

THIS MANUSCRIPT IS COPYRIGHT OF AUTHOR  
THIS TRANSCRIPT MAY NOT BE COPIED OR SOLD

# BEETHOVEN CAN HEAR YOU

BY  
**TIMOTHY X ATACK**

DIRECTOR: JAMES ROBINSON

TX: 20<sup>th</sup> September 2020 BBC Radio 3

---

## INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

Maybe I can talk about something that was important to me when writing this story but is only glimpsed in the story. I'm a composer as well as a writer and when working with digital music there's often a click track playing in the background to keep everything in time and I won't hold back I decided I was being oppressed by this constant metronome, so I bought this device. It's wireless, you wear it like a watch and it buzzes rhythmically in sync with your music. It's very quiet but if I hold it right up to the mic (buzzing) I mean for me it's a nice little luxury but of course the same technology allows deaf or partially sighted players to lock together with other players in time.

Beethoven was a technological innovator on top of everything else. The modern piano owes some of its more dynamic capabilities to the demands he made through his music and musicians and technology have always lived in symbiosis. In Bristol where I live there is an organization called 'Open Up Music' who are dedicated to making orchestras accessible to young disabled people often through brand new technologies, for instance developing a digital instrument that allows music to be played independently using any part of the body including the movement of the eyes alone.

There are quite a few companies working in similar fields for instance Lloyd Coleman the composer for Beethoven Can Hear You is an associate artist with Paraorchestra and the work made by these new composers doesn't have to live in the shadow of the old it can develop its own grammars, its own identities. Today you could write a haptic concerto for instruments that shake a person's whole body but barely make an audible sound or you could score a symphony in colors rather than chords. For me it's representative of people working together to create the world they dream of as opposed to the world other people have already designed for, demanding more through the music.

## THE VISITOR DESCRIBES BEETHOVEN'S MUSIC

### VISITOR

I have known the music of Ludwig van Beethoven all my life... and yet have never heard it.

The shattering thunder at the opening of the fifth, the quiet exhalations that begin the second movement of the seventh -- all are adjectives on a page to me, or diagrams hanging from a staff, rather than sounds hanging in the air. Yet I have known that music, I have felt it, imagined it; as someone who has never traveled might imagine foreign lands.

Sir, I have been deaf from birth. The music in my life has been the buzzing of my own bones, the percussion of my inner body. I learned to form words by the application of hums and vibrations, a teacher's hand to my face, watching the shapes a mouth.

But I have known Beethoven's song. With my hand to the skin of a fortepiano, opus number 1 has shimmered under my fingers. My eyes can run the length of any score and my heart keeps time.

I have never heard your work, Sir, yet I have known it all my life.

I have travelled a distance you would find near-

impossible to comprehend, in my quest to meet the great composer face to face.

I find myself at Ludwig van Beethoven's door, confirmed as his door, on this street, confirmed as his street, looking upon a man who matches in almost every respect the great genius of historic repute, but one thing becomes apparent. One thing beyond doubt:

You are not Ludwig van Beethoven.

## **OPENING CREDITS**

### **ANNOUNCEMENT**

Beethoven Can Hear You.  
A duet for fiction and fact.

By Timothy X Atack

**BEETHOVEN IN HIS STUDY**

Brisk wind beyond shuttered windows.

Scuffles of paper and various other objects, back and forth.

**BEETHOVEN**

(Muttering)

Come on then come on let's have it. (Pause)

No, the papers, you imbecile, you raven! The fresh papers, unstitched -

No the fine paper, the *finest*, for a letter, it's a *letter*, it's not a sketch it's no melody not a concoction for some ballroom with horrendous powdered princes who'll trot back and forth while I play to the very nub of my fingerbones, doubtless most of them barely attentive, pressing the music of my god-given blood into their ears while wearing put-upon delicate expressions as if prising a suppository up themselves, this is an important letter damn you, I'm writing a LONG... LETTER, give me that -

Make your way you jumping little spider. Thank you very much. Leave me alone. Thank you. Get out. Thank you very much.

Smart feet upon wooden floors, departing hastily. A solid door shutting.

Pause, then the messy scratch of nib on paper.

**BEETHOVEN (V.O.)**

Now. My most beloved and bright angel  
how my thoughts turn to

**BEETHOVEN**

(Grunt)

No.

Paper scrunched up, thrown, bouncing off a wall - Another  
scratching...

**BEETHOVEN (V.O.)**

Know that to my final breath I will forever have  
cause to remember how I wronged you -

**BEETHOVEN**

(Grunt)

No.

Paper thrown.

Tiniest pause.

Heavy banging on a wooden desk.

**BEETHOVEN (CONT'D)**

Raven. Bring me an apple.

Door opens.

**BEETHOVEN (CONT'D)**

(Pause) And some

wine.

A good apple.

Don't want a soft apple.

Scratching of nib on paper once more. Rain outside.

**BEETHOVEN (V.O.)**

Strange and mysterious luminous soul whose inscription I shall bear upon my heart for every short year of life left to me, here I sit in abject failure, squalid and decrepit -

**BEETHOVEN**

(Muttering)

- yes, decrepit -

**BEETHOVEN (V.O.)**

- amidst repeated attempts to at least demonstrate some tiny eloquence in recompense for that wrong I did you, profoundly insensible as I was to reason and sympathy in the face of what you so graciously...so graciously...

The door opens.

**BEETHOVEN**

Oh yes the wine, bring it, here, here.

Approaching footsteps.

**BEETHOVEN (CONT'D)**

(Pleasantly)

The fall of the decanter on the wooden  
tabletop.

Yes, the cascading tumble of liquid into the cup,  
the lapping and descending tones in unison  
let's have it -

Wine being poured.

**BEETHOVEN (CONT'D)**

(A little chuckle)

Yes, and the click of the jaw and stopping of the  
breath, a pause, almost in reverence, yes, for  
the calm to descend, and –

He drinks.

**BEETHOVEN**

...ahh! And let's have the same music once more.

Another glass is poured.

**BEETHOVEN (CONT'D)**

Yes there it is. Right there. And...

(Drinks again)

More, more...

(Businesslike again)

I have a most specific instruction for the  
delivery of these messages. Are you listening?  
Will I have to repeat myself? Good.

