

The Beethoven Question: Can Art Make Life Worth Living?

Saturday 27th October 2012 – Purcell Room, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Southbank Centre

TRANSCRIPT

Stephen Johnson – Introduction

and

John Suchet – Beethoven's Life and Deafness (with discussion and questions)

MICHAEL PUGH: Ladies and gentlemen, good morning. My name is Michael Pugh and on behalf of The Musical Brain I wish you a very warm welcome to our 2012 conference, the Beethoven Question: Can Art Make Life Worth Living? As you will have seen from our publicity and the conference programme, the key note of our conference is a statement made by Beethoven in his Heiligenstadt Testament, and it is in fact 210 years this month since that document was created. Beethoven had spent the summer of 1802 in the small village of Heiligenstadt, not far from Vienna, on the advice of his doctor, in the hope that getting away from the city might help with his hearing ailment. That hope was not realised and, in his testament, not to be seen by other eyes until after his death 25 years later, Beethoven confronts his future and, in a way, pre-figures his greatness. We are very privileged to be able to present to you a veritable galaxy of music scholars and performers to tell us about and to illustrate Beethoven's life and work, as well as distinguished practitioners in and researchers into the value of music today to those with hearing impairments. Our conference leader is the excellent Stephen Johnson whose *Discovering Music* programmes on Radio 3 do so much to enlarge and colour understanding of great works of music. Stephen will guide us through the two days and I will make way for him in a moment, reappearing from time to time to help with Q and As, and there will be many of those in this conference because this is most definitely an event in which we invite you to take part.

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Stephen Johnson. [Applause]

STEPHEN JOHNSON: Ladies and gentlemen, the poet WB Yeats wrote a little verse: 'the intellect of man is forced to choose perfection of the life, or of the work, and if he choose the latter must refuse a heavenly mansion, raging in the dark'. I've often wondered if Beethoven was at the forefront of his mind when he wrote those words for surely Beethoven did make a choice, had to make a choice, in the midst of all the extraordinary physical and mental ailments that assailed him in his life, and we will be hearing just how much Beethoven had to contend with and endure physically, emotionally, also even politically in his own lifetime and the almost never-ending sequence of trials that he had to endure.

We are also going to be hearing about the extraordinary story of how Beethoven did achieve perfection of the work, how in the midst of all this suffering - loneliness, frustration, it all piles up, as we will hear - he created this astonishing body of work which, well, as I remember the comedian Billy Crystal saying: it's 200 years old and it's still around. [Laughter]

It's an extraordinary phenomenon, not just that it's still around, but I don't know how many of you know the film *Wings of Desire* - yes, quite a few of you - some will remember the very moving sequence on the underground in Berlin where one of the angels, a man in a long coat, walks up and is listening to the thoughts of people on the Metro as he walks past, he hears one man clearly at his wits' end, he is contemplating suicide and thinking that when he gets off the train he will end it all, maybe somehow in the river - the angel touches him and you see a flicker of expression on this man's face and he says: no, no, no, maybe there is some other way, maybe there is some other possibility, it can't end like this. And I certainly have experienced an extreme moment in my life when Beethoven's music did that for me. In fact, it was just the first two chords of the quartet from Act 1 of *Fidelio* - that was enough for the feeling of being physically assisted and supported in that moment. I can't even begin to explain it. What astounds me is how many other people have had similar experiences with Beethoven.

In his own lifetime, as we will hear during this conference, he took part in what today we call music therapy sessions, particularly with two women friends who suffered from acute depression, one after losing her three-year-old son, the other for more mysterious reasons. Both occasions, Beethoven played for these women and it's recounted that in each case the floodgates were opened and they were able to weep, and in the case of Dorothea Ertmann, who lost her son, she was able to begin the process at last of mourning. It's fascinating to me and mysterious how Beethoven's music can still do that for people today. Yet Beethoven himself was no saint, as we know. Was he in fact, as Lady Caroline Lamb said of Byron "mad, bad and dangerous to know"? That's a question that Professor Michael Trimble will be looking at - I think that's the first session tomorrow.

Today we will be concentrating on the most famous of all Beethoven's trials, his deafness. We have first of all the veteran and distinguished broadcaster and journalist, John Suchet, who will be looking at the broader human and musical results and consequences of Beethoven's deafness. Then, after that, Professor Age Smilde and Dr Edoardo Saccenti joined by The Sacconi Quartet have some fascinating things to tell us about the actual measurable consequences of Beethoven's deafness in the way that he wrote, particularly for the string quartets, how it affected his inner imagination and his ability to create those sounds in music. This afternoon we also hear from, if it isn't too crass a way of putting it, the deaf perspective, as Dr Paul Whittaker will be talking about his experience of music and deafness and there will be a discussion with Nigel Osborne and with the composer Lloyd Coleman, who is also hearing impaired, and is therefore able to give us a unique perspective on what Beethoven must have had to endure.

