

The Beethoven Question: Can Art Make Life Worth Living?

Sunday 28th October 2012 – Purcell Room, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Southbank Centre

TRANSCRIPT

Prof Michael Trimble – Beethoven: Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know

PROF MICHAEL TRIMBLE: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I am Professor Michael Trimble from the Institute of Neurology, I am the musical side of the brain. The task I have now is to discuss some other aspects of Beethoven's biography and my presentation relates to a phrase: “mad bad and dangerous to know”. This was a title that was used by Lady Caroline Lamb in relationship to another great romantic artist, namely Lord George Byron. I thought this would be an interesting introduction in trying to understand a little bit about art at that time, and also how Beethoven and Byron and others may have presented problems from the point of view of their psychological life style. Anyway, Lady Caroline Lamb, who was referred to as a young savage, was one of Byrons lovers; apparently she was bewitched by Byron, and she wrote a novel, Glenarvon, which contains aspects of the Byronic hero.

Byron and Beethoven had things in common. They had plenty of hair; I will return to the hair a little later on. Both were continually falling in love, often with quite inappropriate women, although Byron had much more success than Beethoven; they were both lovers of alcohol, which I will need to return to. There is a little poem by Byron:

"man being reasonable must get drunk;
the best of life is but intoxication,
glory, the grape, love, gold in these
are sung the hopes of all men and of every nation."

Then finally, of course, they were both very much involved with poetry, and music.

In trying to understand some of the difficulties that Beethoven had during his lifetime, we have to start, in a psychiatric sense, with a family history.

Beethoven's grandfather, Ludwig, died in 1773, when Beethoven was aged 3. He clearly revered his grandfather because he kept his portrait until he died. Beethoven's grandmother Josefa has been almost written out of history. She spent the last years of her life in a cloister, I take that to be an asylum, and was considered to be an alcoholic.

Beethoven's mother Maria Magdalena - again these are descriptions one obtains from various people who have written biographies - is said to have rarely laughed, to be gloomy and of a melancholic disposition, probably inclined to depressive episodes.

Little has been said in this meeting so far about Beethoven's biography and I don't see myself as in any way competent at dealing with it. But I do need to mention one or two facts which seem to be recurrent through biographies. One of them was that his father Johann was also alcoholic and died in 1792: one of the comments about him was that he was distinguished in neither intellect nor morals.

Here then is a problem that Beethoven had; he brings with him a genetic disposition both towards alcoholism and melancholia, depression. We now know that both of the conditions have a heavy genetic component. So whatever else happened to poor Beethoven, he comes into the world loaded with a genetics which is not so favourable in terms of both depression and a tendency to abuse alcohol.

Again, according to the information that I have reviewed, his father did not treat him well. He regularly received beatings from his father during music lessons; his father disliked him improvising; he was said to be seen in front of the piano weeping. He was beaten at school, and had bruises on his body. There are references to being shut in a cellar for punishment. Later on in his life, he apparently chose to consider himself not to be his father's son. Now, the fantasy that you are not your father's son is not too uncommon in childhood, but it is very uncommon for this to last into adult life.

So, his early years were difficult in these terms. He had few childhood friends as I understand it. He grew up with a pathological hatred of authority, whether that was linked to his relationship with his father, who knows. There was a phase, during which time his mother died and his father was declared as an alcoholic, that he had to take over many of the family affairs. He referred at this time to his melancholia as a torture.

I want to point out here, that he had an early phase of much composition, which then became fallow. Then followed the first of several compositional outbursts. This slide will appear again, but what it points out are episodes of times when Beethoven's composition doesn't cease completely but decreases. Then there are the episodes of compositional increase following the decreases. So this appears to me to be the first episode where he may have well been affected by a depressive disorder.

I need to discuss from a clinical perspective, not only depression, but also personality disorder, and bipolar manic-depressive illness. I will touch on lead poisoning; we have heard

he had hundred times the normal levels of lead in his hair, and I will get rid of syphilis now. Any famous person who had any psychological or psychiatric disorder in the 19th century was considered to have suffered from syphilis until proved otherwise; there was no evidence that Beethoven ever had syphilis.