Tapping -

**BEETHOVEN (CONT'D)**

This one, addressed to my nephew, wherever life or fate may have taken the brittle young fellow, to be delivered him upon my death -- and upon that event alone! Not upon any 'incapacitation'! Not if 'bed- ridden'! Not if lost at sea!

Understood? Nod immediately if understood.

It's like being my own dentist.

Next: this letter, that I'll complete tonight as long as I don't have to *repeat myself constantly?*

This one I shall seal, it is marked without recipient and shall remain so, and upon my death... it is to be *burned*. It is to be burned unread. Ideally out in the open so the...  
...so the ashes might rise into the night.

(beat)

DON'T LOOK AT ME LIKE THAT YOU PURSE-MOTH. Burn it in the open air. At night. Is that comprehensible to you? Good. Now get out immediately. Thank you.

Footsteps departing.

**BEETHOVEN (CONT'D)**

Go away thank you very much. Thank you, leave me alone, it's how I live best.

A distant peal of thunder.

**BEETHOVEN (CONT'D)**

Hm? What was that?

## BEETHOVEN WRITES TO HIS NEPHEW

Music.

### BEETHOVEN

My nephew, my son. By all accounts it is the 3rd of September 1825 although I feel this night as though I have lived five thousand years and would not be surprised were I to open these windows and see the sun rise and drop several times an instant, as a marionette might dance and jig, the supreme light commandeered by him above to hop and wink like a teasing candle upon this dark consternation of mine.

If you are reading this I am undoubtedly dead, unless that clodhopping servant has yet again misunderstood a perfectly simple instruction. Five bad apples so far this week. Five! Nothing against the teeth.

But if all has proceeded correctly and I am indeed deceased... and if you and I remain unreconciled, then I express with all my heart the most profound extent of my annoyance and dissatisfaction; as well as the hope you will in time come to see me as the sensible father in whose stead I strove to watch over you.

Of course, should that cheese-head that skulks around my house prove as senseless as expected, and you receive this in full knowledge I am extant and breathing, etcetera, then cease reading immediately!

Cease!

Lest you and I yet some day find some  
accordance, and this peep-hole into my very  
soul, the bald contents of this message,  
become entirely embarrassing.

That established -- to the meat of it, then.

You would not be blamed for frowning over  
much of what follows, perhaps returning to  
each sentence as if some poet's allusion.

But it is no caprice of your uncle's, I do not  
write on a whim.

There is, without doubt, an end to it.

## **BEETHOVEN RECEIVES A VISITOR**

### **BEETHOVEN**

Some few days past at Baden Bai Wien I  
received an unexpected visitor. The light was  
unusual upon the windows that morning, which I  
took to be some effect of rapid clouds; though  
no wind was audible. My fingers had contracted  
upon the keyboard, inactive for no good reason.  
I was in a repose I did not understand. And  
then: there was a knock upon the door below  
my rooms.

Following the passage of several minutes, and  
much more knocking, it became apparent my  
RAVEN servant was engaged in some stupidity  
or had perhaps caught her frock tails under a  
chair and was unable to engineer an escape.

And so your fond uncle found himself answering his own door, yet again, as if employing no domestics, which on the face of it let us all agree might as well be the case.

Who was behind that door? Well, a woman. A woman at first so still and oddly-fashioned, I thought her a statue, abandoned on the street.

**BEETHOVEN (STREET)**

Good morning. This is Beethoven's house.

**BEETHOVEN**

She was a young woman, alive, and one I was at first minded to send packing given she arrived with no credentials and little in the way of intelligible speech.

For some confusing minutes she and I spoke at the threshold, or rather I spoke and she seemed to watch me intently, demonstrating in the tension of her posture some desire to respond but also perhaps an inability to do so.

**BEETHOVEN (STREET)**

Is there some way I can help you? Are you lost?

**BEETHOVEN**

Light in the skies remained strange, disconnected to the wind, etcetera. She held a note addressed to me, and proffered it. I was not about to send her away - the heavens were severely darkened and rain seemed inevitable -

and so I invited my visitor indoors, fully intending to dispatch her as soon as her unusual message was delivered.

And yet... and yet...perceived closer, this stranger had a face of some unplaceable complexity to me and a manner suggesting she might be made of glass, fragile and slow to move, passing her eye over every last shape or thing before her as if it were a rising, lustrous flower to be marveled at -- even if that shape or thing were, say, a scratch upon the floorboards.

The straightness of her spine and the restlessness of those wide pupils did - yes - did enchant me somehow - yes, snipe all you like laugh all you want yes - yes, I'm an old fool - and as such I forgot my annoyance at being interrupted, why not, and I received her in the music room where she could not tear her gaze from the piano barely one moment, perhaps thinking it an animal about to pounce!!

Then it was that, wordlessly and avoiding my own eyes once more, she handed me the note - which was written on several leaves of a paper so pristine, unflawed and brilliant white that at first I did not begin to read the text at all... but in time saw the hand on that page, careful but oddly slanted, and in courtly if grammatically curious German:

**VISITOR**

Mister van Beethoven. Please forgive this unsolicited intrusion upon your working day. I have traveled a great distance from foreign lands, in the hope you might entertain a short meeting with a view to a professional request, humbly made.

**BEETHOVEN**

So far so dull, I expect you'd agree. And yet:

**VISITOR**

I am a deaf woman, deaf from birth, and a great admirer of all your works.

**BEETHOVEN**

Ha, well, what do you make of *that*, dear nephew?

Do you see now why I forgot the plans for my whole afternoon in an instant, as if they were suddenly dropped down the stairs? The intrigue of it! The magnetic intrigue!

**VISITOR**

I had very much hoped to meet you earlier in life -- for I understand that you have yourself only recently recovered from a significant spell of illness that has proven a great burden, and makes this perhaps a less than perfect time for my visit.

**BEETHOVEN**

True of course, if a little forward -- my bowels are my own business after all -

**VISITOR**

However this opportunity has been presented to me for this specific moment only, the date and time set thanks to calculations and considerations beyond my control; and I could not deny the journey, for fear of denying myself perhaps the most rewarding and unexpected encounter of my entire life, an interview with one of history's greatest creators.

**BEETHOVEN**

Correct and appropriate as this may be it's not unusual for your uncle to receive these flummeries, whiff-whaffs and supplications. But what followed was of an entirely different cadence. Almost, perhaps, a provocation!

