

**BEETHOVEN: A CRITICAL
BIOGRAPHY. TRANSLATED
FROM THE FRENCH BY DR.
THEODORE BAKER**

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Vincent D'Indy & Dr. Theodore Baker

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VINCENT D'INDY & DR. THEODORE BAKER

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A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY

By VINCENT D'INDY

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LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

INTRODUCTION

ONLY he who has never lived in intimate communion with Beethoven's art would venture to assert that the productions of the genius of the symphony present themselves under but one aspect, so that no essential modification can be distinguished in the course of a career which, opening with a few insignificant variations, closed with the five last quartets.

In support of the opinion which would suppress the division of Beethoven's works into periods, strongly marked though they be, we can find nothing to cite except a letter from Franz Liszt to Councilor Wilhelm von Lenz, the principal advocate of the "three styles." In this letter the celebrated virtuoso, after having first of all declared Beethoven's creative work to be one and indivisible, ends by himself dividing it into two categories instead of three — an entirely arbitrary and illogical arrangement. On all who knew the composer of the Faust Symphony and his refinement of appreciation this letter will make the impression of a mere freak of humor, or possibly even one of those solemn mystifications which, as a good romancer, he had a habit of bringing forward in his letters or conversation, with the greatest emphasis, for the astonishment of reader or auditor, thereafter laughing over them in private. At all events, if such was his view in 1852, he professed twenty years later an opinion diametrically opposed, when it was our privilege to

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dwell near him in Weimar, and when he uttered such judicious remarks on the subject of the *three Beethovens*: "the child, the man, the god." Hence, no serious criticism would attach to the document in question any greater importance than to the dogmatic pronouncements of those "Wagnerizers" who decreed, about the year 1890, the absolute artistic identity of *Parsifal*, *Tannhäuser*, and — *Rienzi*.

It appears certain that the career of every creative artist, whose life attains normal duration, divides into three periods differing one from the other in the character of the compositions: Imitation, transition, reflection.

In the first period, after having studied more or less at length the rules and traditional processes of the trade, the artist will imitate. Not one of the grand pioneers in poetry, painting or music has evaded this law — an Alighieri no more than a Molière, a Gozzoli no more than a Rembrandt, a Bach no more than a Wagner. Before this law the too-convenient theory of autodidactic geniuses falls to the ground — a theory of which, it must be admitted, the history of art offers not a single example.

Following this period of imitation, whose duration varies with different composers (in Beethoven's case it occupied eight years of his life), the young artist gradually frees himself from his leading-strings. He tries to walk alone. Then, with an increasingly vivid consciousness of the joyous or sorrowful movements of his soul, it is *himself* that he seeks, not without hesitations and gropings, to express in his art.

With some, like Bach or Haydn, it will be the tranquillity of the trusting soul (Allemande of the Fourth Partita for harpsichord, by Bach), or mayhap a wholesome gayety bordering on roguishness (Haydn's finales). With others

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(Beethoven, for example) it will be poignant passion, or the feeling of rural calm; with all it will be the attempt to make manifest, in their works, the emotions created in the soul by the events of life. A period more especially human, to put it correctly, a period in which external procedure, execution, occupies a large place, a period preparing for the artist the way to a definitive eclosion of his personality.

To this manner would seem to belong (to mention only a few works) the *Convivio* of Dante, the *Night-Watch* of Rembrandt, the chamber concertos of Bach, *Tristan* by Wagner.

And finally, when the man of genius, weary of expressing his own joys and his own sorrows, disdainful or careless of his environment, shall concentrate within himself his incessant aspiration after pure beauty, the instant has arrived, for men of highest stature, for the supreme transformation, the time for works of pure Art, of Faith and of Love.

Such are Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Fra Angelico's frescos in the chapel of Nicholas V., Rembrandt's *Syndics*, Bach's Mass in *B minor*, Richard Wagner's *Parsifal*.

In the above we have outlined the productive life-history of almost all, not to say all, those men who are worthy to be called artistic geniuses. In not one among them can these various transformations be traced more readily than in Beethoven, by a study of their works, and, so to speak, step by step. We shall make this study — restricted perforce to an examination of the most characteristic works — the object of the following pages.

THE FIRST PERIOD

UNTIL 1801

I

HIS LIFE

IN Bonn that evening there was a festival at number 934 of the narrow street which is called the *Rheingasse* (Rhine Alley). In the Beethovens' dwelling they were celebrating the day of Mary Magdalen in honor of the mistress of the house, *née* Maria Magdalena Keverich, and quite a number of musicians belonging to the Electoral Kapelle were gathered together in the home of the court tenor, their comrade Johann van Beethoven, to aid him in regaling his guests with a little music interspersed with grilled sausages, refreshments and merry talk.

In the "best room" (*gute Stube*) a harpsichord and music-desks have been ranged in order. Under the canopy adorned with foliage, where Frau van Beethoven is about to take her place, appears in a gilt frame the portrait of Kapellmeister Ludwig van Beethoven, the household *Lar*, the illustrious man of the family.*

Radoux, portrait-painter to the Court, depicted him in life-size, clad in a fur cloak with a long-sleeved over-mantle,

* It was through him that the Beethoven family traced their connection with that Netherlandish homeland whence they were brought by the whim of an ecclesiastical Mæcenas, Clement Augustus, Prince-Elector of Cologne. Kapellmeister Ludwig, born at Antwerp in 1712, was the descendant of a line of artists among whom were numbered painters and sculptors.