Now, what is a personality disorder? Psychiatrists use this to describe an enduring pattern of maladaptive behaviour that deviates from cultural norms, that leads to significant distress or impairment of functioning. An interesting question to ask is, at the younger age at least, whether that was relevant to Beethoven or not? People with personality disorders usually improve with age, the relationships between the person with the disorder and those around them gets better as they get older. This does not seem to have been the case with Beethoven. But certainly, the link between physical and emotional abuse in childhood and personality problems is well established in the psychiatric literature, and in addition to the genetics, the alcoholism and the melancholia, the physical and emotional abuse must have contributed to Beethoven's personality development.

However, how much of his personality difficulties were interlinked with the alcoholism? It is clear that the problems I have just mentioned about his schooling and childhood years began before any alcohol dependency; does his hair give a clue? I will come back to that; I will also talk about the link to the deafness.

We have heard about the famous Heiligenstadt testament. From that, there are the following quotations that I have pulled out:

“My fellow men describe me as unfriendly, peevish or even misanthropic.”

“I am obliged to seclude myself and live in solitude.”

“I must live alone like an outcast”

- and he refers to a miserable existence. We know this time was interlinked with the development of his deafness but clearly, with those kind of statements, if a patient of mine was making them, I would be concerned about melancholia.

This is merely a quote from somebody who knew him in 1809: “Picture to yourself the dirtiest, most disorderly place imaginable, this is where he is living. There is an old-ish grand piano on which dust had settled, the place was strewn with various pieces of manuscript music, under the piano, the chairs were covered in plates bearing the remains of last night's supper...”

Thus the picture is of someone who at that time was not caring for their immediate environment. It is about this time that again we get quotes from Beethoven himself:

"I have been suffering misery in a concentrated form, winter depresses me greatly, melancholy reminders."

"I should have left this life long ago, what is more by my own hand."

About this time, he was writing to his lawyer, "In Vienna I'm surrounded by innumerable enemies, I'm on the verge of despair. My brother is my greatest enemy."

Also there was "the immortal beloved" and the relationship with Antonie Brentano. Clearly he had difficult emotional relationships in terms of this particular female.

"Oh God look down on this unhappy Beethoven, I have been ailing mentally", he wrote to Archduke Rainer. And his friends the Streichers found him in a most deplorable condition.

We then have this episode which I've just described, interlinked with the "immortal beloved" time, and this was followed by a second period of decreased composition. So there are up to this point, two episodes when Beethoven describes himself as depressed in a clinical sense, and they are linked with some decline of his compositional productivity.

There is the third episode which is on that slide which related to years 1815 and 1816 and this was as far as I can tell associated with a number of factors. The loss of patrons - and he was very dependent on his patrons - Lichnowsky died in 1814; Lobkowitz 1816; and Razumovsky went back to Russia in 1815.

There was the death of the brother Caspar. The problem was that his brother Caspar, on his deathbed almost, left the custody of son Karl to both Beethoven and Beethoven's sisterinlaw. This led on to considerable acrimony between Beethoven and the sisterinlaw, which I will briefly come back to, but this was clearly a very significant part of this particular period of time:

"My brother's death has affected my spirits and my nerves. I have thoughts of my own death. I'm suffering from a nervous breakdown."

Somebody who knew of Beethoven said, "I've learnt that he has become crazy". Zelter wrote to Goethe saying "Some say he has become a lunatic". He was blaspheming at this time against everything, even Vienna and the Emperor, which was a rather dangerous thing to do.

He did meet with Goethe. Beethoven's view of Goethe was that he was far too fond of the atmosphere of the royal courts, whereas Goethe referred to Beethoven as, "An utterly

untamed personality."

In that third episode there are other comments about him being in despair and wanting to die; he was having continual problems with his nephew Karl, and he writes, "Oh cruel destiny, my unhappy condition will never end. Unhappy, most unhappy of mortals."