**VISITOR**

My request is that over a short period, perhaps a few days, you teach me to play a selection of your works, on pianoforte.

I hear little beyond a certain force or physical sensation transmitted to me mostly through touch -- in which I can sense rhythms and maintain an understanding of harmony, the different intensities of vibrations that mark intervals between notes.

If nothing else I consider myself highly attuned to your work through pattern and theory, and while I have never technically 'heard' the full force of that music, I hear it forcefully enough through other means.

The reason I find myself before you today is not for the sake of empathy, or indeed as a some form of novelty. Upon being given the means to journey to a place of my choosing, any place at all, I had but one immediate desire: of learning to play Beethoven's music under the tutelage of he who created it. A man who has endured so much to practice his art; an artist who would know, more than anyone, how to describe the intent of his works for the benefit of a musician who could never hear the bare notes.

### **BEETHOVEN**

I do recall asking the young miss her name. I also recall that any response was lost in a momentary fog of confusion as it became perfectly apparent, of course, how idiotic of me, that she could not hear the slightest word and, though capable of reading the shape of my mouth she was struggling against that old habit I have of chewing upon my words, talking into my neck, and so forth.

Naturally this problem – requiring pen and paper to further the matter – found me bellowing for that shuffling fool from the top of my considerable lungs, and shortly thereafter the usual noises of stupefaction and dullardry told me the RAVEN had appeared in the doorway behind me.

Whereupon the entire aspect of this conversation changed. While still respectfully facing my visitor, I answered my servant's unending questions as to which kind of paper I might receive, and how.

During this exchange the lackey was behind me and yet I spoke, and understood in turn.

This, it transpires, is what caused all colour to drain from the face of my young visitor...

... and for her to depart her chair and proceed from the room at speed, as though a heavy rain had begun to fall.

### **THE VISITOR PROCLAIMS BEETHOVEN A FALSE BEETHOVEN**

#### **BEETHOVEN**

(Voice raised over it)

In fact rain! Yes, rain, outside! In fact it had begun, but outside of course! - and I watched from my rooms above as the visitor bolted from my door below, crossing the street, hand to mouth, sheltering first in an alcove opposite, then to and fro she went, into and out of the deluge, looking to the skies, looking to the ground, looking anywhere but from whence she came. Confound her, I thought! Confound her primness and useless mystery! What was it she had announced upon her leaving? -

#### **VISITOR**

You are not Ludwig van Beethoven.

#### **BEETHOVEN**

Nonsense! I am the only example.

#### **VISITOR**

It's impossible.

**BEETHOVEN**

I assure you I remain possible if naturally  
distinctive -- most likely unique!

And here nephew, seeing her departed and in  
that rain so rudely, I felt a rage fall upon me, all  
too familiar to you of course, I welcomed it in  
as of old, for you should know for some time I  
have resisted the ringing and roaring it leaves  
behind but here I threw some notebooks I think,  
and I struck a few close and bad chords upon  
the piano with fists clenched and then shut the  
lid over-firmly, and, I believe, kicked off one of  
my slippers at this time, but strong in the  
realisation something of the universe was  
passing me by, of god's strangest hue and  
harmony, I stamped single- shoed downstairs  
and threw open my own front door once more  
like a wild-haired troll, not caring for anyone in  
the street outside but her, intoning, basso:  
come back, young miss, come back in, this is  
all far from over!

Gesturing. Gesturing to the rain and so forth.

At which she stood amongst that downpour and  
looked upon me with the most palpable  
disappointment, clutching at her heart.

**VISITOR**

Can you hear me?

**BEETHOVEN**

- was what she asked, and I was compelled to speak the truth, of course: yes, I responded, nodding too.

**VISITOR**

Can you hear the sound of this voice -- my voice?

**BEETHOVEN**

- and again, I nodded. This started a fire in her eyes and, perhaps, hard to tell in the rain, perhaps, yes, tears also.

(Pause)

Young miss! -- return indoors, I insisted. The words shaped upon my lips most carefully: return indoors, for I was born Ludwig van Beethoven, and such I remain! At the very least, do me the honour of explaining how I might present otherwise?

## STRANGE GRAMMAR VARIATION

Buried somewhere within the soundscape, low volume: the Visitor's voice.  
It's at the cusp of audibility, a sense rather than a fully communicated meaning.

She's lost beneath some eddy or wave.

When any words are caught in the swell, it feels as though perhaps some kind of lesson is being conducted, a set of recitations being made.

But the Visitor is a touch less formal in her attitude than previously heard...

### VISITOR

(Fragments)

... older new high German likely to be less in evidence...

Yeah ... I've been using Klopstock if you want to hear an example from primary sources?...  
I'll just find it for you...

... Still farther do I travel in my tremendous path,  
still nearer draw to the Saviour's death – to his  
death who breathed naught but love divine, and  
whose love supports my fainting powers...

... the year will be 1825... it will be autumn...

But the effect is fleeting, like catching sight of a bottle bobbing on the surf, before the bows of the ship pull it under.

## THE FIRST CONVERSATION

### VISITOR

Something I expected from the very beginning of our meeting was to be conversing as we are now, using pen and ink.

The great Beethoven I know of, at fifty-five years of age, is almost completely deaf. He has been since the year 1811. That same Beethoven also stitches his own notebooks by hand, as I see you do -- but as well as serving as a home for his musical sketches he reserves some of them for conversation books, by which he can speak in detail with his... friends, or fellow musicians. But I see you do not do anything like that.

The many volumes of conversation I expected in your home are entirely absent.

My heart is full of doubt and I feel overcome, sick with fear that my journey has been for nothing.

Sir: are you not deaf? Or are you somehow far more at home, far more comfortable in the loss of your hearing than my information suggests?

### BEETHOVEN

Dear Visitor. This is an experience entirely inconvenient to me. To sit patiently and await the arrival of your words is a strain upon my person - also the brain.

I am *fundamentally* van Beethoven, and while there have been a variety of brothers and other

hangers-on beneath that name, I am reliably the better known and most reliable of the species. My brothers include an apothecary and a man most dead of consumption -- not much of note, then. And you cannot be mistaking me for my father Johann, who drowned himself in a vat of wine some time gone... or my nephew, a 'student' if you like, yet to make a mark under any column in any ledger. So, the matter is confusing.

