The flint of a man's mind

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To write a comprehensive account of Beethoven's life and work is indeed a most formidable task. To assemble and present the biographical facts alone calls for painstaking and discriminating scholarship, while as for the music itself, generations of commentators have made their attempt on it, whether in whole or in part, using varying methods of approach with varying results.

The first of the many outstanding merits of Maynard Solomon's book is that he clearly identifies the magnitude of his subject, and his debt to the work already done by others. His is thus a mainstream work. In the light of this, he decides to conduct his study along four parallel but separate lines of enquiry, which progressively interact: these are aesthetic, historical, psychoanalytic and sociological.

In its broad sense the first of these categories — aesthetics — includes the other three. The aesthetic approach to music invites the listener to consider not only the living sound itself, but also those numerous other factors, personal and social, that bear on the composer's attitude, and compel him to put pen to paper in the first place; in a word, his world-view. It is necessary to mention this, because the aesthetic way of writing about music is characteristic of certain American writers (Charles Rosen is another outstanding example), but is not found very much in England. I find it refreshing and stimulating; it comes as near to the heart of music as words can, partly because it places the composer in a historical and artistic context; also it enables one to detect how his style develops. It both presupposes, and supersedes, analysis of the music *per se*.

Of course a technical analysis of Beethoven's output, even merely a factual description, would be out of the question for such a book as this; it would be interminable, boring, one-sided and redundant. Having said that, there are one or two key works which are the exception to the rule. They represent points of climax, or moments of change in Beethoven's artistic viewpoint. It is impossible to arrive at a true aesthetic assessment of these works without some descriptive analysis, for without such a practical foundation statements degenerate into clichés. The *Hammerklavier* Sonata is one, marking the beginning of the final period. Of this sonata, Solomon says: 'Never had Beethoven attempted so difficult an affirmation, and it is this effort which dictates the special nature of the contrapuntal writing'. This statement is true, but insufficient by itself. Without some evidence of the monumentality of the work, such as the right sort of analysis can give, the reader feels short-changed. How is the counterpoint 'special'? Recourse to adjectives, such as 'rough-hewn' and 'granulated', is a poor, subjective substitute for the objective finality of a musical example — such as we are given for the *Eroica* Symphony (the only one in the whole book).

Solomon's account of each period ends with a chapter on the music, which draws in the threads, as it were, of what has been said before. He shows quite clearly that aesthetics is much more than just an analysis or a description of style. His assessment of Beethoven's stylistic development — an exceedingly difficult achievement — invests his writing with a rare authority, exemplified in the chapter called 'The dissolution of the heroic style'. It is those passages in which the author's sense of historical movement and growth somehow matches Beethoven's own creative evolution, that read particularly convincingly; more so, perhaps, than those chapters in which he talks about the music specifically as such. These chapters, of which there are four, are weakened by the author's excessive reliance on quotation from other commentators, as though he somehow lacks the strength of his own convictions. The last such chapter, also the last one in the book, I found the least satisfactory in this respect; particularly as he is here dealing with the hardest nut of all to crack, Beethoven's final period. Really this is the point in the book at which the writing might be expected, as it were, to brace itself for the enormous extra burden of discovery and expression called for by Beethoven's fantastic, idealised, other-wordly creations. But nothing of the sort happens. Solomon is content merely to report a summary of what other writers have had to say. The result reads like an academic lecture, and not a very good one at that:

'Kerman stresses the way in which . . .', 'as Nottebohm observed . . .', 'Schindler, in his simplicity, believed . . .', 'Rosen has demonstrated . . .' And the final, barrel-scraping let down, when the work under discussion is, of all things, the *Missa Solemnis*. 'As Ernest Newman observed, "the conclusion of it all is enigmatic".'

Now Solomon has shown himself vastly better qualified than that particular critic; in any case there are those who are supremely unimpressed by what Mr Newman had to say. At this vital stage of the book it would, I think, have been better if Solomon had cut out, or at least much reduced, his reporting of the views of others, and given us instead his own much more original and stimulating thesis. It is, moreover, curious to note that, with all the name-dropping that he indulges in in these chapters on the music, (but not so much in the other chapters), one name is noticeably absent, that of Schoenberg. In referring to the *Diabelli* Variations for instance, Solomon mentions the views

Portrait drawing of Beethoven by Klober, 1818

of Blom, Tovey, Halm, Geiringer and Ernest Walker. Yet Schoenberg's analysis of this work (in his *Structural Functions of Harmony*) has just as much claim on our attention as any of the others mentioned; particularly as, a little later on, we are given Stravinsky's ambivalent comments of the *Grosse Fuge*.

Perhaps in the case of such a gigantic figure as Beethoven, the approach adopted should in some way match the subject. Cautious, academic scholarship is unlikely to yield much insight into music of such originality and creative thrust; what is called for is boldness, the courage to explore, to take the risk of an imaginative leap into the dark. Maybe Solomon is inhibited by the limitations of words. As he says: 'That the meanings of music are not translatable into language is a philosopher's truism'.

