

The Story of a Life that Remains an Inspiration

BEETHOVEN

JUST over a century has passed since the death of this fighter, stormer, and wonder-worker who forged his dreams and disappointments into immortal music. Posterity approaches his work only with bowed head. But it may follow his life with open eyes; Beethoven, the inspired, the conqueror.

One may be too curious about the life work of a great artist, he may be too critical. But there is a case for informing ourselves about Beethoven's personality. The poet can convey in words all we need to know about his opinions. The musician does not tell us how he viewed life; what he expresses is at most the emotion which he felt, as he pondered and struggled.

Yet Beethoven had strong opinions. It was a daring thing for a composer writing within reach of the Austrian police to dedicate a symphony to Napoleon. Not only did Beethoven write the Eroica in honour of the First Consul; he tore up his dedication when his hero proclaimed himself Emperor. His opinions, then, had some bearing on his music; a political enthusiasm stimulated the first of his works which deserves to be called not merely beautiful but great.

There is another reason which drives lovers of Beethoven's music to study his life. Few artists grow so visibly as we survey their work in the order of its composition. The development of his technique is not a sufficient explanation, certainly in that respect he never ceased to invent.

HE is constantly winning freedom within the traditional forms and rules, which at last he bursts and breaks, modulating from one key to another with increasing subtlety and audacity, and discovering fresh colours in his orchestral instruments. So much, in some measure, one may say of every original artist. But in Beethoven's case one feels that the man is growing as noticeably as the composer.

If he had died in 1804, his early work would have ranked him in quality, though not in quantity, with Haydn and Mozart. The world had heard few symphonies as lovely and interesting as his First and Second. Yet when he came to his Third (the Eroica) we feel that something has happened to this composer. By taking thought he has added many cubits to his stature. For the first time we call him not only a great artist but a great man. The early works were beautiful patterns of sound, but this symphony reflects the experience of a man who by suffering and struggle had won his right to hope and believe.

Ludwig von Beethoven was born in 1770 at Bonn, amid the beauties of the Rhine Valley. His grandfather, a Fleming, was a chorister in the service of the Archbishop-Elector, an enlightened patron of music, and rose to be conductor of his concerts. His father, who sang in the same choir, had a narrower mind and a harsher character, and his drunken habits brought the family to squalid poverty.

To his mother, of whom we know too little, Beethoven was deeply attached, but she died before he was eighteen. The father, who wished to exploit Ludwig as an infant-prodigy, neglected

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"I have never yet seen an artist more energetic, more spirited."

—Goethe.

temporaries describe him as an ugly, but sturdy little man, with a shock of insurgent black hair. His manners were awkward, his accent provincial. To awkward manners, a provincial accent, and slovenly dress, he added a prickly and defiant independence. Mozart had worn a livery, and dined in the servants' hall of his patron.

No man ever dared to treat Beethoven as less than an equal. Throughout life he was a democrat, formed by the French Revolution. A bust of the regicide, Brutus, stood on his bureau.

When his brother, John, a war-profiteer, described himself on his visiting card as "land-owner," Beethoven retaliated by scribbling under his own name "brain-owner." On a visit to Goethe he horrified that courtier of genius by remaining covered and erect when they met the Imperial Family on the road. To the Archduke Karl, the commander of the European coalition against France, he wrote a dignified letter exhorting him to lead a movement for peace.

His religious opinions were as unorthodox as his politics. No one who listens to the sublime choruses of the Ninth Symphony, or to the Convalescent's Hymn of Thanksgiving in the A Minor Quartet (Op. 131) can doubt that he was, emotionally, a deeply religious man. But his faith was pantheistic, and on one occasion the police even thought of prosecuting him for blasphemy based on some rash words spoken in a cafe.

At thirty, this young man had achieved success. Good judges considered him the first pianist of the day, and his compositions were spreading his fame as far as London. To our ears, these early works seem to place him in the school of Haydn and Mozart, but his contemporaries, even at times the (Continued on page 2)

his general education, kept him hard at work at fiddle and piano, and published his childish compositions with falsified dates.

His growth, when one compares him with Mozart, was slow; yet at seventeen, on a brief visit to Vienna, he won high praise from that brilliant genius. He was well grounded in Bach, played the organ as well as the piano, and gained valuable experience as viola-player in the Elector's orchestra.

WHILE still in his teens he was obliged to take over from his drunken father the responsibility for the household. Encouraged by Haydn, during a visit to Bonn, he sought his fortune, in 1792, in the imperial city of Vienna, at this time the musical capital of Europe. Here he took lessons in composition from Haydn, but the self-willed, though hard-working pupil was too tactless to retain a teacher's regard. As a pianist, however, he made his way rapidly, chiefly by his gift of improvisation. At his concerts someone would suggest a theme, and on this, abandoning himself to a fury of creation, he would pour forth variations which astonished his hearers as much by their prodigal invention as by the sure architecture of their form.

But he was not at this time a popular figure in musical society. His con-