

Quote from  
***Beethoven – His Spiritual Development***

By J.W.N. Sullivan  
Pages 41-47

*[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).

**Beethoven's Characteristics (beginning on page 41)**

One of the most significant facts, for the understanding of Beethoven, is that **his work shows an organic development up till the very end**. The older Beethoven lived, the more and more profound was what he had to say. The greatest music Beethoven ever wrote is to be found in the last string quartets, and the music of every decade before the final period has greater music than its predecessor. **Such sustained development**, in the case of an artist who reaches years of maturity, **is a rare and important phenomenon**. **Bach**, for instance, who may be likened to Beethoven for the seriousness and maturity of his mind, **lost himself at the end in the arid labyrinths of pure technique**. **Wagner**, as the fever in his blood grew less, had **nothing to express at the end but exhaustion and ineffectual longing**. **Beethoven's music continually developed because it was the expression of an attitude towards life that had within it the possibility of indefinite growth**.

Some attitudes towards life are not susceptible of development. They may achieve greater richness and subtlety, but they are incapable of organic growth. The cynic, for example, may become more bitter and penetrating, but **unless he suffers a catastrophic change he remains at the same distance from reality**.

*The man who has sincerely accepted a religious scheme in which all the major problems of life are provided with solutions is likely to go through life without ever experiencing the direct impact of those problems. That is, in fact, the weakness of Bach as compared with Beethoven. ...*

The chief characteristics of the fully mature Beethoven's attitude towards life are to be found in **his realization of suffering and in his realization of the heroism of achievement**. The character of life as suffering is an aspect that our modern civilization, mercifully for the great majority of people, does a great deal to obscure. **Few men have the capacity fully to realize suffering as one of the great structural lines of human life. Bach, as we have said, escaped the problem with his religious scheme. ... To Beethoven the character of life as suffering became a fundamental part of his outlook.** The deep sincerity and the naiveté of his nature, combined with the circumstances of his life, made this knowledge inevitable. The quality of this realization has nothing in common with the pessimism of such a man as **Schopenhauer**. It is the direct, simple and final acceptance of an obvious fact.

This attitude of mind is perhaps rarer today than at any previous period in history. **To the modern mind suffering is essentially remediable.** Suffering is primarily due to physical and moral maladjustment, and with the spread of science and correct social theories we shall be able to abolish it. For an increasing number of people suffering is already practically abolished. **They may go through life without meeting one problem they cannot evade until they reach their deathbed**, while they find the sufferings of others easier to endure through their conviction that they are the temporary consequences of the imperfect state of society. **But to the vast majority of people suffering is still one of the fundamental characteristics of life, and it is their realization that an experience of suffering, pure and profound, enters as an integral part into Beethoven's greatest work, that helps to give that work its unique place in the minds and hearts of men.**

**Beethoven's capacity for a deep and passionate realization of suffering necessitated, if he were not to be reduced to impotence, a corresponding capacity for endurance and an enormous power of self-assertion.** No artist ever lived whose work gives a greater impression of indomitable strength than we find in some of Beethoven's most characteristic movements. The force that triumphs throughout the Scherzo of the Ninth Symphony, for example, is indeed indestructible, while the fugue of the Hammerclavier sonata is an almost insensate outburst of unconquerable self-assertion. **As he grew older his force increased.**

"I will take Fate by the throat," he said as a young man, a' propos of his increasing deafness, and there is plenty of the "will to victory" in the Fifth Symphony he proceeded to write. **But a stronger, although a more subtle pulse, is to be found in some of the last string quartets. In his last years he had more to carry and he carried it more lightly.**

The "personality" of such a man as Beethoven is a slowly developed synthetic whole. It is formed by the gradual combination of its constituent elements into an organic unity. **For the development of a personality a rich and profound inner life is**

**necessary, and for that reason it is usually only great artists and religious teachers who impress us as being complete persons.**

Amongst the elements constitutive of Beethoven's personality we must include his **lack of malleability**. This quality made him almost immune from purely external influences. Thus he was **impervious to criticism**; his **manners were atrocious**; he **ignored conventions**; he was **permanently subject to no social passions**, not even sexual love. The **low standard of education he achieved** seems to have been as much **due to his lack of plasticity** as to his lack of opportunities. **He was not an educable man**. He accepted none of the schemes of thought or conduct current in his time; it is doubtful whether he was even fully aware of their existence, **He remained utterly faithful to his own experience**. It is for this reason that **his affirmative utterances, as in the Credo of the Mass in D**, have such unexampled weight. **Such utterances spring solely from his own personal and tested experience.**

**Beethoven's capacity for realizing the fundamental character of life in its two aspects of suffering and achievement, combined with his lack of flexibility, was the necessary condition for the development of his attitude towards life.** That development takes the form of a synthesis. The Beethoven of the C minor symphony [*Fifth Symphony*] finds the meaning of life in **achievement in spite of suffering**. Fate is an enemy to be defied. [*But in contrast,*] The Beethoven of the last quartets finds that the **highest achievement is reached through suffering. Suffering is accepted as a necessary condition of life, as an illuminating power.** That the reconciliation he thus effected was genuine and complete is made evident by the music, for none of Beethoven's music is more obviously the expression of an authentic experience.

The quality of this experience has led many writers to call this music "mystical" or "metaphysical." But whatever meanings these terms may be intended to convey, the music in question is really **Beethoven's expression of the final synthesis he achieved between the primary elements of his experience.** He did not turn away from life towards some mystical Nirvana. **He forgot none of the joy, the effort, or the pain. He abandoned nothing.** What he achieved is something much more wonderful than an old man's serenity. **The life in the last string quartets is as full, varied and intense as anywhere in Beethoven's music.** But those aspects of life that Beethoven formerly presented as contrasted he now presents as harmoniously flowering from a single stem. **Life's experiences are still presented with all their diversity, but no longer as conflicting. ...**

**We have, then, in the person of Beethoven a musical genius with all the conditions for writing great music. He has a realization of the ultimate character of life, he has a force adequate to any trial, however arduous, his growth will be free from the distorting effects of mere convention, and his response is pure and sincere to a wide range of experience. No other musician who ever lived has united so many advantages. ...**