There has been a question in the biographical literature as to whether or not Beethoven suffered from what in a psychiatric sense we would call delusions. This is an unshakable belief out of keeping with reality and cultural norms. At one point he came to consider himself as the physical father of Karl, his nephew. He referred to his sister-in-law as a "Queen of the night" which was a reference to her being a prostitute. He suspected her, Joanna, of actually poisoning and killing his brother, and if he was to be Karl's father of course he had never married he would have to be a father without a wife. So the question is when other people at this time said he had become quite psychiatrically disturbed, what really was going on in his mind? We have those second-hand reports, but also that which he himself documented.

Depression is the most common complaint in his correspondence. Aside from the Testament, there are two clear references to him either wanting to die or talking about suicide. And many of these events were linked in with stress or bereavement. The biographer Francois Mai has looked very carefully at the Beethoven's psychiatric history (for whose book I'm most grateful for a lot of the information). He documents many other episodes of depression. I have outlined here three clearly defined episodes, when his mood declined by self-report, and his musical composition declined followed by compositional outbursts. It is very difficult to escape the conclusion of recurrent depressive episodes. I accept the fact that understanding illness from biographies and the past is extremely difficult, but depression is such a common disorder that afflicts *Homo sapiens* that it's very difficult to avoid the conclusion that Beethoven suffered from classic depressive illness, which I would suggest was genetically interlinked with at least in part with his mother's predisposition.

A further question is whether Beethoven would have had what was called a bipolar disorder rather than pure depressive episodes. Beethoven wrote about having a sensitive body that can suddenly change, and how he could be plunged from the best of spirits into the worst of humours.

I came across this which I think conveys something in the form of a pressure of speech, or a flight of ideas, which is common in people who are moving towards the more manic end of their thinking. This is a letter to Baron Nikolaus Zmeskall, from 1802:

"My dearest baron, baron, baron Domanovecz. Baron, hail and happiness, happiness and hail and hail and happiness, hail, hail, happiness etc, baron, baron, baron."

Well, would you address a letter to a baron in such a way? To Franz Wegeler: "I live entirely in my music and have hardly completed one composition than I have already begun another, I often produce three or four works at a time."

Composers in the audience might like to comment whether composing three or four works at a time is a normal rate. My understanding is again I beg to the better knowledge of others that between 1798 and 1802 he produced 14 piano sonatas, six string quartets, five violin and piano sonatas, the Prometheus ballet, two piano variations and the first and second Symphonies. Whether that was driven by increased moods following depression, I don't know, but it struck me that this compositional period was a time that may well have represented increased energy from a mental perspective.

Did he develop a paranoid illness? Paranoia is, a sensation that people in the world are against you. A paranoid illness can reach the point of being psychotic, where people have a delusion, a fixed delusion which has nothing to do with reality. We know that Beethoven made quite severe negative references in the Testament about, or to, his brothers. He was in endless disputes with his servants, and he refers sometimes to them with such comments as them being "wicked". Rather more ominously considered that Joanna was having him followed and that she was bribing his servants in some way. Then there's the story, true or not, that he believed that the rescue of his nephew Karl was "divinely ordained".

There is an interesting element here that I want to bring in, specifically in relationship to this conference. There is a link between the development of paranoid feelings and loss of hearing, particularly in adult life. Now, it is not associated with schizophrenia or anything like that. The problems of social isolation, social withdrawal, the emotional effect of not hearing well the human voice, leading to misinterpretations, and auditory hallucinations, have been written about quite extensively.

The failure to appreciate the emotional tone of another's speech and misinterpretations by the listener and the failure of normal auditory feedback, leads to changes of psychological functioning which with some social isolation, has been interlinked in the psychiatric literature with the development of these feelings that other people are against you and to a social withdrawal. Whether or not that was interlinked with some of Beethoven's later behaviour, I don't know. I do want to mention, however, auditory hallucinations. In the audience yesterday, somebody who is hard of hearing commented on their musical auditory hallucinations. Now, the most interesting thing about these auditory hallucinations in deaf

people, is that music can be, loud, vivid and can feature familiar or unfamiliar melodies. It can have orchestral accompaniment. The hallucinations can be replaced at will with other elements of music. Thus there is this fascinating question as to whether or not any of Beethoven's inventive musical episodes could have been interlinked with musical hallucinations which arose from his deafness. Again, if we could have more audience participation on that, it would be extremely interesting.

