

York Festival of Ideas 2020 - *Infinite Horizons*
York Chamber Music Festival presents

“Beethoven and the Cello – Reaching for the
Cosmos”



BEETHOVEN AT THE AGE OF THIRTY-ONE
Engraving by J. Neidl from Stainbauer's Portrait

By Stuart Lowe

Introduction

Very rarely in history does someone arrive on Earth touched with such a force of invention that they change everything. Beethoven was such a person – born 250 years ago – a genius without parallel in music.

This essay focuses on Beethoven's cello sonatas – only five of them but spread out across his creative career they are a good representation of his artistic evolution and spiritual journey - from radical re-invention of a tradition in his early years, through glorious transformation in a middle period – when not only did he write unimaginable symphonies but that each time he put pen to paper he seemed to re-create the *idea* of the symphony – and finally, in poor and declining health, he ended with mysterious, strange music unlike anything else heard before. Beethoven seemed at that stage to be in liminal space connected, as he himself said, to the source of his musical imagination – touching the Cosmos from within his silent world. For Beethoven's great tragedy was that for much of his adult life he became progressively deaf until there was nothing left.

Beethoven was born in Bonn in 1770. In November 1792 the young Ludwig moved to Vienna having secured aristocratic patronage. Relatively uneducated, rough-mannered, with a face somewhat pock-marked but with an enticing personality and undoubted musical genius he fed the insatiable appetite of his patrons for chamber music of all sorts; piano sonatas, violin sonatas, string trios, string quartets and more flew off his pen, already deeply poetic, turbulent, unorthodox in structure, opening up new possibilities, new and 'infinite horizons'. And not forgetting that his ability to improvise on the forte piano was legendary; indeed this is what he was at first best known for.

Why did Beethoven write cello sonatas?

Of course, Beethoven came out of a tradition. As a teenager he was sent to meet Mozart (Oh to have been a fly on *that* wall!) and once established in Vienna he studied for a while with Haydn and so touched base with the Greats. But from the outset Beethoven was re-creating everything - he started with an energy and imagination without parallel in musical history. Neither Mozart nor Haydn wrote cello sonatas but both used the cello prominently in their string quartets; Haydn especially gave it an equality of voice. Haydn's remarkable D Major cello concerto of 1783 was a statement of the potential of the cello as a solo instrument in the hands of a virtuoso player. Beethoven was at pains to inform himself of what every instrument could and could not do. We should remember that he played the violin and viola to a reasonably competent level, so he knew string playing from the inside and pushed players to the edge of what was technically viable and this was the case for years to come. He intuitively knew that an advanced technical standard would in time become the norm. This is why meeting exceptional virtuoso cellists is important to the story of his cello sonatas. He knew Bernhard Romberg, worked with the Duport brothers and, later on, the cellist of the Schuppanzigh string quartet, Joseph Linke.

The 'invention' of the cello

The cello itself was fixed in its dimensions and design in the early 18th century in the workshop of Stradivarius in Cremona and other great makers – notably Pietro Guarneri working with Domenico Montagnana and Carlo Annibale Tononi in Venice. Montagnana's cellos were particularly famed and together with the 'Strad' cellos became models, blueprints for other makers. These Italian instruments were made during a glorious golden age of craftsmanship. In the face of their acoustic properties and sheer beauty of sound the old-fashioned viols gradually disappeared (but were revived in the second half of the 20th century through the 'Early Music' movement). Viols have a long history of evolution – including the ancient Arabic rehab – and first appeared in Spain in the mid- to late-15th Century; they were particularly popular during the European Renaissance. They were well suited to the intimate space of aristocratic courts but their soft tones were simply unsuited to the bigger arenas and larger orchestras that evolved as music moved out into the public square.

One of the keys to this change was string technology. It was discovered in a workshop in Bologna at the end of the 17th century that wrapping gut strings with fine metal thread meant that they were stronger, less prone to snap and could bear much greater tensions. As a result it was possible to have higher bridges and by changing the angle of the neck/finger-board to accommodate the high bridge the violin family of instruments were more resonant, louder and above all able to produce many more colours and shades of tone than the ancient viols. Cellos were a step change over the viola da gamba ('*leg viol*') because they were smaller and less cumbersome.

Some composers were quick to react to the new cellos especially in Italy. Boccherini and Vivaldi wrote dozens of sonatas and concertos for the instrument. Boccherini (who emigrated to Spain) invented the idea of 'thumb position' which enabled playing more securely higher up the fingerboard. J.S. Bach's miraculous six unaccompanied cello suites were written between 1717 and 1723 when he was in charge of the musical life of the provincial court of Duke Leopold at Köthen in northern Germany. It is one of the great mysteries that Bach who never travelled more than a few hundred miles from home could write such supreme works for the cello, which was still in its infancy.