Tomorrow, after Michael Trimble's session we have a very interesting focus on the music from a slightly unusual angle. Beethoven is not often celebrated for his vocal writing, in fact the composer Vaughan Williams said, on looking at a score of the Ninth Symphony, the choral finale, if only Beethoven had had some old-fashioned, unimaginative, pedantic choral director to stand by him when he wrote this piece and say, "You can't do that!". Anyone who has taken part in a choral performance of a Beethoven work like the Ninth Symphony or the Missa Solemnis will know there are times when he expects you to go possibly even beyond the superhuman and yet Beethoven's writing for the voice is absolutely fascinating. It's an important part of his output and even if he sometimes approaches the voice almost as an instrumental composer, his writing for the voice is far more subtle and imaginative and beautiful than it has been given credit for. Professor Barry Cooper will be taking a look at this in the afternoon session and also Professor Richard Stokes, who has written a great deal about Lieder, has some interesting insights into Beethoven's Lieder in the afternoon.

As I said, these are the discussions. I will be popping up from time to time to lead discussions after we've heard some of the lectures, or some of the presentations today, but as Michael said, it's extremely important that you remember that you are more than an audience. You are here to make a contribution too. Surely this is as relevant with Beethoven, the great democrat in music, as in any composer. We really want to hear what you have to say and what you feel about what has been said, and no matter how critical - we are braced and ready for it - it is very important that we hear your feedback, so be ready to have things to say, and also remember that the questions that often seem the simplest and the ones you may be most embarrassed to make are often the ones that produce the best discussion, so whatever it is that comes into your mind, whatever it is that you feel you would like answered, don't be afraid, please say it, because we want to hear what you have to say as well, and your opinions, your judgments on what you've heard too. Even if it's just a little record of a personal experience of Beethoven's music, that is of immense value for an occasion like this.

Anyway, we are running a little late already so I had better hurry on and introduce our first speaker today. I am sure the name of John Suchet will be familiar to many, if not all of you, from his days as a broadcaster, now as the presenter of Classic FM's flagship morning show. He has also made a lifelong study of Beethoven, a composer who absolutely fascinates him and I am looking forward immensely to hear what John says on the subject of Beethoven and his deafness. So ladies and gentlemen, will you please join me in welcoming John Suchet. [Applause]

JOHN SUCHET: Thank you, Stephen. Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Enormous pleasure to be here, to open this two-day conference on Beethoven and his deafness. And you are going to be hearing from some very distinguished speakers about the musicological aspects of this deafness. That's not my area. My area is the man. What fascinates me is Beethoven, the man. I approach the music through the man, not the man through the music, and I hope by the end of this little presentation this morning to bring you a Beethoven that maybe you didn't know before. Because you know

Beethoven, don't you? Everybody knows Beethoven. Somebody once said: you are born knowing who Beethoven is. [Laughter]

Mind you, I promise you this is true, I was in the make-up room at ITN one evening being made up to present News At Ten on ITV and the make-up lady asked if I was writing a book about somebody and who it was. I said Beethoven, and she said: I know him, didn't he wrote Beethoven's Fifth?

[Laughter]

On another occasion, I promise you this is true, I was in Scotland, being driven by cab to the local theatre to give my Beethoven talk and the cab driver - I can't do the accent very well - but he said "who are you giving a talk about tonight?" I said, "Oh, Beethoven", and he said, "Oh aye", and went quiet and after a couple of minutes it was as if I saw the light bulb go on in his head. "Beethoven! I know him, he is the one who cut his ear off!" which is close. If not exactly right. [Laughter]

Even my little granddaughter Annie, who is five, I said to her the other day, "Grandad is writing a new book, just published it", and she said "Oh, what's it about?", "Beethoven" - "What, the dog?".

Everybody knows Beethoven even if for the wrong reasons. As for the cab driver in Scotland, he was nearly right, wasn't he, because if there's one thing that everybody knows about Beethoven, it is that he is the one who went deaf. The only other thing is that he wrote da da da dum. So we have the image of an angry man, face in a permanent scowl, hair flying all over the place, writing angry music as he was going deaf. That's not the real Beethoven at all. When I first began researching him and his deafness I thought he had gone to bed one night as a young man and woken up the next morning deaf. It happens. It happened to my grandmother. She went to bed at the age of 29, and was woken in the middle of the night by a fierce ringing in her right ear. The next morning she was stone deaf in her right ear and remained so until the day she died in her mid-70s. Not so in Beethoven's case.