Certainly his strongest point is not so much the discussion of the music, which is largely secondhand, but his interpretation both of historical factors, and the pressures of social and intellectual movements, which is masterly. He describes vividly the 'heroic' central period of Beethoven's life for which the *Eroica* Symphony represented the musical Rubicon. Heroism is seen as a romantic, idealised concept, presupposing tragedy and suffering. You cannot accomodate a hero in a salon, or in a princely establishment of the Enlightenment. It was the age of revolution in a war-torn Europe that laid the way for heroism. In terms of musical structures, Beethoven not only depicted death, warfare, anguish, tragedy, triumph, transfiguration; he also showed that these ideas were transcended by the structures of the classical style, which he himself had helped to create, and which proved equal to this heavily increased load. Tragedy in Beethoven's 'heroic' period, is not just misery depicted in music, but a spirit of optimism prevailing over the misfortunes that are inevitable in human life. This theme of heroism is expressed both publicly (*Eroica* Symphony, *Fidelio*) and privately (*Razumovsky* Quartets).

Solomon is on equally strong ground when he describes, in more subdued terms, the mood and spirit of the post-Napoleonic 1820's, which coincided with Beethoven's final period. The ideas of the Enlightenment had given way by this time to a more questing freedom; the Baroque past was reconsidered at the same time as the Romantic future. It was this mood which allowed Bach's works to be heard, for the first time for some seventy or eighty years; and Beethoven laid great stress in his late works, on polyphony, fugue, recitative and aria, and variation form.

Set against this historical perspective, which rings true because of its linking Beethoven the historical figure with Beethoven the composer, Solomon unfortunately introduces an element that is totally at variance, namely Freudian psycho-analysis, with its attendant jargon. I cannot see how it helps my knowledge of Beethoven, the man or the composer, or of his music, to be informed that he suffered from 'disillusionment in the first exemplary love-object'. When one is told that 'Quasi psychotic symptoms such as those manifested by Beethoven are invariably a continuation of, and are modelled on, archaic conflicts dating from infantile and childhood experiences', such information can only be listened to in one way; on the couch with one's feet up; preferably in a somnolent frame of mind. It belongs to a different world from music.

In one sense, everything that happened to Beethoven, or affected him, is important; yet a sense of proportion is equally important; and I must admit that I find it hard to take this part of Solomon's book as seriously as he does, as he relates in detail every last one of Beethoven's known love affairs, attributing to him as he goes along a fair number of the complexes and hang-ups in the Freudian repertoire. We hear that he had 'unacknowledged libidinal ties'; 'Oedipal strivings' go without saying; his songs *An die ferne Geliebte* were the 'imago of the idealized mother'; the episode with his nephew Karl was Beethoven's attempt to 'rewrite the history of his childhood'; and so on.

Two main points about this approach need to be made. First it is irrelevant to the music, and at most ancillary to the composer's life — after all, it is rather late to cure him of his alleged neuroses; second, and more serious, it leads only to hypotheses, not conclusions. Phrases such as 'seems to have', 'it is not impossible that . . .', 'perhaps', 'maybe', begin to pepper the page as soon as we approach the diagnosis of poor Beethoven's symptoms. Now to labour with the clinical detachment of the psychoanalyst, and to have nothing more to show for it at the end than some alternative speculations, is woefully inadequate as a critical procedure. Indeed Solomon himself is aware of this, when he says, in a somewhat crestfallen tone of voice: (page 298) 'It is impossible to tell which, if any, of these factors were operative'. What he takes many weary pages to worry over, with little or no result, is covered with much greater dignity by another Beethoven scholar, Marion Scott, in one simple sentence: 'To pry out the secrets of a soul in pain is near to sacrilege'.

One chapter, also devoted to an ancillary issue, but which leads to a very definite conclusion, is about the identity of the 'Immortal Beloved'. This has all the compulsion of a good detective story. Like Shakespeare's 'Dark Lady' many writers have investigated Beethoven's 'Unsterbliche Geliebte', and come up with different solutions. Solomon has his own, reached after a process of elimination, and by referring to, among other things, police registers and Prague newspapers of 1812; it was Antonie Brentano.

To sum up, only one of the four lines of enquiry laid down by the author has proved comparatively unproductive; the other three have led him into rewarding and valuable insights, and one of them in particular, the historical, has led him to write the most original section of this most important book.

Ates Orga's book, by contrast, is straightforward and uncomplicated. It deals with outward events only, and not inward tensions and striving; nor does it go into the music in any depth. It is moreover entirely non-technical, as though written for a wide, general public. It contains facts about performances, reviews, letters; descriptions of Beethoven, his moods, his relations with other people, particularly women; politics, the Napoleonic wars, and general background. Among the most attractive features are the illustrations, which are numerous and excellent. Each chapter is headed with a most quotable quote. In summary the book should make for a student or young reader, an excellent introduction to Beethoven as a man, as well as the times in which he lived.

MAYNARD SOLOMON
Beethoven
400pp, Illus, Cassell £8.95.

ATES ORGA
Beethoven
176pp, Illus, Midas Books £6.50.