Beethoven's cello sonatas

The first and second cello sonatas (Op. 5)

And so it is important to the story of Beethoven and the cello *that he came to know the acoustic properties of the instrument before deafness descended*. In 1796 – age 26 – unaware yet of what was soon to happen to his hearing he wrote the first two sonatas (Op. 5) revelling in the sound of the cello. He arrived in Berlin on a concert tour, there as a pianist – his improvisations and performances of his own works had audiences gasping. This ability was part of his creative instinct and fed directly into his composing. Indeed, being a concert pianist was his first chosen career, although fate played its part because by the turn of the century he realised his deafness would in time put paid to performing. For our sakes he was saved from having the normal divided career by what to him, at the time, appeared to be his greatest disaster. As his outer-ear faded so his inner-ear quickened.

But before this happened, in Berlin he met two French virtuosi cellists Jean-Pierre Duport and his younger brother, Jean-Louis. Jean-Pierre had recently been appointed as first cello in the court orchestra of King Frederick-Wilhelm II, himself a keen amateur cellist. So Beethoven's appearance at the court with his two cello sonatas is perhaps not so surprising. Being a shrewd businessman Beethoven dedicated the new sonatas to the King. It is thought that for the first performance at the court in Potsdam it was Jean-Louis who played the cello with the formidable pianist Beethoven. Duly impressed the dedicatee rewarded the composer with a golden snuff box full of Louis D'or! The two sonatas were written on a grand scale, real concert pieces and are full of exciting effects for the cello with flights into the high register, although the pianist was not to be out-shone and the piano was still the dominant partner. But these sonatas were for the first time a genuine partnership between the two instruments. The opening Adagio in the First sonata is almost operatic in its invention; slowly the curtain rises before the drama begins. Beethoven seems to be introducing his idea of the cello sonata almost as if he knew it was going to be an important series.

Feeding into these early cello sonatas was Beethoven's deeply held admiration for Handel; his ability to evoke an emotion or construct an entire dramatic scene out of scraps of motifs. We know that Beethoven heard Handel's oratorio *Judas Maccabeus* in Vienna. It is quite

telling that Beethoven uses dotted and double dotted rhythms in his first cello sonata's opening *Adagio* in clear imitation of the oratorio. *Judas Maccabeus* must have been on his mind while he was in Berlin because he wrote a companion piece to the two cello sonatas - *12 Variations on the aria "See, the Conquering Hero Comes"* from the oratorio.

The third cello sonata (Op. 69)

The Third sonata in A major, Op. 69 inhabits a very different world from the first two. It is a work of intense beauty – serene, full of humour and joyful. This is all the more astonishing when we consider the circumstances and background of its composition. He started work on it in 1806 but between his Berlin sonatas of 1796 and 1806 his life had fallen apart. We must reflect briefly on this because his resolution of this crisis shaped the rest of his life. By 1801 he had crossed the Rubicon realizing that his intended career as a virtuoso pianist was in tatters owing to the remorseless impact of hearing loss. He avoided social gatherings which for such a gregarious person was a mental agony, compounded by his own pride and growing status in the public eye. Haydn in his gentle wisdom affirmed that here was a young man of genius.

The 'Heiligenstadt Will'

On medical advice Beethoven sought to spare his hearing by retreating to his beloved countryside. He went to Heiligenstadt, a village outside Vienna and for a while was happy there, out in nature and also in love – he was frequently in love but his powerful instinct for composing made him wary of marriage. For a while at Heiligenstadt he composed joyous music but as the summer of 1802 wore on there was no remission of his deafness, and his beloved Giulietta Guicciardi - a minor aristocrat – married as her social status required. To Beethoven it was perhaps a last bitter blow. Whether he contemplated suicide or was so ill he thought he was dying, he sat down and wrote what in effect was a will for his brothers in the event of his death. On 6th October page after page of the most profound emotion poured from his pen, all pointing to the utter humiliation of his proud spirit; in despair he walked in the deepest, darkest valley. Towards the end he wrote, "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 to produce, and so I endured this wretched existence...Forced already in my twenty-eighth year to become a philosopher. Oh, it is not easy, less easy for the artist than for anyone else. Divine One, Thou lookest into my innermost soul, Thou knowest that love of man and desire to do good live therein." Beethoven's disaster was as complete as a Greek tragedy. It was a self-emptying breakdown that nearly killed him. But he seemed to trust this experience and as he recovered albeit over many months he found a new creative dimension welling up from a deeper source. Those last weeks at Heiligenstadt were cathartic. He sensed his calling, the mission that he must fulfil, to bring liberation to humanity through music. He returned to Vienna still in turmoil but his struggle was on an ascending path.