The first that we know about him having any kind of problem with his hearing is a letter that he wrote when he was 30 years and a half, living in Vienna now, making his home there, and he chose to write it to an old schoolboy friend of his back in his home town of Bonn. That friend was now a qualified doctor so no coincidence that he chose not only to write to somebody who was several hundred miles away from him, but also a medically qualified man, and in this letter he writes:

"If I'm in company and I can't hear somebody, I tell them to speak up, they shout, and it hurts my ears. What should I do?"

And the friend wrote back saying: "it's nothing, it's a blockage, Ludwig. Go and see your doctor."

He went to one doctor after another. "It's just a blockage, don't worry about it, you will wake up one morning, there will be a pile of wax on your pillow and you will be fine." They came up with the most bizarre set of remedies that you could possibly imagine. We know from a letter that he wrote a little while later that one doctor said to him, "Fill a bath with water from the Danube and heat it, sit in

it, it will help your deafness, and coincidentally help your bowel issues and your indigestion problems”, all of which he suffered from constantly. No good at all. Another doctor said: “water from the Danube in a bath, chill it and sit in it.” No good at all. Then he went to one doctor who said, "Ah, I know exactly what to do, I will take the bark of the plant the Daphne Miserium", which apparently is poisonous, "I will take the bark from it, I will strap the bark to your upper arms, having wet it first. Come back and see me in two weeks by which time it will have dried". Beethoven did this and went back two weeks later by which time the bark had dried out, shrunk, tightened around Beethoven's upper arms and when the doctor removed the bark, brilliant, perfect blisters had formed. He lanced them, to cure Beethoven's deafness. You won't be surprised to hear that it wasn't too successful. What it did manage to do was keep Beethoven away from the piano for two weeks because his arms were too painful. And then one doctor came up with the only worthwhile suggestion any doctor ever made to Beethoven about his deafness: get out of Vienna, get away from the noise and the dirt and the dust, the new metal-rimmed wheels on the cobbles of the city. Go away, get out of the city, go to where it's nice and peaceful and calm and quiet. Beethoven said: “well, where do you suggest?” The doctor said: “there's a lovely little village just north of the city, in fact I know someone who has got rooms there, a little house there, why don't you go there?” And Beethoven said: “okay, I will do it.” As we know, the name of the village was Heiligenstadt. Beethoven went in April 1802, 31 years old, and intended to stay for a few weeks and he actually stayed there until September. It was perfect for him, possibly. He was out of Vienna - by the way, it's ten minutes away on the U-bahn now but it was a half-day's carriage ride in his day. His friends came to visit, Ferdinand Ries came to check on what he was composing. We know now he completed the Second Symphony there, he worked on a huge new set of piano variations, the Prometheus variations which we know better today as the Eroica variations, and it was while Ries was with him that one of the most, I think, poignant moments in all Beethoven's life occurred and we know it from Ries' memoirs which he wrote with Franz Wegeler, who was the doctor back in Bonn, very crucial memoirs, because these are both highly educated men and they did not exaggerate, and we know from this that Ferdinand Ries said: “I was with the master one day and we were walking across the countryside, and we heard a shepherd playing his pipe. And I turned to the master and said, Isn't that lovely, do you hear the shepherd playing his pipe?, but the master couldn't hear it.” Now, can you just picture that scene? In most biographies that you read of Beethoven that's given a few lines but in my book I've tried to go into this in some detail because imagine how that must actually have happened. They are walking across the countryside, let's imagine it's a lovely day, although in fact for the four or five months that Beethoven was in Heiligenstadt it rained almost every day, which literally dampened his spirits, did nothing to encourage him, but let's imagine it was a nice day, and they were walking across the field, and there not so far away, because Ries heard the flute, was a shepherd playing his pipe, and it must have sounded lovely on the air. And Ferdinand Ries must have turned to Beethoven and said, "Do you hear that?", and Beethoven would have said, "What, speak up, say it again", and then he will have looked, seen the

