

Beethoven's Heiligenstadt Testament

This famous document, drafted in the form of a testament addressed to his two brothers, was found among Beethoven's effects when he died. It had been written twenty-five years earlier in the village of Heiligenstadt, on the outskirts of Vienna, at the most critical moment in the composer's life, when he had had to face the fact that his deafness was progressive and, probably, incurable.

FOR MY BROTHERS CARL AND _____ BEETHOVEN

Oh you men who think or say that I am malevolent, stubborn, or misanthropic, how greatly do you wrong me. You do not know the secret cause which makes me seem that way to you. From childhood on, my heart and soul have been full of the tender feeling of goodwill, and I was ever inclined to accomplish great things. But, think that for six years now I have been hopelessly afflicted, made worse by senseless physicians, from year to year deceived with hopes of improvement, finally compelled to face the prospect of a *lasting malady* (whose cure will take years or, perhaps, be impossible). Though born with a fiery, active temperament, even susceptible to the diversions of society, I was soon compelled to withdraw myself, to live life alone. If at times I tried to forget all this, oh how harshly was I flung back by the doubly sad experience of my bad hearing. Yet it was impossible for me to say to people, "Speak louder, shout, for I am deaf." Ah, how could I possibly admit an infirmity in the *one sense* which ought to be more perfect in me than in others, a sense which I once possessed in the highest perfection, a perfection such as few in my profession enjoy or ever have enjoyed.—Oh I cannot do it; therefore forgive me when you see me draw back when I would have gladly mingled with you. My misfortune is doubly painful to me because I am bound to be misunderstood; for me there can be no relaxation with my fellow men, no refined conversations, no mutual exchange of ideas. I must live almost alone, like one who has been banished; I can mix with society only as much as true necessity demands. If I approach near to people a hot terror seizes upon me, and I fear being exposed to the danger that my condition might be noticed. Thus it has been during the last six months which I have spent in the country. By ordering me to spare my hearing as much as possible, my intelligent doctor almost fell in with my own present frame of mind, though sometimes I ran counter to it by yielding to my desire for companionship. But what a humiliation for me when someone standing next to me heard a flute in the distance and *I heard nothing*, or someone heard a *shepherd singing* and again I heard nothing. Such incidents drove me almost to despair; a little more of that and I would have ended my life—it was only *my art* that held me back. Ah, it seemed to me impossible to leave the world until I had brought forth all that I felt was within me. So I endured this wretched existence—truly wretched for so susceptible a body, which can be thrown by a sudden change from the best condition to the very worst.—*Patience*, they say, is what I must now choose for my guide, and I have done so—I hope my determination will

remain firm to endure until it pleases the inexorable Parcae to break the thread. Perhaps I shall get better, perhaps not; I am ready.—Forced to become a philosopher already in my twenty-eighth year,—oh it is not easy, and for the artist much more difficult than for anyone else.—Divine One, thou seest my inmost soul; thou knowest that therein dwells the love of mankind and the desire to do good.—Oh fellow men, when at some point you read this, consider then that you have done me an injustice; someone who has had misfortune may console himself to find a similar case to his, who despite all the limitations of Nature nevertheless did everything within his powers to become accepted among worthy artists and men.—You, my brothers Carl and _____, as soon as I am dead, if Dr. Schmidt is still alive, ask him in my name to describe my malady, and attach this written document to his account of my illness so that so far as is possible at least the world may become reconciled to me after my death.—At the same time, I declare you two to be the heirs to my small fortune (if so it can be called); divide it fairly; bear with and help each other. What injury you have done me you know was long ago forgiven. To you, brother Carl, I give special thanks for the attachment you have shown me of late. It is my wish that you may have a better and freer life than I have had. Recommend *virtue* to your children; it alone, not money, can make them happy. I speak from experience; this was what upheld me in time of misery. Thanks to it and to my art, I did not end my life by suicide—Farewell and love each other—I thank all my friends, particularly *Prince Lichnowsky* and *Professor Schmidt*—I would like the instruments from Prince L. to be preserved by one of you, but not to be the cause of strife between you, and as soon as they can serve you a better purpose, then sell them. How happy I shall be if I can still be helpful to you in my grave—so be it.—With joy I hasten to meet death.—If it comes before I have had the chance to develop all my artistic capacities, it will still be coming too soon despite my harsh fate, and I should probably wish it later—yet even so I should be happy, for would it not free me from a state of endless suffering?—Come *when* thou wilt, I shall meet thee bravely.—Farewell and do not wholly forget me when I am dead; I deserve this from you, for during my lifetime I was thinking of you often and of ways to make you happy—please be so—

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
(seal)

Heiglntstadt, [Heiligenstadt]
October 6th,
1802

For my brothers Carl and _____
to be read and executed after my death.