During the winter months he resumed work. He was moving on, re-inventing form and structure, what it means to write symphonies and perhaps one of his greatest works, the

Eroica symphony, was coming into being. Not content with his past style Beethoven was finding within himself a completely new form of music, music so strange that at first it was misunderstood and at the least thought to be 'difficult', 'too new', sounding like gobbledygook to audiences. We know now that it was a work of supreme importance; powerful and of a splendour hitherto unknown in music. And so began the unfolding of Beethoven's gloriously productive 'middle period'.

The A major Cello Sonata, Op. 69 was a product of this newly found sense of his destiny. He worked on it between 1806 and 1808. In common with his works of this period it is positively bubbling with joy but, carefully crafted over two years, nothing is superfluous or trivial here. Cello and piano for the first time speak to each other almost as lovers. It was a marriage of equals, a marriage made in heaven. The 'cello sonata' would not, could not, be the same again such is the force of invention and beauty that Beethoven conjures up.

The fourth and fifth cello sonatas (Op. 102)

In the years up to 1815 Beethoven was an immensely popular personality and he achieved a semblance of respectability and financial security. But his compositions around this time were relatively few. In 1815 he produced nothing of any consequence until in July and August he wrote two cello sonatas Op. 102; No. 1 in C Major and No. 2 in D Major. Beethoven was troubled at this period by family problems; his brother Karl fell dangerously ill, he disliked his sisters-in law and just to add to the melee one of his main sponsors Prince Kinsky died so partly cutting off his financial security. Profoundly deaf and ill, Beethoven once again dug from his innermost being a renewed creative energy. These sonatas were the opening works of his so called "late" period. It seems as though he opened a door and peered into a new place. He stood on the threshold imagining strange new music, transcendent and of such beauty that only a broken-hearted person might write.

From his pen came an extraordinary group of masterpieces – the last string quartets, the piano sonatas Op. 109 and Op. 111 and other works that were and still are outside ordinary experience, light years ahead of his time. The cello sonatas Op. 102 are the harbingers of this cluster of final works.

The stimulus for a new set of cello sonatas came from Beethoven's friendship with Joseph Linke who was the cellist in the Schuppanzigh string quartet. They gave the premieres of many of Beethoven's string quartets and was signed up by Count Razumovsky as his house quartet. It was famously disbanded after the count's palace burnt down. Supported by his long-term patron Countess Maria von Erdődy Beethoven wrote the C Major and D Major cello sonatas for Linke to play. The pianist for the first performances was Carl Czerny – Beethoven long since totally deaf and unable to play. But he must have remembered the acoustic properties of the cello and could see Linke's facility at the instrument.

These sonatas are worlds away from the early Op. 5 sonatas. They are half as long, taut with everything here pared down to essentials – not a superfluous note. The fourth sonata in C Major opens with a simple two-bar phrase. He might well have been re-imagining his

undoubted devotion to the music of Handel who made whole oratorios from the seeds of a few notes. In this cello sonata virtually the whole work is derived from the two opening bars.

The final cello sonata, in D major by contrast begins in great drama and the whole of the first movement builds on this. Then right at the end of his cello sonata oeuvre, almost too late, he finally seems to touch the cosmos with the only substantial slow movement of any of the cello sonatas. Steven Isserlis described it as “...a prayer that must surely be the most beautiful movement ever written for cello and piano.” This being Beethoven we must then come down to Earth with a bump with a fugue which really is the defiant gesture of a genius composer who knows exactly what he is doing in saying farewell to his cello sonatas; a joyous celebration, ending as though blowing out the candles. From within his silent world Beethoven shows us a depth of humanity beyond music. How did he lead us to this? How did he seem to become one with the cosmos?

Reaching for the Cosmos

The evidence of Beethoven’s creative process has been written about copiously by scholars, musicologists and philosophers. Musicians themselves perhaps feel it most acutely as the notes pour from their instruments. It starts from something we all share (especially in these days of Covid-19). Beethoven’s passion was to live in nature – he felt one with the created universe. This is crucial to understanding his creative process. The English pianist Neate, who Beethoven liked, said he never knew a man who so enjoyed nature; who took intense delight in flowers, in the clouds. Nature to him was like food. Out in nature Beethoven found the conditions most conducive to composing, when he was most ‘himself’. It seems that he glimpsed whole pieces and used his sketch book to scribble down a few themes, fragments, to capture the moment although he said that he never forgot a theme once it came to mind. Ernest Newman said that somehow Beethoven worked from the WHOLE to the particular, to reduce a nebula to its atoms; to make the implicit explicit. This was a large part of Beethoven’s genius. How could it be?