So moving just towards the end, "mad, bad and dangerous to know"?

Well, mad is a difficult term. It was of course used in the context of Byron and I wanted to hang my presentation a bit round that. The depressions seem clear. At one point I think he was overtly psychotic, under extreme pressure, perhaps driven by alcohol.

Was he bad? Well, he clearly had a lot of personality difficulties in dealing with people. This, I believe, arose in part from the physical and emotional abuse of his early years, but at one time he was clearly in danger himself when blaspheming against the Emperor.

Was he dangerous to know? Well, some people thought so. I accept alternative views. Certainly Karl, who tried to kill himself (he shot himself but didn't actually kill himself) after this suicidal event, said that his uncle, namely Beethoven, had "tormented me too much".

There are stories about Beethoven throwing dishes at waiters' heads, and did his servants suffer? Well, this is one of Beethoven's comments: "I threw half a dozen books at her, Nanni, probably one landed by chance on her brain or in her evil heart". So there may well have been some dangers there.

As we've heard, after Beethoven's death, a lock of his hair was taken and preserved. This was analysed by various methods, and eight strands of this were found to contain lead at 60 parts per million, which is huge. Biographers have gone on to speculate as to whether he could have suffered from lead poisoning or indeed where did the lead come from?

Now, let me deal with the lead poisoning. Lead certainly affects bodily systems and, if anything, there's more evidence that Beethoven's abdominal problems may have been associated with the ingestion of lead rather than other issues. However, lead does affect the brain, but more so the developing brain than the developed brain. If it does affect the central nervous system, it usually leads to a dulling of intellectual faculties, to a dementialike syndrome, and there's no evidence up to when Beethoven died that he lacked his full cognitive and intellectual capacity. And there's no evidence that lead intake would have been interlinked with his depressive disorder.

Where did it come from? Well, there's a lot of speculation about this, but it may well have been related to his liking for wine. In those days, these drinking glasses were made from lead and the question is whether or not he got it from wine glasses or from the wine itself which was sometimes impregnated with lead. It seems, wine was impregnated by the manufacturers who used to put lead in the wine to sweeten it. This was an illegal process, but one which was common at the time.

In his later years Beethoven's behaviour, as far as I can see, became increasingly eccentric. Again, this may have been due to the social isolation and deafness, but not to the ingestion of lead.

I don't think there's any doubt that he died of cirrhosis of the liver. He had all the signs of this cirrhosis of the liver, including the need before he died to drain his abdomen of fluid (ascites). The cirrhosis was presumably consequent on alcoholism.

A diagnosis of depression is supported by most biographers; bipolar manic depressive disorder most likely. If anything, his personality difficulties after childhood were very much to do with his developing deafness.

Now, what about bipolar disorder? Beethoven along with Berlioz, Cherubini, Chopin, Gluck, Mendelssohn, Elgar, and several other composers all suffered from bipolar disorders. The most interesting thing about bipolar disorder amongst the psychiatric disorders is the one associated with creativity. There are no biographies in the literature of composers with schizophrenia. I am not saying that all composers had bipolar disorder, or that all people with bipolar disorder are composers, but one difference between the psychiatric illness schizophrenia and that of bipolar disorder is the musical creativity that often goes with the bipolar disorder.

Beethoven was able to rise above many of his afflictions, and this is a theme of this conference. He wrote "I was at the point of putting an end to my life. The only thing that held me back was my art. It was thanks to my art that I did not put an end to my life by suicide."

[Music]

MICHAEL PUGH: Ladies and gentlemen, Michael Trimble. Thank you for a provocative perspective on Beethoven, there will be opportunities and questions for Michael's talk later. This is a two part session, Beethoven and words, and in a while, we will be hearing Professor Richard Stokes talking about Beethoven's lieder. In the first place, I will ask Barry Cooper to return to the platform, to talk to us about words and folk song arrangements.