However, this I can tell you: at a younger age, perhaps 27, I did once enter into an argument with some voice-box on legs, a self-regarding pampered numpty with aspersions to musicianship, on the subject of some detail or whatnot within some work, and the disagreement then caused me to send him from my presence - even though the fool imagined himself to be leaving voluntarily of course - and when a few moments later he returned with some ridiculous afterthought or false rejoinder, knocking on my door – doing so with his forehead for all I could discern, for all the sense he demonstrated – I found myself in an utterly wild rage, and rose, whereupon the world tilted on its axis and I fell to the floor.

I righted myself and discovered I could no longer hear.

Not one thing. In place of the room was a cacophony, a fury, as if the roar from my mouth had filled up my mind and was refusing to leave.

After some seconds of my not responding that same idiot threw open the door again, shouting whatever foolishness he had landed upon with the volume and intelligence of a seagull I imagine, hopping around in the doorway -- and he was utterly silent to me! That flapping mouth hollered to no effect. Of course I might have found this agreeable under other circumstances, but it was apparent to me in that moment that my ears had been stopped by some fateful hand.

Dear Visitor this was a most terrible afternoon. My head was thick with a devil's concerto of squalling and whirling tones, the shrieking of a long and high string, also a dense rushing of blood, and also rolling gongs, the most unstoppable deep and dissonant bells.

But in time, to some degree within that day but ultimately overnight, the horrendous squall quieted. My faculties returned.

Since that day – and here, young miss, some detail I have confided only to my closest colleagues and my dearest friends – following that incident, my left ear, and to a lesser degree my right, sing quietly with a distinct and constant tone. Yet the sounds sit in some part of my perception that allows life to proceed as normal, for my work to continue as expected. They are notes I hear only in the softest of atmospheres, in the absence of any other noise.

A pianoforte or a flute can subsume them entirely, it is only in the rattle of a carriage along a cobbled street, for instance, that I perceive the imbalance from one ear to the other, the sharpness is not as defined to my left -- yes, and of course yes, it is a foul affliction for one so attuned to the subtleties of the divine song. But I have been able to conceal my infirmity without subterfuge these many years. It remains as always: that no-one truly understands the interior condition of Beethoven's skull.

So tell me of these false rumours you have heard.

### **VISITOR**

The source of my knowledge is one which would take much time to explain. Sir were you not baptised in December, year of our lord 1790?

- But, no, perhaps this is not enough. Perhaps

ask you some quieter detail from the pages of time. Some footnote.

It may take some thought.

And as I sit here my despair accumulates densely upon me, like a fall of the iciest snow.

It is almost impossible to explain to you, Sir, how distant is the land I have come from. Not only in the measure of miles;

But most of all in the measure of deepest time and deeper emotion, the requirements I have met: to explain, intricately and repeatedly, the need for me to arrive in this chair, here and now, in your presence, watching you at the Broadwood close by...

Pause.

### **VISITOR**

When I was younger no-one quite understood my interest in music. It was seen as perhaps a kind of rebellion, against my nature. If so, it was because of Beethoven. I had read that when Beethoven composed a work, he was often spurred on by a mental image, or an emotional one. Is this true of you?

Also: do you find yourself appalled by your very body? Is it a subject you shirk from, do you distrust doctors and suspect a trick in every cure?

Do you vomit? Do your stools squirt? Do you

drink despite all medical advice, braining  
 yourself with wine, and yet take country walks  
 in all weathers, whatever your physical state?  
 Do you regularly imagine yourself undergoing a  
 variety of deaths? Do these images of the end  
 often play a part in your cadences and codas,  
 do you spell them out with strings and brass?

I must ask. There is no other way.

Pause.

**BEETHOVEN**

Have you been talking to my Doctors?  
 Beethoven.

**VISITOR**

Sir, no, I've never met them.

**BEETHOVEN**

Is it Schupanzigh? That fat little clamp-arsed  
 gossip?  
 Did Schupanzigh put you up to this? As a joke?  
 Write your answer.  
 Beethoven.

**VISITOR**

I have heard of the great violinist Mister  
 Schupanzigh, yes, but never met him.

**BEETHOVEN**

So how - how then, why then - why all this -  
 this here, you've practically plucked my  
 eyebrows here! You're inside my very  
 intestines! These questions, explain their

provenance! I am angry. Beethoven.

**VISITOR**

Is it true? Have I described you as a whispering ghost might?

**BEETHOVEN**

Damn it yes. Damn it yes you have and I want to know how. I want to know how!!  
Beethoven.

**VISITOR**

There is no need to keep signing your name, Sir. I accept who you are. I accept who you are and my mind races. There is no doubt: your likeness, your language, your skill and your style, the company I am in is that of Ludwig van Beethoven.

But with one, fundamental, unavoidable difference. You can hear me. You can hear the catch in my breath as the horror of it all becomes real to me.

**BEETHOVEN**

What horror?

**VISITOR**

There are two immediate possibilities.

The first is one that could make no sense to you, but it's best described as my having taken the wrong fork in the road...

except mine is a road that twists about itself,

and you can not only journey along it, but within it, and on its underside. The lands I have traveled from are distant in many ways.

The second possibility is by far the worst. It is the possibility of a lie. A lie perpetuated by evil men.

An astonishing idea, of the greatest of composers, deaf, and still creating the most wondrous, powerful music! A fable of despair followed by triumph that was created... to who knows what end?

And if that was a lie, it's one of the biggest in the history of human art, and I have uncovered it through my own selfishness.

I do not want to believe it. I am desperate not to.

Yet here you are.

You are not the Beethoven I love.

My quest has failed.

## BEETHOVEN BANISHES THE VISITOR

Beethoven's study.

### BEETHOVEN

Nephew, it will not surprise you that my already ragged and threadbare patience was completely unskinned in this instant, and so -

### BEETHOVEN (ROOM)

GET OUT!

### BEETHOVEN

- I cried -

### BEETHOVEN (ROOM)

SO, LEAVE! If I am not a good enough Beethoven for your ETERNAL RIDDLE, your SANCTIMONY, then GO!

### BEETHOVEN

I think the Visitor might have produced some noises of apology or regret - one sounds much like the other, after all - before collecting herself and departing.

The RAVEN behaved contemptibly and in some misguided attempt to embarrass me further decided to take a broom to the Visitor's heels as she left -- like some Colombina in a poor comedy, cackling.