His working practice was to spend the summer and autumn living in the countryside away from Vienna. He would get up early and spend long days rambling in the open air, coming in for dinner before a nighttime walk. After his summer sojourns he spent the winters in Vienna writing; completing and scoring the music, getting up early to work, breaking off for breakfast and later taking a walk across the city’s ramparts or visiting friends, going to the theatre. Routines varied with teaching commitments and rehearsals when performances were due. But whatever seemed to beset him this was his calling and duty, *above all else*. What is more amazing is that he often worked on several compositions simultaneously. Early on he remarked to his school friend Wegeler that one composition has barely ended than another begins, “...I frequently work on three or four compositions at a time”.

Of course, Beethoven lived fully in the social and political world he was in and was embedded in his cultural context. He was an idealist, hoping for liberty and brotherhood (meaning all humanity) and was angry when his political idol Napoleon set himself up as Emperor. He hated Metternich's anti-liberal politics, his nationalism and cultural conservatism. He was a considerable philosopher, he read poetry – especially Goethe and Schiller – and his favourite topic of conversation was politics.

His musical influences were spoken about by many of Beethoven's friends and found in other sources. As we saw above he met Mozart and his miraculous music moved Beethoven to his core, so much so that he sometimes avoided listening to it for fear of losing his independent voice. He

spoke of Mozart's opera *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute) with great affection. One of the two cello variations he wrote in Berlin as companion pieces to the cello sonatas was based on Pomina and Papageno's gorgeous love duet '*Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen*'. Beethoven was famous for playing from memory J.S. Bach's 48 Preludes and Fugues. Indeed, *The Well-tempered Clavier*, taught to him by his boyhood piano teacher Neeffe in Bonn, entered his compositional DNA. His feeling for key colours and characteristics had an inner significance; B flat minor, for example, was for him a 'black' key. We know he also studied C.P.E. Bach's keyboard music. Haydn more than Mozart welled up in Beethoven's psyche at a practical compositional level and perhaps above all he revered Handel. He named him on several occasions according to the biographers. Towards the end of his life his friend J. A. Stumpff asked him who he thought the greatest composer and the answer came back without hesitation, "Handel, to him I bow the knee."

Putting all this aside it still remains to wonder how it was that Beethoven had access to a world, a knowledge that few people have touched on. Organized religion and ritual meant very little to him. He was not afraid of dying. He was profoundly religious in his awareness that the source of his creative mind, throughout his life, was a divine presence. He seemed to draw his music from the cosmos accessed, it would seem, through the natural world where he was most truly himself. A letter to Goethe from Bettina von Armin describes her conversation with Beethoven. She says, "This is what he said," "...well I know that God is nearer to me than to other artists; I associate with him without fear; I have always recognized and understood Him and have no fear for my music. Speak to Goethe about me; I am right in saying that music is the one incorporeal entrance into the higher world of knowledge which comprehends mankind but which mankind cannot comprehend. ...Every real creation of art is independent, more powerful than the artist himself and returns to the divine through its manifestation. It is one with man only in this, that it bears testimony to the mediation of the divine in him." Read also the precious manuscript in the library of the



LYSER'S SKETCHES OF BEETHOVEN

Royal College of Music in which Beethoven had copied out what seems to be passages from sacred texts of the East which show him to be free thinking and very sensitive to and aware of a mystical divine source. "Thou art the true, Blessed, Thou the best of all laws, the image of all wisdom, present throughout the whole world, Thou attainest all things."

Beethoven's music, of course, speaks for itself, for it does indeed transcend explanation. In his last years, beset by personal problems, money worries, rapidly declining health and remembering that by this time he was profoundly deaf, he found deep within his inner consciousness other-worldly music. In this inner world, in his contemplative mind he became free to hear the Source of all creation. This is why the natural world was so important to him because he found God in all things- tiny flowers, rocks, living creatures - then turned his gaze to the firmament. A conversation he had was recorded by his friend J.A. Stumpff and despite the somewhat florid manner in which it is described seems to be the authentic voice of Beethoven himself. This is what he told Stumpff.

"...when at eventide I contemplate in wonderment the firmament and the host of luminous bodies which we call worlds and suns eternally revolving within its boundaries, my spirit soars beyond these stars many millions of miles away towards the fountain whence all created works spring and where all new creation must still flow... Only by hard persistent labour through such powers as are bestowed on a man can the work of art be made worthy of the Creator and preserver of everlasting nature."

Surely, here we have the essence of Beethoven. His music became a conduit between the cosmos and Earth, inviting us to share not just the sense of being one with nature from observing it, but fully to be part of the created process. He looked across the Infinite Horizons and found that there was no separation.