



Reflection

"Beethoven in Heiligenstadt in the Museum dedicated to him: the Man and the Artist"

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Abstract: The purpose of this contribution is to reflect on the human and musical figure of the great composer Ludwig van Beethoven. In 1802, Beethoven visited Heiligenstadt and in October 6 he there wrote his famous "Testament" that was found after his death in 1827. The authors have visited the Museum dedicated to Beethoven in Heiligenstadt in the summer of 2022.

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1. Beethoven in Heilingenstadt

The name Heilingenstadt means "holy city" suggesting that this was a place of religious worship already in pre-Christian times. In medieval times, the area was rich, the inhabitants lived from agriculture, fishing on the western branch of the Danube and from the production of wine: the nearby and important Klosterneuburg Monastery already owned large vineyards around 1250. Economic crisis occurred after the "second siege of Vienna" in 1683. During this great clash with the Ottoman army, many of local inhabitants were massacred. The economy gradually recovered during the 18th century as local livestock and fruit became popular in Vienna's markets. The recovery was also favored towards the end of the 1700s by the construction of a SPA, which exploited a hot water spring. Up to 300 people frequented the place and the adjacent restaurant every day. In the summer months, Heilingenstadt became a popular tourist destination (Figure 1).



Figure 1. A postcard showing the tourist nature of Heilingenstadt.

Dr. Johann Adam Schmidt - professor of Anatomy in Vienna - to whom Beethoven had turned because already afflicted by pressing deafness problems, had suggested a period of rest in a quiet place and in contact with nature. To his advice, Beethoven rented a rustic house in Heilingenstadt, Probusgasse and spent whole days in solitude, eating his meals in a nearby tavern. This was the place where the great composer had lived from April to October 1802 and where in a moment of great despair, wrote heartfelt pages addressed to his two brothers: the text was never sent and was found among his papers only after his death; it went down in history as "Testament of Heilingenstadt" and is preserved and exhibited in the Museum.

2. Reflections on the Museum

The exhibit takes visitors through 14 rooms.

Beethoven's memory is preserved here also through many handwritten notes, notebooks, conversation books, letters and everyday objects, that testify the musician's working routine, private life and state of health, as well as the genesis, meaning and impact of some of his compositions on the public.

The room dedicated to Fidelio, the only opera written by Beethoven, is very interesting: the plot and the different political interpretations that characterized the subsequent performances are very well explained.

The room where Beethoven's piano is shown is touching because the composer, in order to amplify the sound, had placed the metal scaffolding, normally superimposed on the prompter's box on the stage, on it (**Figure 2**).



Figure 2. Beethoven's piano with sound amplifier. Photo: G. Lamberti.

We know that, as early as 1804, Beethoven's compositions frequently appeared in concert programs as those of Haydn and Mozart, and they were all printed during his lifetime, often under his direct supervision. Count Waldstein, to whom Beethoven later dedicated the Piano Sonata op. 53, and who had already been his main patron in Bonn, with his contacts facilitated his introduction into the palaces of aristocrats, where the young musician was immediately appreciated as piano virtuoso and improviser.

Among the patrons who supported Beethoven, worthy of mention are Prince Lobkowitz, the Russian Count Razumovsky and mainly Prince Lichnowsky, who from 1800 to 1806 even granted him an annual fixed allowance. Thus at the age of 30 Beethoven could already sell his compositions to various publishers - even foreign ones - or to music lovers and aristocrats, who in exchange required a dedication and the exclusive right to perform them for a certain time.

Although the upper classes commissioned, played and appreciated his music, at the same time they demarcated some strict social boundaries that he could not cross: this was also due to the political climate of restoration and new social order sanctioned in the Congress of Vienna (1815). Beethoven never showed open sympathy for the French Revolution, but he always remained faithful to the ideals of freedom, brotherhood and respect for human rights.

Beethoven's initial intention to name his Third Symphony "Bonaparte" is well described within the Museum, but then, disappointed when Napoleon proclaimed himself "emperor", he wrote on the score: "Sinfonia Eroica, composed to celebrate the arrival of a great man".

Even musically, Beethoven got elements from the French revolutionary music: most likely the theme of the last movement of the Fifth Symphony was taken from Gossec's Revolutionary Hymn "To the Dead of the Gironde", of emphatic simplicity.



The Third Symphony itself was influenced by the monumental nature of French music at the end of the 18th century, as was the entire second period of Beethoven's production (1803-1815), defined by critics as a "heroic style": it is characterized by an emphatic drive towards the grandiose, as well as by the enhancement of simple and elementary motifs (think of the incipit of the 5th Symphony), therefore susceptible to much more elaborate and complex developments.

His music was not designed to be easily accessible, especially during the so-called "third manner". The late Beethoven is the initiator of the artistic avant-garde in the history of music. His last compositions are even devoid of the prospect of an immediate performance: "This music is not for you, but for posterity" Beethoven himself would have stated in response to Muzio Clementi's perplexities regarding the opera 59.

From the analysis of his musical sketches it was understood that Beethoven's process in composing was very different from that of Mozart, whose first inspiration had undergone the character of completeness. His creative path was instead slow and gradual and he usually made numerous attempts and trials before getting to the definitive formulation of a theme (it took him almost 10 years to complete the 9th Symphony, whereas Mozart had composed his last 3 symphonies in less than 2 months).

3. Heilingenstadt Testament

However, the most moving element inside the Museum, like a sacred relic, is undoubtedly the so-called "Heilingenstadt Testament" (**Figure 3**).

"O men who consider me and call me a spiteful, stubborn and misanthropic being, how unjust you are to me! You ignore the secret reason that makes me appear this way to you... just think that for six years I have been struck by an incurable disease..."

