passionate reverence that so many thousands have felt for the author of this music (a phenomenon quite without parallel in the case of any other musician) is a testimony to the **profundity, universality and genuineness of the experiences it communicates. No artist, more than Beethoven, has dealt with the things that most deeply concern mankind.** And **we can be encouraged and made hopeful by the solution he presents because he convinces us that he knows, in all their bitterness, the elements of the problem.** What optimism this man preaches has, we feel, been earned. This attitude

towards Beethoven is, and always has been, very general and, except on the basis of quite arbitrary theories about the meaninglessness of music, is perfectly justified.

Beethoven could compose music “for the fun of it,” but **in all his greatest work he was concerned to make explicit, through the medium of his art, states of consciousness evoked by his profoundest experiences.** For his ability to use his medium he would have to be ranked amongst the greatest composers; for the quality of what he expressed he is beyond comparison.

...

[page 171]

During his *[final]* illness *[dropsy or, in today's language, edema]* Beethoven passed much of his time in reading **Handle** *[1685 – 1759, contemporary of Bach]*, whose complete works had been presented to him by Stumpff. He had a **special liking for this composer.** Indeed, he had said more than once that he **placed Handel above all others.** A reference to this reading, which also throws light on the attitude in which Beethoven awaited death, occurs in a letter by his physician, Dr. Wawruch, written after the fourth *[and final]* operation for dropsy:

“No words of comfort could brace him up, and when I promised him alleviation of his sufferings with the coming of the vitalizing weather of spring he answered with a smile, ‘My day’s work is finished. If there were a physician *[who]* could help me his name should be called Wonderful.*’ This pathetic **allusion to Handel’s Messiah** touched me so deeply that I had to confess its correctness to myself with profound emotion.”

**[Chorus from Handel’s Messiah:
Chorus: **For Unto Us A Child is Born:**
For unto us a Child is born,
unto us a Son is given,
and the government
shall be upon His shoulder;
and his name shall be called
Wonderful,
Counselor,
the Mighty God,
the Everlasting Father,
the Prince of Peace.
(Isaiah 9:6)]*

The end came some time after five o’clock on the afternoon of March 26, 1827. Beethoven had been unconscious for two days, and his death struggles were violent. His last moments are described by Hüttenbrenner, who, with Beethoven’s sister-in-

law, made one of the only two people present at the end. There had been a violent storm, and suddenly there was a lightning flash and a great crash of thunder. It seems to have aroused the dying man from his unconsciousness. He raised his clenched fist, opened his eyes and looked upwards for several seconds with a “very serious, threatening expression.” As the hand dropped he fell back dead.

In this sketch of Beethoven’s spiritual development we have regarded him chiefly as an **explorer**. What we may call his **emotional nature** was **sensitive, discriminating, and profound**, and his **circumstances** brought him an **intimate acquaintance with the chief characteristics of life**. His **realization of the character of life was not hindered** by insensitiveness, as was Wagner’s, nor **by religion, as was Bach’s**. **There was nothing in this man [Beethoven], either natural or acquired, to blunt his perceptions.**

And he was not merely sensitive; he was not merely a reflecting mirror. **His experiences took root and grew. An inner life of quite extraordinary intensity was in process of development till the very end.** Other artists, of those few whose spirits were both sensitive and free, seem to have passed through similar stages of development. But perhaps even Shakespeare never reached that final stage of illumination that is expressed in some of Beethoven’s late music. The other steps of the journey he knew, but Shakespeare never wrote his C sharp minor quartet. It is possible, indeed, that Beethoven’s late music is unique, not only in music, but in the whole of art.

Although we have regarded Beethoven’s music from its philosophic aspect, it is not for the purpose of deducing a philosophy from it. **Beethoven’s greatest music has meaning in the sense that** it is not a mere pattern of sounds, but **possesses a spiritual content**; nevertheless, it does not in any sense express a philosophy. It expresses certain primary experiences as organized in the mind of this particular artist. But this organization of experience is utterly different from the organization of experience presented in a philosophy. It is an organization to which the criteria of logical coherence do not in the least apply. **Beethoven’s profoundest attitude towards life, as expressed in his music, owes nothing to the mediation of his intelligence.** The synthesis of his experience that is achieved by a great artist proceeds according to laws of which we know almost nothing, but purely intellectual formulation plays a very small part in it.

If Beethoven reached the state, as we believe he did, where he achieved the “submission” he felt to be so necessary, it was not through any process of reasoning. And his realization of the necessity of submission could not have been reached by any such process. As a crude analogy we may suggest that **there are spiritual appetites**, as there are bodily ones, **necessary for development but which, like the sexual appetite, make their appearance only at a certain stage of growth. Comparatively few men, even amongst artists, manifest a true spiritual growth. Their attitude towards life is relatively fixed; it may be exemplified with more richness and subtlety as they mature, but it does not develop.** Such a transition

as we find from Beethoven's "second" to his "third" period, where nothing is abandoned and yet where everything is changed, is extremely rare. Beethoven, therefore, although he preached no philosophy, is of philosophical importance because he adds one to the very few cases that exist of a **genuine spiritual development**.

Such cases, it might be said, do nothing to help the development of mankind. **Beethoven's music illustrates the development, but throws no light on the process by which it came about.** But such revelations have a strangely haunting quality. We may be unable to earn for ourselves the capacity to utter the prayer of thanksgiving of the A minor quartet, or to reach the state of final serenity of the fugue of the C sharp minor quartet, but we can henceforth take but little account of attitudes towards life that leave no room for these experiences, attitudes which deny them or explain them away.