shepherd playing on his pipe and he will have seen from Ries' face that Ries could hear the notes and he will have known that he couldn't. Just picture that. Imagine what that must have meant to him. Here he is with physical evidence that he is not hearing his own great art. Music. What would he have done? He would have said, "He is not playing, that's why I can't hear him, he is obviously not playing", "But he is, master" and Ries will have realised that he had walked into a trap with Beethoven, how was he going to get out of this, and then Beethoven would I imagine - I am inventing this because I imagine scenes in Beethoven's life, and in acknowledgement of the known facts without distorting what we know, I think it is fair to imagine what must have happened. You don't read about this elsewhere because the musicologists and the formal biographers won't allow themselves to speculate but I want to speculate. What would Beethoven have done at that moment? What would you do at that moment, if you thought you were losing your hearing? Here is physical evidence of it. Well, it's obvious, you would walk closer to the shepherd, to make sure that you could hear him. And he will have said to Ries: "wait there, I'm going to walk forward to that shepherd". Then he will have walked closer and still won't have heard it. Then he will have said to the shepherd: "play the bloody flute and play it louder, for Christ's sake". He will have got angry won't he, because he had a temper, he knew he was losing his hearing and we know from Ries' memoirs that that was a seminal moment in Beethoven's acknowledgement of his deafness because here was absolute evidence not in a crowded concert hall, where we know he said he would have to come right here to hear the music being played, but there were people all around and the acoustics, who knows, and the musicians there might have been louder than the musicians there, and here he was in the countryside with a lone shepherd playing his pipe. I am sorry to dwell on this instance but it merits no more than one paragraph in Ries' memoirs but to me it is critical in understanding Beethoven's life and his deafness and his acceptance of his deafness because after that moment he knew he was terminally deaf. Now, I'm making that up as well. Maybe he still fought it. Maybe he still thought it would be cured, and we know that a few years later, when Czerny was taken to him as a pupil, Czerny reported that he saw cotton wool in Beethoven's ears with a thick yellow fluid trickling down his cheek and onto his collar. Oil. So they were still convincing him that it was nothing but a blockage that would cure, but I believe that after the incident with the shepherd on his flute he knew that he was losing his hearing slowly, gradually, and incurably. And what do I base that on? I base it on the fact that we don't know exactly when in the stay in Heiligenstadt that that incident happened. We can assume it happened in May, June, July, a nice summer's day, because in September he sat at his table in Heiligenstadt, all on his own, and here is another scene that I want to imagine without any concrete evidence: nights beginning to draw in, dark, on his own, getting a little bit cold, still raining, and the loneliness kicks in.

- "What am I doing in this godforsaken place? What am I doing away from everyone, I can't see anyone, I can't talk to anyone, I can't hear music" – and I imagine and I am inventing it again, there will have been a carafe of wine on his table, because we know that a housekeeper and her daughter looked after him while he was there, provided him with food and drink and Beethoven was a

monumental drinker, just by way of diversion, the disease that almost killed him was cirrhosis of the liver. I don't believe he would have sat at that table with a pen and several sheets of blank paper, not manuscript paper, with blank paper, without a carafe of wine and a glass in front of him and he will have slurped it, and he would have then picked up the pen and began writing the most important thing that Beethoven ever wrote in his life that was not in the form of musical notes; his last will and testament at the age of 31 and a half.

“Oh ye men who have called me misanthropic, who accuse me of this and that. Just think for a moment of what I was having to endure, the one sense that in me, should have been more heightened than in any other person, was slowly disappearing.” Here is a man at the age of 31 and a half writing his last will and testament. Not many people that age write it, or if they do, maybe it's because they married young and they have a family and they want to make absolutely sure that what they are leaving is going to the right people.

No, this is a man who can only be a musician, there is nothing else Beethoven could do but be a musician and he was losing the one sense which in him should have been stronger than any other.

Then, I think it is, I forget how many lines down it is, 13 or 14 lines down on the left hand edge of the paper, and I imagine, again it is my imagination at work, he had a good slurp of wine before he wrote it. But he dipped the pen in the ink and wrote the 3 little words – Ich bin taub - I am deaf.

That is Beethoven for the first time in his life, not only confronting his deafness but in my view, accepting it.

We know that it started 3 years before, from the letter that he wrote to Wegeler, in the middle of 1801 when he was 30 and a half. In the letter he says that for the last 3 years, now Beethoven was notoriously fickle about times and dates and a lot of his letters he either didn't date or he misdated, and it has taken musicologists two centuries to work out when such and such a letter was written, but for something as important as this, let's give him the benefit of the doubt, at the age of 27, roughly speaking, it started. Why did it start? The truth is we don't know. We know that he was very ill 3 or 4 years before, there is some evidence that one of his patrons, to thank him for a composition, presented him with a gift - a horse.

The only person in Beethoven's history that ever gave him a horse. Beethoven allegedly rode it once or twice, and went out on it once, got very hot and sweaty, came back to his apartment in Vienna, threw open the windows, stripped to the waist, exposed himself in front of the window and caught a chill and became very seriously ill. What was the illness? If there is one thing we have to be careful about doing, it is post-diagnosing Beethoven 200 years after his death. When I said cirrhosis of the liver, I have shown the post mortem which we've got, the report to modern doctors and they say, well that is obvious with the description of the liver and the kidneys, he has cirrhosis of the liver, very dangerous to make that assumption, although it's probably true. What was this illness? In Austria in those days it was called typhus, which does not translate as typhus, it translates as typhoid fever, two

different diseases. We really don't know what the illness was, but soon after that the deafness began to develop.

