

CONCERT 3rd August 2020

Dear WHO members and friends,

As we buckle down for at least another six weeks don't forget to remain optimistic and resilient. I thank those who emailed me after last week's letter and those who listened to the War Requiem, especially as the performance I suggested was of such significance to the symbol of unification. What a cathartic effect music has in healing wounds.

With the rhetoric flying around at the moment between superpowers, I can but look back at our orchestral trip to Shaoxing and muse at the wonderful friendship and cooperation we all experienced. Music and concerts have always been such a wonderful way of bringing people together. I recall the story my Grandfather told of the German and English troops in the trenches on the first Christmas of the World War 1. Climbing out of their trenches, soldiers on both sides sang carols together. The high command was terrified that the hatred that had been carefully instilled in both armies may be diluted by the reality that they were all human beings together. To do anything like that again was to be seen as a treasonable action. Music has always been such a wonderful ambassador and catalyst in cementing international relations.

I thought I would return to our great birthday boy, Beethoven, this week and the next as it is a special year for him. Today, let's summarise his early childhood days. His actual birthday is not known as his birth certificate disappeared or, more likely, was destroyed by his father so he could falsify his son's age, thus exaggerating his talent with a view of making more money out of him. However, his baptismal certificate has survived. It is dated 17th of December 1770, which indicates it may be of that date, or no more than a couple of days earlier. He was born in Bonn, seat of the Elector of Cologne, into a family of musicians. His grandfather, the Ludwig after whom he was named, had moved from Flanders to Bonn, hence van Beethoven rather than von. A highly talented musician, he was an excellent bass and rose to the position of "Head of Court Music" (Kapellmeister). Ludwig junior's father Johann was a tenor at the court but his voice suffered from his love of alcohol. He fully expected to succeed his father and, sadly, his drinking became an addiction when he failed to do so. Beethoven was only three years old when his grandfather died and he treasured memories of him for the rest of his life. A portrait of Ludwig senior was pawned by Johann for much needed money but after his son Ludwig moved to Vienna and established himself he wrote to a friend in Bonn, payed out the debt, reclaimed the portrait and hung it on the wall of every apartment he lived in. It was hanging in pride of place at his death. Beethoven's mother, Maria Magdalena, lived a very hard life. She was described by a neighbour as a sad woman and obviously found difficulty caring for three boys of whom Ludwig was the eldest. She certainly had good reason for her depression, marrying for the first time at the age of 16 out of economic necessity after losing her father at the age of 12. She then lost her husband in less than two years of marriage and a child in infancy in that time. Her second marriage to Johann was also marked by tragedy. She again lost a child who lived for just a week. Maria gave birth to six more children only three of whom survived into adulthood. All this and an alcoholic husband with an unreliable income!

Ludwig's early school years were unhappy. He was often teased and nicknamed the "Spaniard" because of his swarthy and unkempt appearance. He had few friends and was taunted with the suggestion that his mother must be dead as his clothes were in such disrepair. He was no doubt grateful when his father, realising his talent and earning potential took him out of school at the age of 10 to concentrate on his music.

I always find it fascinating to understand the trials and tribulations of great artists who are able to lift themselves above the mundane but whose insight and connection with the human condition is profound. Beethoven the man is so different from Beethoven the legend. The portrayal of the man as proud, haughty and dominating have to be understood in the light of the turbulent times and his less than happy upbringing. One can perhaps begin to understand his failings as a man: his drinking, temper, lack of success with partnerships and loneliness, and also begin to understand more of the subtext of his extraordinary music.

The one interest Ludwig's father showed in him was an early recognition his music talent. The first teacher Johann hired for him fortunately left Bonn after a year as he preferred to spend his time

drinking with Johann rather than teaching. However, his second was to prove inspirational for Ludwig. Christian Gottlob Neefe was a pianist, organist and composer, who encouraged every aspect of Beethoven's talent, not least his desire to compose. Under Neefe's guidance Ludwig published his first work at the age of 11 then, a year later, published a set of three piano sonatas that he dedicated to the Elector of Cologne. Good move! As it turned out this led to his first paid job as assistant court organist at a salary of 150 florins. Not only was Neefe a great teacher but also manager of his pupils' talent. This in turn led to his association with the von Breuning family and suddenly the 16-year-old Beethoven was off to Vienna, two years before he eventually moved there for good, to meet his idol Mozart and his mentor Haydn. Life was certainly looking up!!

Beethoven was always falling in love but invariably with someone not appropriate. Stephan von Breuning, his life long friend, (one of the few) from Bonn days wrote home to his mother stating just that. Either she was aristocratic, already married or not interested. More often than not she was a pupil of his. Two of the most recognised of Beethoven's piano pieces were written for pupils to whom he showed amorous intentions. The first was *Giulietta Guiccardi*, a pupil of his in 1801-1802. She asked Beethoven to compose a piano sonata for her, which he did using some material he had already written. What she was given with a dedication was the opus 27 No. 2, the *Moonlight Sonata*. No luck, her father forbade her to marry a musician, especially one who was going deaf. Most pianists with a modicum of skill can play the first movement but the third, with its surging arpeggios, demands virtuosic skills. This sonata I believe reflects his love and also his anger and pain at growing deafness. Firstly called the *Arbour Sonata*, it later took on its endearing title thanks to German music critic Ludwig Rellstab. Enjoy the contrast of the three movements and the progression of Beethoven's torment. There are so many good recordings of this work on YouTube, though I'm sure many of you have it in your private collections.

Another woman who received Beethoven's attention and compositional dedication was Theresa Malfatti, the daughter of a wealthy Italian merchant whose family had moved to Vienna. To her he wrote the most famous of Bagatelles "*Für Elise*". Again his luck ran out but the world was left with arguably the most played piece of piano music ever written. After Theresa's death at the age of 69 the manuscript was found in her effects. It was entitled *Bagatelle* with a dedication from Beethoven on the front. The piece was then published with the dedication "*Für Elise*" for some unknown reason. Again, if you can't play it yourself there are so many recordings. Finally from one extreme in the first movement and the *Bagatelle* to, in my mind, Beethoven's most challenging "*Grosse Sonata für das Hammerclavier*". The *Hammerclavier* or hammer keyboard sonata is an enormous work requiring exceptional technique and stamina. I last enjoyed a performance of this work played by Mark Magee at his doctoral recital at Melbourne University. What a performance, the first doctorate in performance conferred by the Conservatorium. You will remember Mark as our soloist some years back performing *Rhapsody in Blue*.

To listen to Beethoven in one of his most complex but inspired compositions envelop yourself in this extraordinary music, a complex web of all his turmoil and sufferings. This may be hard listening for some but stick with it. Great art needs perseverance, the rewards are absolutely worth it.