The drama of his hearing loss will lead Beethoven to progressive isolation from social life ("...I soon had to isolate myself and spend my life in solitude...").

But, above all, admitting the deafness could deprive him of his credibility as a musician before the world ("...Ah, how can I confess the weakness of a sense that I should possess more perfect than any other... it was not possible for me to ask: "Speak louder, shout, because I'm deaf...so forgive me if you see me withdrawn, when instead I would gladly join you" ...).

Beethoven was a person of profound culture and not being able to relate to the world was a great intellectual impoverishment for him. And then he tells about his desperation: "As soon as I get close to people I am seized by a terrible anguish of being exposed to the risk of making my state known I was close to putting an end to my days myself..."

But then he immediately adds "the Art, it alone held me back..."

Music then becomes the only salvation, a revealing instrument of the highest values between man and the beyond.

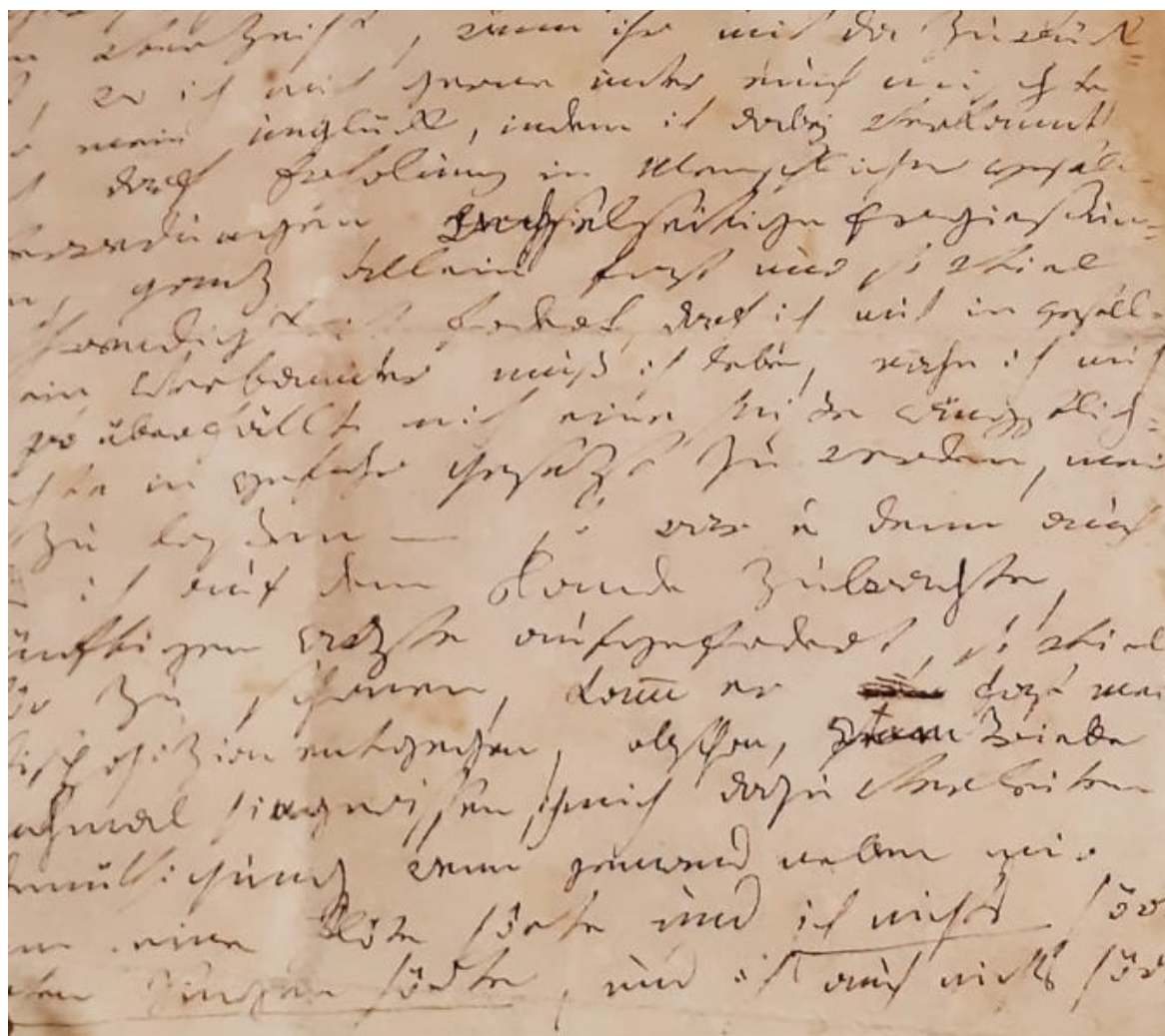


Figure 3. A segment of the reproduction of the testament. Photo: G. Lamberti.

Beethoven is perhaps the first musician in history who considers himself invested with a mission, that of transmitting a universal message destined to last over time.

Beethoven would fulfil his "duty" as a musician to the end: starting from the "Pastoral" Symphony up to the grandiose Symphony No.9, with which - inserting a choir for the first time in the history of Music - he arrives at the luminous and conclusive joy of a such a painful journey.

Beethoven is not only one of the greatest musicians of all time, but he leaves us with a great ethical inspiration.

Faced with a handicap and the desperation and shame that arose from it, Beethoven chose life and decided to continue composing despite his insurmountable limit. Beethoven chose to live with his deafness, to overcome it and go further, leaving us with a unique testimony of superhuman strength, desire, courage and will.

In our opinion, if Beethoven's contemporaneity emerges from his profound faith in reason and freedom, his universality is measured in "having known how to leverage pain and anger, through a titanic effort, not to destroy, but to create".