So we know it began roughly around 27, the Heiligenstadt Testament is written 3 years later at the age of 31 and a half and here is Beethoven I believe in that testament saying "I am going deaf and I am going to go profoundly deaf - stone deaf. The day I can no longer hear my music, I will take my own life" again I am exaggerating because he doesn't say that, but he comes within a whisker of saying it. He actually says, "there have been moments recently where I would have taken my life except that my art prevented me." Is that not almost saying, and in the future, if that moment really does come, I will take my own life? I believe it is not a suicide note, the Heiligenstadt Testament, in fact it is a thoroughly practical will, because after the emotion at the top he goes into the distribution of his effects - I want my brothers to have the string quartet instruments and I leave to my doctor, the only sensible doctor I've ever had, blah blah blah. So it is a genuine last will and testament and I believe he is reserving the right to himself to take his own life when he can no longer hear his music.

What happened? We know what happened. Not only did he not take his own life, but what was the first major work that followed the Heiligenstadt testament? Only the Eroica Symphony, to be swiftly followed by the Fourth and Fifth and the Emperor piano concerto and we enter now what is known as Beethoven's heroic phase, because the works become more heroic, more gigantic, and it is called his heroic phase because of the sheer scale of the works, but I believe it should be called his heroic phase because he is being truly heroic, because all the time now his hearing is declining, slowly but surely. There were blips for instance - enter into the story the wonderfully eccentric character by the name of Johann Nepomuk Mälzel, who you may know is credited with the invention of the metronome, and he was also a builder of mechanical musical instruments and he had built a musical trumpet which was a machine worked by pedals and wheels and he then built a Panharmonicon, which recreated the sounds of an entire orchestra. He went to Beethoven and said, "would you compose a piece of music for my Panharmonicon"? You can imagine, I am inventing again, you can imagine the contempt with which Beethoven received that request. "Don't be ridiculous, I am a composer, my art is given from God."

Mälzel said, "try this". You know what it was? An ear trumpet. Because he created machinery, he built music machines, he even built a replica in a glass box of the battle of Leipzig with all the soldiers in the right position. And so he fashioned at least 4 different types of ear trumpet for Beethoven. One was very long with a neck brace which he found too difficult to hold, there were a couple of others but the smallest and simplest which is just like a little horn, Beethoven put it in his ear and guess what? He could hear. He said to Mälzel, "what do you want me to write?" And he said, "well, the battle of Vitoria has just happened" in which Arthur Wellesley, not yet the Duke of Wellington, defeated the French in Spain, which has led the king of Spain, the brother of Napoleon Bonaparte, King Joseph, to flee from Spain – the end of French rule in Spain. The only disappointment for us is that Napoleon himself was not at the head of the army, so Wellesley didn't face Napoleon. We know they only met once on the battlefield and that was Waterloo. But it was a famous victory, and in Vienna it was

celebrated to the rafters because they had lost the Austrian army time after time against Napoleon, every time they'd declare war on Napoleon, he had swatted them away like flies. They invaded and occupied Vienna twice, the second time shelling it to oblivion, which is another Beethoven story, but there are other speakers to come, I won't get into that now.

This victory at Vitoria was highly celebrated in Vienna, and Mälzel said to Beethoven "would you write a piece of music to celebrate this great victory?" And Beethoven wrote what is now considered to be one of his least successful works ever. It's known as the Battle Symphony or Wellington's Victory, and it's a two-part piece. The first part is the battle - you hear the British National anthem, you hear the Marseillaise, you also hear For He's a Jolly Good Fellow but that's actually a traditional French folk tune. You hear the cannon fire, then the second part which is considered the better of the two parts is the victory and you hear the Marseillaise slowly die away. If you don't know it have a listen, it is a wonderful cod piece of Beethoven, comparable probably with the piece he wrote for the Congress of Vienna that followed shortly after, the great choral piece that is almost never performed, *Der glorreiche Augenblick* - the glorious moment, two little cod pieces by Beethoven written to order. I must digress to tell you, that *Der glorreiche Augenblick* was first recorded on CD only in the 1990's, and the words for it were written by a surgeon by the name of Aloys Weissenbach who Beethoven got on with like a house on fire. Do you know why? He was stone deaf. Can you imagine the two of them working together on this composition, "what did you say?" "You said what?" That is the origin of *Der glorreiche Augenblick*, have a listen to it if you can, but I digress.

This Battle Symphony, Beethoven wrote for a mechanical instrument, and he wrote it because Mälzel had built him an ear trumpet that worked. He went on to orchestrate it; and Mälzel took it with him on his Panharmonicon to Germany and then toured Europe with it. Beethoven said I didn't allow you to do that, and sued him. Sued him for a breach of copyright which didn't exist. It was thrown out of court.

Mälzel, who did so much for Beethoven in terms of his deafness, has a rather sad end, he took his Panharmonicon across the Atlantic to the United States where he performed the Battle Symphony. He was on a brig, I think it was entering Boston harbour, and it went down, with Mälzel and his Panharmonicon on board. But Mälzel's place in history is now determined by the invention of the metronome, which isn't strictly accurate, but however that's his claim to fame, but in my book his claim to fame is that he fashioned this ear trumpet that worked for Beethoven for a while.