Why must it be so hard to find good servants?

What crack in creation did god in heaven neglect, so that all the ill-qualified domestics of the universe

might crawl out of hell and towards *me*, semi-demonic, slovenly and decrepit?

Although, my Karl, that night I was in truth grateful for her inattentiveness and sloth.

Impossible to sleep. I recall the darkness as a headache. Lying on my back, a belly that wouldn't cease its nagging, the sound of my own breath ludicrous to me, a vile, enormous bellowing.

And yes, also: the tiny whine, living like an insect in the root of one ear, its corresponding sibling perhaps less insistent but just as apparent in the other. That night in the amplified hush of the bedchamber I heard them clearly, worse than for many years. They feed on wine, they sing louder when swimming in its warmth... and yes, my nephew, I had drunk, drunk much, once the Visitor departed. Perhaps two and a half bottles. But it was not the wine alone that stayed my sleep -

Deaf? Me? Deaf? Beethoven? Deaf? No. Never. Ridiculous! Abstract, stupefying concept. Me? No!

I wasted some moments arse-edge to the bedside, before fumbling for a candle and returning, as ever, to the piano.

The Broadwood is quite the most sonorous of any pianoforte I have owned. And here, Karl, you might once more pause and re-read, for yes, what struck me in the dead of night for the first time was that I could not remember having the Broadwood installed at Baden. But no matter. The mind needed respite and what better than some crashing of waves, some thunderclaps?

Big chords.

### **BEETHOVEN (CONT'D)**

Gratifying... but not enough. Every time I chanced to look at the Visitor's chair I saw a ghosted outline of her somewhere in the candlelight.

I was offended by this shadow and reprimanded it. Me, me, deaf? Preposterous! And to think I was the one with headful of glug!

Pause.

Softer chord...

### **BEETHOVEN (CONT'D)**

The notebook with her words inside had been dropped to the floor and I discovered this by kicking it.

Whether it was dropped by me or by that harpy beneath the stairs, I do not know -- but this night her failure to arrange things properly was in my favour.

In the clutter and clash of the day, the remarkable nature of this book had evaded my attention. Its stitching was immaculately measured, its pages so lustrously white, they seemed almost luminous in the dark. I rifled through those mostly blank leaves, empty but for that previous day's entries, but found a scribble at the back, in the Visitor's hand, reading:

### **VISITOR**

This book to be burned upon the death of its owner.

### **BEETHOVEN**

Which owner?

Her? Or Me?

I opened the first pages before me, laid upon the piano as a libretto, and made soft, distracted extemporisations against that afternoons exchange. Revisiting each change of turning of logic, each ornate but troubling phrase.

## RAPTUS FOR CONVERSATION BOOK AND PIANO

A piece of music built from quiet meanderings on a piano and repeated 'ghost phrases' from the Conversation Book so far.

The voice heard is always the Visitor's.

Rather the idea is it's a quiet revisitation of the story so far, set to music.

It's a reverie. What Beethoven's friends called a 'raptus,' when he would retreat into musical thoughts and block out the rest of the world.

It should feel present, thoughtful.

... but its underscore is mostly a gentle one, as if the pianist's hands are taking a long, considered time to feel around each arrangement of notes before finally dropping home.

It's Beethoven lost in his own mind.

**VIENNA**

A small silence.

**BEETHOVEN**

Awoke before sunrise with my head upon the keyboard. The C sharp and E flat had indented my brow. One hand on the last chord I'd sounded and the other hanging like a gibbon. Head like a dog.

Immediately called for a hot bath and, steeping within it, resolved on my course of action, thus:

Slam cut: a coach and horses, galloping, rattling.

**BEETHOVEN**

Woke up the fastest bastard in Baden, one Dirk Melchior. Take note, nephew: he'll get you into Vienna twice the speed of anyone else, although possibly not alive.

Knocked politely yet firmly on the door of Mrs Brandenbauer, for five minutes, until her servant answered; announced myself.

Anyone taking rooms in Vienna will have Brandenbauer's pigeons reporting as much to her in no time. She has a standing account in every coffee shop, a reserved ticket to every function.

With assurances and promises I was sure I'd come to rue, I extracted from Mrs Bradenbauer what was required – the address of a lodging house in Mendel Street, and left there the note

I'd drafted in the tub, adding a scrawl at the bottom as to where I could be found.

Trotted the short distance over to Humboldt's Coffee House, deflecting a 'Good Morning Mister Beethoven' here and a 'Maestro!' there. Lickspittles.

Once at Humboldt's I took of some chocolate. And one pie.

Wasn't long before she arrived at the door and damn near stopped the room entirely. I had to cram myself into the darkest corner for fear of that hydra of loose talk that might hatch and begin a vast flailing around. Did you see that young creature with old Ludwig? Dressed like she didn't know how to even walk in it! etcetera.

I placed the notebook before my Visitor, where, upon a fresh leaf, I had begun a new conversation.

## THE SECOND CONVERSATION

### BEETHOVEN

Last night, inspired by your words, I attempted to compose for a great silence.

I found I could not.

The proposition of an unhearing composer is fascinating however. I would ask that we converse some more on the matter, if you should be available today.

I cannot comprehend how any musician would operate after such a loss.

Perhaps Beethoven has not detected it, but the Visitor's responses seem less starry-eyed than before.

### VISITOR

Well, in the lands I come from there are many who no longer describe deafness as a loss. Some consider it a more fulfilling life to live beyond noise, with a language all its own.

Of course there are still cruelties enacted upon the deaf. But we have deaf musicians, and blind painters, and dancers who do not walk.

### BEETHOVEN

Am I to understand this magical place also has deaf composers among its people?

**VISITOR**

Yes.

**BEETHOVEN**

Then why come all this way to me? You may have believed me deaf through some miscommunication, but in the first instance why did you not consult with some countryman who shares your condition?

**VISITOR**

I have. All my life.

**BEETHOVEN**

Still, why come to me?

**VISITOR**

Because you're a very particular case.

**BEETHOVEN**

Ha! That much I know.

Pause.

**BEETHOVEN**

Young miss we have sat here for a considerable time. Can you not then tell me about my particularity?

**VISITOR**

No.

**BEETHOVEN**

This seems altogether rude.

**VISITOR**

The choice isn't mine to make. My presence here comes with strict terms and conditions.