And our conviction that these experiences are valuable, even to us, is reinforced by the whole bulk of Beethoven's work. If they stood alone these superhuman utterances might seem to us those of an oracle who was hardly a man. But we know, from the rest of his music, that **Beethoven was a man who experienced all that we can experience, who suffered all that we can suffer. If in the end, he seems to reach a state "above the battle" we also know that no man ever knew more bitterly what the battle is.**

The Heiligenstadt Testament

In May 1802, *[at the age of 31]* on the advice of Johann Adam Schmidt, Beethoven went to Heiligenstadt to rest. This residence was separate from the one at Vienna: it took about an hour to get there by carriage.

Depressed and unable to hide his increasing infirmity, Beethoven wrote, on October 6th 1802 a document which he guarded carefully afterwards, entitled "The Heiligenstadt Testament". In it he revealed his deafness and expressed his disgust. A second part of the testament was written a few days later, on October 10th 1802.

It is noted that three times the composer has omitted to write the christian name of his second brother, Johann. *[Johann was his father's name, whom he suffered under greatly as a child – his dad died when Beethoven was 19]*

Beethoven later wrote two more wills: in 1824, and, just before his death, in 1827 *[at the age of 56]*.

For my brothers Carl and [_____] Beethoven

O ye men who think or say that I am malevolent, stubborn or misanthropic, how greatly do ye wrong me, you do not know the secret causes of my seeming, from childhood my heart and mind were disposed to the gentle feelings of good will, I was even ever eager to accomplish great deeds, but reflect now that for six years I have been a hopeless case, aggravated by senseless physicians, cheated year after year in the hope of improvement, finally compelled to face the prospect of a *lasting malady* (whose cure will take years or, perhaps, be impossible), born with an ardent and lively temperament, even susceptible to the diversions of society, I was compelled early to isolate myself, to live in loneliness, when I at times tried to forget all this, O how harshly was I repulsed by the doubly sad experience of my bad hearing, and yet it was impossible for me to say to men speak louder, shout, for I am deaf. Ah how could I possibly admit such an infirmity in the one sense which should have been more perfect in me than in others, a sense which I once possessed in highest perfection, a perfection such as few surely in my profession enjoy or have enjoyed - O I cannot do it, therefore forgive me when you see me draw back when I would gladly mingle with you, my misfortune is doubly painful because it must lead to my being misunderstood, for me there can be no recreations in society of my fellows, refined intercourse, mutual exchange of thought, only just as little as the greatest needs command may I mix with society. I must live like an exile, if I approach near to people a hot terror seizes upon me, a fear that I may be subjected to the danger of letting my condition be observed - thus it has been during the past year which I spent in the country, commanded by my intelligent physician to spare my hearing as

much as possible, in this almost meeting my natural disposition, although I sometimes ran counter to it yielding to my inclination for society, but what a humiliation when one stood beside me and heard a flute in the distance and *I heard nothing*, or someone heard *the shepherd singing* and again I heard nothing, such incidents brought me to the verge of despair, but little more and I would have put an end to my life - only art it was that withheld me, ah it seemed impossible to leave the world until I had produced all that I felt called upon me to produce, and so I endured this wretched existence - truly wretched, an excitable body which a sudden change can throw from the best into the worst state - Patience - it is said that I must now choose for my guide, I have done so, I hope my determination will remain firm to endure until it please the inexorable parcae to bread the thread, perhaps I shall get better, perhaps not, I am prepared. Forced already in my 28th year to become a philosopher, O it is not easy, less easy for the artist than for anyone else - Divine One thou lookest into my inmost soul, thou knowest it, thou knowest that love of man and desire to do good live therein. O men, when some day you read these words, reflect that ye did me wrong and let the unfortunate one comfort himself and find one of his kind who despite all obstacles of nature yet did all that was in his power to be accepted among worthy artists and men. You my brothers Carl and [Johann] as soon as I am dead if Dr. Schmid is still alive ask him in my name to describe my malady and attach this document to the history of my illness so that so far as possible at least the world may become reconciled with me after my death. At the same time I declare you two to be the heirs to my small fortune (if so it can be called), divide it fairly, bear with and help each other, what injury you have done me you know was long ago forgiven. to you brother Carl I give special thanks for the attachment you have displayed towards me of late. It is my wish that your lives be better and freer from care than I have had, recommend virtue to your children, it alone can give happiness, not money, I speak from experience, it was virtue that upheld me in misery, to it next to my art I owe the fact that I did not end my life with suicide. - Farewell and love each other - I thank all my friends, particularly *Prince Lichnowsky* and *Professor Schmid* - I desire that the instruments from Prince L. be preserved by one of you but let no quarrel result from this, so soon as they can serve you better purpose sell them, how glad will I be if I can still be helpful to you in my grave - with joy I hasten towards death - if it comes before I shall have had an opportunity to show all my artistic capacities it will still come too early for me despite my hard fate and I shall probably wish it had come later - but even then I am satisfied, will it not free me from my state of endless suffering? Come when thou will I shall meet thee bravely. - Farewell and do not wholly forget me when I am dead, I deserve this of you in having often in life thought of you how to make you happy, be so -

Heiglstadt
october 6,1802

Ludwig van Beethoven