But of course it wasn't really curing his deafness, what it was doing was amplifying the sound that went into Beethoven's ear and so for a while it helped. We have the Battle Symphony, which I believe is a tribute to that sudden "gosh, I can hear again". He used that ear trumpet for 2 or 3 years before the deafness increased and he finally threw it away and he knew that the deafness was incurable. I believe he knew it when he wrote the Heiligenstadt Testament. But we all trust our doctors, don't we, when they say that this will work or that will work. They kept telling Beethoven that they would be able to cure his deafness right up until the end of his life. That deafness did not become stone deafness, as we

would call it today, or profound deafness until he was at least in his mid-40's - a decade or so before his death.

What is the influence of that deafness on his music? It is so profound, I will simply leave the musicologists to take this further, because you have some very distinguished musicologists who will be talking to you about exactly that. I would just like to pose these questions: would we have the Eroica symphony, which I believe is the greatest of the 9, controversial, if Beethoven had not, in the previous year, confronted his deafness, accepted it and, once accepted it, didn't yet realise he was the master of it? I believe he still intended to commit suicide when he couldn't hear his music.

Aren't those two opening chords, the cliché about those opening chords of the Eroica symphony, is that they took music into the new century, music was never the same again, the symphony was never the same again, all of which is true, but Beethoven was never the same again because he had for the first time confronted his deafness, and he is now letting himself go into other realms of his music. Just quickly, by way of diversion, those 2 great opening chords, what happens then, in the third bar, he goes down to a remote C in a different key and as one musicologist once put it to me, any ordinary composer would have written [sings example]. Easy! Mozart might have written that.

What did Beethoven write? [sings example] – and it was that note, that must have made the audiences in Vienna go, what the hell is he doing? It's Beethoven, what do you expect? To us now it is genius, to them then it was just totally weird, would we have that remote C without Beethoven's deafness? No. Would we have had the great magisterial works that followed? No. And then, as the deafness really begins to take over, in the final years of his life, we get the late quartets. Would we have the late quartets, the greatest body of work ever written by any composer ever in the history of the universe ever, without Beethoven's deafness? No. I believe we would not.

And there is another reason for them as well. Remember the court case, with the nephew Karl? That all played a part as well, so we mustn't isolate the deafness and say that without it we simply wouldn't have had that, because Beethoven was seriously ill before he wrote Opus 132, with the Heiliger Dankgesang in it, remember those chords in the Lydian Art, and the thanks of a recovering sick person to the great deity, so we know other illnesses intrude. I mentioned that his bowel problems and his indigestion were always there throughout his life and plaguing him. Diet didn't help, excessive drinking didn't help, eating in the middle of the night didn't help, eating stale food several days later that had been crawled over by flies didn't help, but we know that other things were going on. The court case that drained him - he should never have done it. I know that Barry Cooper, who you'll hear tomorrow, and I slightly disagree with this, he believes Beethoven did the right thing for his nephew. I believe it was an appalling thing to do, to take the boy's mother to court, in a case that lasted nearly five years, and destroyed his creativity with admittedly one gigantic exception, it is the most barren period creatively of Beethoven's life, and he emerged from it the victor. "See I was right all along", he said to his friends who had vanished, but his health was broken. His deafness was worse than ever, everything went wrong, his ankle started to swell, and we are into the final years of Beethoven's life.

So there is a lot more going on apart from his deafness that makes his life so intolerable in the final years, but I believe, with the single exception of his deafness, all Beethoven's problems actually throughout his life were self-inflicted. He didn't need to take Johanna to court to fight her for the custody of her son, he didn't need to move more than 30 times and have more than 30 addresses in Vienna, he didn't need to move over 70 times if you include all his summer sojourns as well - he was a restless, restless spirit, a difficult argumentative man, who offended every single friend he ever had for no reason at all - Stephan von Breuning more greatly than anyone else - and then overwhelmed them with excessive remorse afterwards. Other speakers will diagnose his mental issues for you, I am not competent to do that but I do know that all these things had an effect on his composition and on his music and certainly none more so than his deafness.