**BEETHOVEN**

I am not a barbarian. I see the stormy looks you give me. Perhaps allow me to phrase something that might save our companionship.

I have decided that you are some envoy of things yet to be.

This appeared to me clearly upon re-reading your introductions from yesterday. And furthermore, this morning, awaiting your arrival, a coalescing of your words occurred in my mind that seized me with a great fear.

Your presence signifies that my fractured ears are some day to fail. Having withstood a great many years with flaws no greater than a hair's-width, my hearing is to finally crack and collapse.

And you, like Gabriel appearing - dazzling the eye but with no clarion sounding - you come with a message, and it is this: that Beethoven must be deaf, for the proper operation of things.

It is fate. Hence your diligence and high emotion -- as *shepherdess*, if you will, of that fate.

Some years ago, during the days of the Congress of Vienna, this accursed city danced itself stupid in a whirl of debauchery and vice while the so-called great men of Europe drew up the maps we now inhabit.

I recall, back then, the sudden fashion for tableau vivant. Draped ladies of aristocratic houses assuming mythic positions for gawping old men.

And I fancy myself now such a gawping old man, watching a tableau of my own life sometime in the future, by candlelight, but it is peopled instead by faces from my life.

There is a perfect representation of myself, sat at a piano, head in hands, bereft, unable to hear its chime, a carefully placed candle capturing the fear and pain in one visible eye, the full effect being as if under a great thundercloud at the furthest extent of dusk, a silver spray of lightning overhead; you, my Visitor, are featured also robed as in the Jan Van Eyck annunciation maybe, perhaps perched atop the piano's far end, meanwhile my nephew himself, (foreground, kneeling) is weeping, inconsolable etcetera - this is a broad representation after all - while upon the boundary my bulbous brother Johann and his strange wife stand looking upon this misery as if it's entirely a Sunday stroll, those stupid smirks on their faces, which doesn't surprise me in the least. Then perhaps also some smattering of cherubim, played by street

children.

This to say, sweet and perturbing Visitor, that anything the future holds must be imparted to me. I must know! I must be prepared, if all is to turn to dust in my ears, and to ash in the mouth, and for my only profound and meaningful contributions to this dirty, ugly world to fall into ruin.

**VISITOR**

Mate, seriously I'm no angel.

Tiny pause.

**BEETHOVEN**

Excuse me?

**VISITOR**

I'm not an angel. I bring no message.

**BEETHOVEN**

Are my ears not at risk?

**VISITOR**

Don't know.

**BEETHOVEN**

Are you to return abroad? Will you leave Vienna?

**VISITOR**

When I first arrived the day before last this city felt like the most magical apparition. Now I see

any old city. Perhaps I should go.

But... I too have a fear. You could not put it in  
a... tableau, or frame, of any kind. I sense it has  
a larger shape.

### **BEETHOVEN**

I have some time to hear of this shape.

### **VISITOR**

Unfortunately a full explanation requires me to  
tell you of a life you never lived -- Although...  
perhaps I could...

... given that neither of us know which path  
we're presently on...

### **BEETHOVEN**

So tell it, and let heaven be damned! Tell it,  
and we'll have more chocolate, or more pies,  
or anything you desire! Tell it, so I might sleep!

Tell it, so you may depart in peace! But tell it  
entirely, dear Angel, and tell it today!

**LATE QUARTET VARIATIONS**

Again the soundscape swells and rolls and hums.

After a while, once more...

Buried somewhere within, low volume, at the edge of audibility: the Visitor's voice.

Fading in and out, phasing. Once more at the very cusp of perception.

**VISITOR**

(Fragments)

... well yeah he'll be in that last stage where the,  
uh... it's Fanny isn't it who says that he has good  
days and bad days? Some days you have to  
shout. Other days he can hear if you, like, lean  
in close maybe...

... what's the distance from Baden to Vienna? I'll  
have to factor that in, it'll mean arriving in the ...  
afternoon, I'm guessing?...

... yeah I know I know it's mad... (Laughs)

It feels more futuristic than anything yet heard.

And her voice drifts away again, over the horizon...

## THE VISITOR'S TALE

### VISITOR

Yesterday, when you described the disagreement that led to a fall, I felt a momentary calm. The Beethoven I journeyed to meet wrote of such an argument, and its effect on his health.

Except, for that Beethoven - your hearing never truly returned.

Over a decade it left you, in increments, until sometime past your 40th year you found yourself profoundly deaf.

That immense roaring and howling you describe became a permanent companion. At first it made you ashamed of company, afraid. What would public knowledge of your condition do to your reputation? You had always been sickly. Your guts would plague you all the time. Perhaps the tinnitus was a sign of something riddling your whole body.

Almond paste, smeared on cotton wool and driven into the ears, had no effect, neither did fresh horseradish. You syringed yourself with warm milk on the orders of the professor of medicine at Vienna University. Nothing, nothing, no change.

The first consequence was an end to your career as a virtuoso pianist.

The much-admired dynamics you'd perfected through years of practice were now obscured to you, and in later years you would sometimes make a joke of it, hammering huge thick distorted chords on your piano and asking unsuspecting visitors "is it not beautiful?" just to see the look on their faces.

But in your fourth decade, the absence of any cure drove you to such despair, made you so uncertain of any future in your art, at one point you composed a letter to your brothers assumed to be a suicide note -- not enacted upon, ultimately... but something that you kept into later life, locked away, hidden in a secret drawer with a spring-loaded switch. As if to remind yourself of the darkness you faced down.

Because: day by day, moment by moment, you became attuned to that unwanted company. A resolve grew within you.

You wrote:

### **BEETHOVEN (LETTER)**

"If only I can be partially liberated from my affliction, then  
– I will come to you as a complete and mature man ... you will find me as happy as I am fated to be on this earth, not unhappy - no, that I could not bear - I will seize Fate by the throat; it shall certainly not bend and crush me completely - oh, it would be so lovely to live a thousand lives."

**VISITOR**

You, Beethoven, wrote that.

The creator of the metronome fashioned ear trumpets for you -- you avoided using them.

He created a sounding horn to amplify your piano that you most certainly did use -- you introduced the world to the concept of a deaf composer. It was somehow in line with your reputation. Perhaps that made it easier to grasp: that it was Beethoven, above all others. He was so stubborn, so obstinate, so certain of his own genius, even the loss of his hearing couldn't stop him creating music.