Heiglntstadt, October 10th, 1802, thus I bid thee farewell—and indeed sadly.—Yes, that fond hope—which I brought here with me, to be cured to a degree at least—this I must now wholly abandon. As the leaves of autumn fall and are withered—so likewise has my hope been blighted—I leave here—almost as I came—even the high courage—which often inspired me in the beautiful days of summer—has disappeared—Oh Providence—grant me at last but one day of *pure joy*—it is so long since real joy echoed in my heart—Oh when—Oh when, Oh Divine One—shall I feel it again in the temple of nature and of mankind—Never?—No—Oh that would be too hard.¹²

In view of its centrality in the Heiligenstadt Testament, this may be the place to review briefly the history of Beethoven's deafness. The autopsy report stated that "the auditory nerves . . . were shriveled and destitute of neurina; the accompanying arteries were dilated to more than the size of a crow quill and cartilaginous."²¹ Specialists disagree as to a diagnosis—some lean toward "otosclerosis," others claim that it was a disease of the inner ear ("neuritis acoustica" or "labyrinthitis"); while still others favor "otitis media," a disease of the middle ear.²² The earliest onset of his hearing difficulty dates from approximately 1796, and the first troublesome symptoms appear in 1798 or 1799. In the years of the crisis, 1801–02, the fact is that Beethoven's physical deafness had not progressed very far. There were intermittent symptoms of "tinnitus," such as humming, ringing, buzzing, and other noises in the ears; there was a partial loss of the ability to distinguish high frequencies; and sudden loud noises caused discomfort and even pain. Beethoven sought treatment from various doctors—Johann Peter Frank, Gerhard von Vering, Pater Weiss, and an unknown whom he dubbed a "medical ass"—before he found the firmly sympathetic Dr. Schmidt in 1801. Czerny, observed that in that year "he did not give the least evidence of deafness."²³ Seyfried, who between 1803 and 1806 lived for long periods of time in the same building as Beethoven and often dined with him, confirms: "No physical ill had then afflicted him; no loss of the sense which is peculiarly indispensable to the musician had darkened his life."²⁴ Even Ries, who learned of Beethoven's deafness in 1802, believed that "the trouble soon disappeared again."²⁵

To be sure, there is a report that Beethoven had difficulty hearing the wind instruments during an 1804 rehearsal of the *Eroica* Symphony; and in the same year Stephan von Breuning wrote to Wegeler: "You cannot believe, dear Wegeler, what an indescribable—I should say terrifying—impression the waning of his hearing has had upon him. . . . He has become very withdrawn and often mistrustful of his best friends, and irresolute in many things!"²⁶ But Beethoven was far from incapacitated: in 1805 he conducted rehearsals of *Fidelio*, and in 1808 he called attention to subtle nuances in Rust's playing, indicative of the sharpness of his hearing. By the decade's end he no longer performed in concerts as a solo pianist; by 1814 his hearing was only barely adequate for him to participate in performances of the *Archduke* Trio, op. 97. It was actually after 1812 that his deafness progressed more rapidly, and it then became more and more difficult to speak to him without shouting. However, Czerny told Jahn that "it was not until 1817 that the deafness became so extreme that he could no longer hear music either."²⁷ Beethoven began to use an ear trumpet around 1816, and by 1818 the Conversation Books came into existence, so that visitors could communicate with him through writing.

In his last decade, Beethoven became more markedly deaf, and he was apparently totally so in his right ear. Even then, traces of hearing persisted throughout the 1820s. Several visitors in 1822 and 1823 were able to converse with him, and Schindler described Beethoven listening intently to the overture to Cherubini's *Medea* on a music box. On October 3, 1822, he conducted (with assistants) at the opening of the Josephstadt Theater, but the following month he attempted in vain to conduct a revival of *Fidelio* and was forced to quit the theater. As late as 1825 and 1826, Sir George Smart, Stephan von Breuning, and Samuel Spiker reported that Beethoven could occasionally still understand loud speech. Holz confirmed that "Beethoven undertook the rehearsals of his quartets up to the last." He could hear high tones: "When one yelled powerfully into his left ear one could make oneself understood."²⁸ He could also still distinguish certain low frequencies, such as the clatter of wagon wheels, the sounds of thunder, and gunfire.²⁹

We have, then, a pattern of progressive, though uneven, deterioration of Beethoven's hearing, which reached a state of almost total deafness only in his final decade. This pattern is clearly quite different from the popular conception, which, taking the 1801 letters and the Heiligenstadt Testament at face value, gave currency, in Thayer's words, "to a very exaggerated idea of the progress of his infirmity."³⁰ Beethoven shared that idea: the terrifying anxieties that were generated by the probability that he would ultimately become totally deaf led him into a self-perceived intensification of his deafness. In his despair and panic he felt himself to be more deaf than his actual condition warranted at the time.

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Solomon (1977), pp 116-123