I just want to tell you, why that deafness is so relevant to us today, to wrap up before I hand over to Stephen again. On Beethoven's deathbed they were as interested then as we are today, in what caused Beethoven's deafness. The doctors knew they had failed to cure it. He was a patient that got away. Our science is not capable of diagnosing it and curing it. Maybe it will be one day. So what they did on the deathbed where they conducted the post mortem was not good. The pathologist Dr. Wagner (no relation) sawed across Beethoven's forehead and lifted the top of his skull like a tin. Sawed out the auditory nerves and placed them in a huge jar of preserving fluid, which vanished. There is a rumour, a very strong rumour that it came to London, and stood on a window sill, in the 20th century, of a room, in University College Hospital, just off Gower Street, that took a direct hit in the Blitz. It is gone. And by the way, as proof that this really did happen, I have a photograph that was taken of Beethoven's skull when he and Schubert were disinterred in the 1860's, we are now into the photographic era just. We can see the incision, right across the skull. When his body was laid out for the funeral, March 29th, 1827, it was noted the undertaker had to strap his jaw up because the removal of the auditory nerves damaged these nerves here, so the jaw was slack and to one side, and it had to be taped up. You don't get that in other biographies because they are not interested in that kind of thing but to me that is fascinating, that Leonine face, that strong jaw, totally destroyed at the post mortem on his deathbed, but I digress.

That jar of preserving fluid vanished, but, the following day one of Beethoven's great admirers went to pay his respects to the dead master who was on his deathbed, almost totally bald because so many people had come to cut locks of hair as a memento, while he was by the bed saying, oh master you've gone, etc., his little boy went crawling around the floor and guess what was lying on the floor? Little fragments of bone that had flown off when he had sawed across the head and he picked them up and put them in a bag and what do you think? We've got 'em! When I say we have got them, they are at the moment in New York, where they are the subject of a massive legal dispute over who owns them. Once that is sorted out, they will be DNA tested to match them with the hair, because one lock of hair has come down to us, in a locket, signed by the person who took it from him and it is believed to be Beethoven's. You may have read the book *Beethoven's Hair*, and you may know that the finding of the

DNA testing on this lock of hair was that it contained abnormal levels, his blood contained abnormal levels of lead at his death, which is very interesting but proves nothing because probably everybody did - all the kitchen utensils were made of lead, the paint was lead-based, the Danube fish were contaminated by lead and so on and so forth. Interesting, but not definitive because it would have had no effect on his hearing and deafness. That was a lock of hair that was cut from his head, so it didn't include the follicle. Hair without the follicle is a very poor conductor of DNA, bone is brilliant. First of all when they settled the legal dispute, they will DNA test it to make sure it matches the hair, then we know it is Beethoven's and then they will start work on it and then one day, one day, we will know what caused Beethoven's deafness and why am I so sure? If 200 years ago when they cut the lock of hair off, they would have known what we can do today with that lock of hair, what do you think people in 200 years will be able to do, not only with a lock of hair but with bone? When you test it, you destroy the hair and you destroy the bone, but fortunately enough is being preserved for future generations, so I can stand here with total confidence and say to you, that one day, I pray it is next week, I pray it is not much more than ten years or so from now, but it might be another hundred years. So if we don't know, maybe our grandchildren, maybe our great grandchildren, maybe their great grandchildren, one day will have a solution to what is the greatest mystery in the history of art, what caused Beethoven's deafness.

Thank you.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: Thank you very much, John, for setting I think certainly the tone in terms of energy and enthusiasm that we needed for this weekend. I find it fascinating, I had to write a note the other day for the Pastoral Symphony, one of Beethoven's most popular works, perhaps the most popular work of all these days, and it suddenly occurred to me as I was looking at these astonishing sound effects that he creates, the brilliant use of divided cellos and basses to create the rumblings of thunder, the sound of the brook, and the note in the sketches that says "the deeper the brook, the deeper the note", and the bird song that he imitates, not just that but the sound perspectives that he is able to create, so that you have merry-making of the peasants in the distance and coming nearer, the storm itself advancing towards us and then retreating, and the rainbow that he creates at the end of the storm. All these - even the sound of the carriage wheels in the first movement as he is arriving in the country, you can hear it accelerating. How much of that, John, would he actually - we are talking about 1808 here - how much of that would he actually be able to hear then and how much would he be relying on memory, and very distant memory perhaps?

JOHN SUCHET: Yes, first of all Stephen when you said probably The Pastoral is his most popular, let me tell you that in the Classic FM Hall of Fame, Your Choice of the Top 300, the Emperor Piano Concerto is higher, and the Pastoral actually comes below the Ninth Symphony, but let me tell you a story about the Pastoral that absolutely fascinates me. We know from Schindler, who was Beethoven's helper, secretary and also glorifier of his reputation - he actually destroyed lots of conversation books