Your music became the source of an eternally unanswered question.

Whence, Beethoven's music?

And therein lies my fear. The one with a shape undefined.

When my course was plotted for this journey, I knew I'd be finding you before you had written the works that have most saturated my imagination, pieces I have returned to over and over.

**VISITOR**

They are works commissioned by Prince Nicolai Galitzin. Perhaps now, you are engaged in arranging them. Perhaps not, depending

which fork in the road has been taken.

This is part of my fear -- that they might never exist. Or perhaps worse, that they'll exist in some muted, or muzzled form. That I'll return to my own lands and discover their essence skewed, compressed, diluted, as if they've always been that way.

And it's a fiery, horrible fear... because the Galitzin quartets contain some of the most heartbreaking cadences in human music.

It haunts me to think of a world without that music.

And so I find myself in the impossible situation of describing a composer's work, before it is finished, to that very composer.

It struck me between our last meeting and this one, that in all the time I had watched your hands at the keyboard yesterday, none of it even slightly resembled the Galitzin quartets.

And here the shape of the fear prickles and shudders.

What if this finds me, in some way, at the centre of a whirlwind? The focal point of an undetected change?

This is the story of my fear this morning.

I do not know what might be done about it.

Have I destroyed what Beethoven means  
to the entire world?

## **BEETHOVEN GETS ANGRY AGAIN**

Beethoven's study. Heavy rain outside.

Door opens. Feet entering.

A peal of thunder, relatively close.

### **BEETHOVEN**

I've finished this wine. Bring more.

What's that look for? To what end the clamped  
mouthed and dead eyed gazed will o foul  
raven. I'll be with my maker in months, then  
you'll be sorry, no-one to stare at in contempt,  
no-one to badmouth behind his back, "you'll  
never guess what old Ludwig did last night!  
Locked himself away for hours on end writing a  
letter to some mysterious young miss who no  
doubt will have none of him!" I see you rolling  
an eye over the page here, yes, none so subtle  
as you, yes indeed! -- well it's NOT WHAT  
YOU THINK.

(Pause)

The wine please.

Footsteps departing.

**BEETHOVEN (CONT'D)**

Yes laugh as you go I saw as much, the story  
must be told and entreatments made, heaven  
has spoken!!!

Door shuts.

(Beat)

WHERE'S MY APPLE?

Furious scribbling.

**BEETHOVEN (V.O.)**

Now...Sweetest apple, I -

**BEETHOVEN**

Agh -

Furious crossing out, more scribbling –

**BEETHOVEN (V.O.)**

Sweetest Traveller, I write this, I write this so that  
you know your leaving was not my wish, nor  
my doing. Perhaps it might have seemed I  
engaged in sabotage the moment your tale was  
done. That I drove my hands into the earth  
beneath us, and pulled the foundations out from  
under our short companionship. That is not so,  
could never be - for I am not that evil creature  
nor would I be capable of such malevolence.

I do comprehend - and it has always been -

that my anger is as a noisy shadow to me, one that once entertained by the slightest gloom will, like a demon, leap from beneath my feet and climb upon my head like a terrible hat, crowning me in pompous rage, raking its clawed fingers at anyone close by. I know this. I sincerely did not mean to wear this terrible hat in your presence. Any composer losing their ears would have thrown themselves in the river.

Rolling, approaching thunder.

### **BEETHOVEN**

So it was that the demon dismissed each question you asked in turn; the demon grinned at your evident pain; the demon waved a disdainful hand at any suggestion of imperfection in Beethoven's craft.

'I've never had a simple arrangement in my life anywhere'

It was the demon which barked, using my voice.

'This is entirely ridiculous and now I'm certain you can't be any kind of prophet.

That any analysis of music is so much counting of syllables.

The demon, too, that refused the simple request to examine any recent works against your memory of them

'It is done, it is done, it is done'.

'I've decided and there it is. I've no more to say'.

The demon that sat in wretched silence drumming its fingers while you, emanating patience and despair, tried to define some path in the fog.

The notion that Beethoven would rest content without absolute control over his music at any interval and under any conditions.

**VISITOR**

I don't know why you're getting so angry about it.

**BEETHOVEN**

Cast yourself into some abyss yes, formulate some Roman exit, yes, with honor too, yes, but languish unnaturally, no. It's not debatable. It's not imaginable. There is nothing more to add.

**VISITOR**

Just sit down okay.

**BEETHOVEN**

We've dallied her long enough. The man I am could not be as the forest could not be without rain.

A close clap of thunder, cut short -

**AN ENSEMBLE**

**VISITOR**

Violin, 3136 to 196 hz.

Violins tuning up.

**VISITOR**

Viola, 2093 to 131 hz.

Violas.

**VISITOR (CONT'D)**

Clarinet, 1760 to 131 hz.

Clarinets are added.

**VISITOR (CONT'D)**

Contrabass, 525 to 33 hz.

Basses join in.

**VISITOR (CONT'D)**

Piano 3951 to 28 hz

And a piano joins the cacophony.

## AN INVITATION

### BEETHOVEN

Of course, dear nephew, if indeed you pay any attention to this letter at all, you will have a multitude of questions for your old - and I trust, dead - Uncle. Stay those questions a while longer.

True, at the time of this letter Galitzin has commissioned a clutch of quartets and they are crystalizing suitably, they are I would say passable and will serve their purpose, namely in the shape of the funds they command, that's no-one's concern but mine.

The Visitor, I conjectured, could of course have heard of this commission and invented some fancy in order to pique my interest, perhaps snare me in some disreputable manner; this is what I believed for several days after we parted in Vienna.

I returned to Baden that afternoon and during a walk in nature - but perhaps longer than of habit - I found myself suspecting the Visitor might knock again on my door; an instinct that a fanatic of her kind would return in short order.

However, she did not.

What transpired was altogether more taxing, and an experience most troublesome to conjure in mere words.

Some two days later, I believe, I received a letter from Schupanzighe which instead of being typically meandering and ingratiating, invited me in straightforward manner to some exclusive concert.

Nothing much to note.

But, BUT: the outrage - nestling like a cuckoo in that formally dull prose - was that this was to be a concerto of variations upon my own themes.

Upon *my own themes*.

Shocked, appalled, and immediately writing to my attorney, I found the hell-for-leather madman Melchior that same hour and he might have killed at least one horse in the scramble to the city.

