Beethoven, Ludwig van (1770–1827): Overview of his Writings

Beethoven's writings are all written in a familiar register. The *Heiligenstadt Testament* (*Heiligenstädter Testament*) of 6 October 1802, was intended for his two brothers; the famous *Letter to the Immortal Beloved* (*Brief an die unsterbliche Geliebte*) of 6 and 7 July 1812 is addressed to a woman whose identity is today still uncertain; the whole of his correspondence, his 1570 *Letters* (*Briefe*) cover a period of forty years from 1787 to 1827, the year of Beethoven's death, and is written to his friends, relatives, and editors; the *Conversation Books* (*Konversationshefte*) are an ensemble of manuscripts that the composer read when his friends wanted to talk to him after he had become completely deaf during the last years of his life, from 1819 to 1827; and finally, his *Tagebuch* (published in French under the title *Carnets intimes*) is an anthology of writings that he addressed to himself from 1804 onward. This is all that remains in the composer's hand. There are no theoretical treatises, no writings destined for publication (with the exception of a brief declaration on Maelzel's metronome). Beethoven didn't care about being read. When he had something to say, it was in music.

Hence the somewhat embarrassing feeling, when taking an interest in his writings, of brazenly and indiscreetly prying in the Beethoven's private life. This kind of intrusion, however, has failed to completely lift the veil on the composer. To begin, there is Anton Felix Schindler, Beethoven's assistant at the end of his life, who appropriated certain documents, creating false conversations to cast himself in a more favorable light. Other documents are incomplete: the *Letter to the Immortal Beloved* indicates no date or place of writing (requiring that Beethoven's biographers invest great effort in deducing that information from the circumstances it describes), nor even the name of the intended recipient (still a matter of controversy), nor do the *Conversation Books* contain Beethoven's oral responses. An aura of mystery surrounds these writings. Finally, Beethoven's style is readily parataxic, elliptical, and humorous. It is not always easy to decipher what he means.

It might be surprising to see the 137 *Conversation Books* included among Beethoven's writings when these are not exactly from his own hand. Still, some lines are written by him. Between two conversations, Beethoven might insert a few lines of music or use the books as a reminder to himself, recopying advertisements found the newspaper, or even writing his responses so as not to be heard by people beyond the small circle around him. Beethoven was never totally lacking in caution, despite his reputation at the end of his life as a madman capable of making intemperate public remarks regarding important figures of state at a time when the Metternich regime had instituted close police surveillance of the population.

Although the addressees of Beethoven's writings were limited to his close intimate circles, they nevertheless contain important elements in the construction of the public myth of his personality and music. The *Heiligenstadt Testament* is not just a letter to his brothers from a suicidal man who has discovered the handicap that will overwhelm his life as a musician, it is the poignant and universal testimony of a man grappling with his own destiny. The very absence of an addressee in the *Letter to the Immortal Beloved*, makes it seem readable as an ardent expression of amorous passion in which any person might project themselves, to the point of forgetting that it is above all else, the renouncement of a relationship that has become impossible: despite its impassioned tone it is a letter ending a relationship. Through these two documents the romantic myth of Beethoven, hero of his own life and music was able to take form.

It is therefore necessary to read these documents today with critical distance and if one is to refrain from purely and simply adhering to the myth which began to take form immediately following the composer's death. It is also important to not read the *Letters* without considering the people to whom they are addressed. Beethoven's remarks to his editors in particular are often cited out of context. When Beethoven writes that his *Missa solemnis* is a masterpiece, he is undoubtedly sincere (it cost him five years of hard work), but the identity of his correspondents must also be considered: they were his editors and the crowned heads of state who would finance his project through subscriptions. When Beethoven complains of being able to write nothing else but his final quartet(!), this is not meant to devalue a masterpiece, the value of which he was undoubtedly aware, but to excuse himself to an editor who would have preferred to receive a successful opera rather than an esoteric work through which even performers had difficulty finding their way.

Beethoven's writings, like his music (see letter 283 to Amalie Sebald, "The good, the beautiful needs no public. It exists without anyone's help."), are divided between the desire to only address himself to those who had ears to hear and eyes to see, and the need to compose for a public whose expectations could not rise to meet his own. The *Tagebuch* offers a precious trace of a man alone with himself, sometimes writing to encourage or pity himself, but always protecting the imperatives of an artistic solitude which, to a great degree, resembled the solitude of his life.

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