Sure enough Shupanzighe and his cronies were rehearsing in the rooms set aside for his bastard- child of a concert.

And sat with care and calm between the violins and violas was their conductor. Not the jelly Shupanzighe, no, but: my Visitor.

She rose, and solemnly handed me another of those remarkable notebooks of her own devising... in which the first entry appeared as follows:

## **CONCERTO FOR DIMINUENDO**

### **VISITOR**

Mister van Beethoven. Please forgive this unsolicited intrusion upon your life.

I am a deaf woman, deaf from birth, and a great admirer of all Beethoven's music.

I'd expected to meet a different man -- and find myself terrified that you will not compose a piece that, I have always thought, was a hymn to acceptance; of the triumph of the mind over the impermanence of the body, of creation over entropy. A set of quartets I have read like poems on the page.

However: If you are not deaf, I must take you to that world the best I can. I feel certain, so certain, that it is the only manner in which you might come to write that music I love.

I've composed my own piece, a variation upon a theme of yours... I have called the piece 'Concerto For Diminuendo'.

The mode is as follows: a motif, a phrase, shall be repeated, tutti, over and over by this

ensemble. This precise repetition and lack of development is intentional. But what seems like a perverse arrangement has a purpose.

In a specific order, the players shall cease playing, stand, and leave this room.

They will do this as representation of the perceptions of a man who gradually ceases to hear certain tones. The highest of them first. Proceeding eventually to the whole.

You, or a man much like you, once wrote: "what is difficult is good." Reading those words created in me the final resolve to become a musician. I hope you can bear those same words in mind as my work is played.

You believe deafness must define a life. For me, while it is part of my life it no more defines me than the colour of my eyes. It is part of the arrangement. An arrangement can be interpreted. An arrangement can be difficult. It can also be good. So do I have your permission to proceed?

Pause.

### **BEETHOVEN**

Young Miss, if nothing else your tenacity inspires admiration. I promise to give it my full attention. I cannot promise to find it good.

### **VISITOR**

Thank you.

The piece of music that follows is as the Visitor describes.

It takes its time.

It proceeds to a near-whisper, a muted phrase, as if one of the lower-frequency instruments (perhaps a bass) is being heard through a wall.

Then it stops.

### **BEETHOVEN CONCLUDES HIS LETTER TO THE VISITOR**

A hush.

A rush of rain against the windows, distant thunder.

#### **BEETHOVEN**

I was most surprised, faithful and mysterious Angel, that upon the end of your concerto, as the contrabassist concluded his final ostinato and solemnly left the room, I had been left entirely in solitude.

I had expected to turn and see you standing some distance behind me, perhaps understanding of my tears - although it would not have been too forward of you to smile in acceptance of a foolish old soul, finally reaching an accommodation with your story.

But after that first shock of finding myself abandoned, in truth I understood instantly I was never to see you again.

I fancied that on my journey home I could still hear the horses' beat, the chime of their reins and the spatter of dirt on the roads.

As I took to bed that night I almost could perceive the wind pushing against the walls, as it often does here on the corner.

You had prepared me for my waking the following morning, and I thank you for it. During the concerto you had handed me your score and your notebook, in which you had written:

**VISITOR**

There depart the violas, they have ceased.

**BEETHOVEN**

But the viola part remained on the score, and in the notebook you asked:

**VISITOR**

Can you not still hear them?

**BEETHOVEN**

And I could, dear young Miss.

I could hear them *entirely*. Despite their having gone.

A shudder of distant thunder. The rain calms.

**BEETHOVEN (CONT'D)**

Just after sunrise the following day I raised myself with more spirit than in a good long time. I woke, of course, profoundly deaf. It had ever been so. How else is Beethoven these days, but deaf as a loaf of bread? Ha! You might as well shout at the mountains, they'll hear more than I!

For a few moments I rifled through my conversation books, convinced I might find our exchange from some days before. I did not. This, somehow, I also understood. The squall in my ears clattered around as a friendly puppy might, asking for a ball to be thrown, so...

The quartets were upon the piano, half-scrawled, piles of ambient paper, unruly and unkind to me in the second movement, the work bad, uninspired. Upon resuming my place at the keyboard I found the music altogether more responsive than ever before. It emerged under my fingers and caught fire.

My great regret - and mark my words sweet one, Beethoven has rare regrets, ones relating to strangers of uncertain provenance rarer still - my greatest regret is not to have tutored a ghost in the playing of my music.

The proposition itself was remarkable but it is not for my own sake I grieve the loss. I grieve it because I did you a great wrong. I denied you your wish.

So there it is, and I've said it.

I've written my Nephew - in a letter to be delivered only once I've coughed my heart up - and maybe I shall have it sent, maybe not. In any event, I feel he would think it a delirium and pay it no mind. History shall stand witness. I shall not. The days are short.

I have decided on an instruction for this letter to be burned in the openair at night, that seems most expedient. The light in the dark might catch your eye.

Yours, a fellow composer, a poor Austrian musical drudge,

Beethoven.

Addendum.

In my earlier days, when I played, I would laugh at any tears from my audience; scorn them, and call them fools to their faces. Today, in writing the Quartet B flat, I wept, and did so a while, and did not care even if that damned harpy saw me crying.

## POST SCRIPT

What follows is perhaps more accurately the voice of *the woman playing the Visitor*: leading us from the story, out into the present.

### THE VISITOR

Beethoven dies two years later.

Before he goes so far as to do that, he completes what will be known as the late string quartets: some of the most astonishing music in the known universe, songs of whirling heartbreak and hymns of gratitude, ending in a fugue of such forward-thinking scope and complexity, it is hated by almost everyone who hears it played... and only properly appreciated a hundred years after his death.

His publisher begs him to write a different, simpler, more comfortable ending for the quartets. He does so - he needs the money - but eventually this cop-out is pretty much ignored... and the fugue, his staggering final expression of the infinity of tones, is what will be remembered.

Profoundly deaf, having to sit close to the instruments to hear the slightest vibration, he writes his last music in the same way as Einstein will one day describe black holes -- through inference and mathematics, and memory, and faith.

I've always thought that anyone interested in

music as an act of faith would want to meet  
Beethoven.

So here's my humble proposal for that journey...

Music fades.

---

**THE END**

---