and ensured that Beethoven's legacy was one of a hero and a God, so he's not totally trustworthy, but little anecdotes that Schindler comes out with which are so real they have to be true - he says that Beethoven would take long walks in the villages north of Vienna like Heiligenstadt, Unterdöbling, Nußdorf, which today are stops on the U-bahn in the wine area at the base of the Vienna woods at the Kahlenberg hill, and Beethoven was in one of these taverns in Nußdorf and there was a band of musicians playing and he was sitting happily drinking his wine and one of the musicians was a bassoonist who would keep falling asleep and every time it was his solo the guy next to him, the violinist would jab him and wake him up and the bassoonist would go: ba, ba, ba...ba, ba, ba, ba - it's in the Pastoral. In the merry-making of the gathering of country folk in the trio: [singing]. And the proof of it is that Beethoven gave it to the second bassoonist, not the first, so he is having a laugh here. It's always important to remember I think with Beethoven, and I'm stating the obvious and sorry if this sounds patronising, he was the most famous musician in Europe before the deafness began. He heard music at his grandfather's knee, the great Kapellmeister Ludwig van Beethoven, he was beautifully taught by Christian Gottlob Neefe, he went to Vienna, he met Mozart as a teenager, he knew what music sounded like. He had written so many compositions before the deafness kicked in, so Beethoven was always able to hear music and right at the end of his life, when the deafness was total, there's anecdotal evidence of him holding the ear trumpet to the keys to try to hear, pounding on the keys so hard he broke the piano strings and legs, hence the modern grand - stronger legs, stronger metal wire and what have you - but that suggests something is getting through. Something is getting through to him right to the end. Total 100% deafness in my view never struck him and it's very rare for it to strike any individual. Probably the deafest person I've ever met was Lord Jack Ashley who had a cochlear implant to help him hear. Was Beethoven's problem with the inner ear, which that is, or the middle ear with the hammer, the anvil, the stirrup - we don't know. I've heard all these theories put forward. One thing I can state with total certainty is that, if Beethoven were alive today, even if we couldn't cure his deafness, we would be able to make him hear to the same level that Jack Ashley heard, and I interviewed him for ITN many times and you would have a normal conversation. In fact, he would be a lot better than Jack Ashley because Jack Ashley was deaf from birth so his speech was impaired whereas Beethoven's never was. We would be able to help Beethoven with his deafness 100% - well, 90%. Would we then have the late quartets?

STEPHEN JOHNSON: Do you think with some artists, this is a difficult one to express, that sometimes limitation or deprivation or restriction actually works as a stimulant to the imagination, that it makes you treasure what it is that you are lacking even more? Stravinsky said famously the sight of a totally blank page of manuscript paper was death to him, he couldn't compose if he was free, it was only when somebody said to him we need a piece 20 minutes long and by the way we only have eight instruments, then his imagination could start working. Do you think in a similar sort of way that this restriction, however humanly terrible it might have been for Beethoven, was actually one of the reasons why the sound memories in the Pastoral Symphony are so acute and why sound itself becomes

something so treasurable in his last works?

JOHN SUCHET: I doubt that because Beethoven was a composer like no other long before the deafness set in. You know, he and Mozart met famously once, about which we know practically nothing, and he admired Mozart hugely and his great regret was that he wasn't able to take lessons with Mozart although Mozart offered but his mother had died, etc etc. What if he had taken lessons with Mozart? Would Mozart the great perfectionist have just smoothed the edges, rounded the corners? Beethoven left the symphony, the greatest art form of its kind musically in his day, until his late 20s. Hugely late for a composer, and what does he begin with? A dominant 7th in the first chord of the first symphony. It's just bizarre. It's a bizarre start to a symphony. He knew the deafness was beginning to set in, he had already composed two piano concertos by then, he had composed a set of six string quartets by then, all of which were in a new era, a new generation. I think the deafness was at first an irritant and then a major irritant, and then infused his music with the determination not to let it get in the way.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: Perhaps it would be quite useful before we throw this open to the audience, to just take stock for a moment. We've touched on the fact that Beethoven was assailed by all kinds of ailments, not just deafness. You suggest that to maybe to a degree these were self-inflicted but could you just give us a broad outline of some of the other things that he had to contend with?

JOHN SUCHET: Well, probably irritable bowel syndrome, that's the most common diagnosis today for his digestive problems. All his adult life, he had chronic indigestion. Colic was the word he used but again we are talking of translation from the German 200 years later and the most common diagnosis 200 years ago in Germany for everything was dropsy. Beethoven was diagnosed all the time as having dropsy. What is it? I think it's a swelling of water in the tissues, his ankles swelled up and what have you. Today medical people will tell you it really has no meaning. It's not an accepted diagnosis today. In his day that was the word for everything. So it's terribly difficult for us to know what he had. In his final year, when he went with Karl, his nephew, to stay with his brother Johann, before he went he had written to his tailor saying: send me more tight belts, I need to hold my stomach in check. So his abdomen was vastly distended before he left, and ankles hugely swollen. Dropsy. We know this and that while he was there these greatly worsened. By the time he arrived back in Vienna, on 1st December 1826, just three or four months before his death, his stomach was so distended, his abdomen was so distended, that the remedy was to drain it and it was drained four times before his death, so we know that it was out here, we know that this was out here, what was the disease? Oh God, it's so difficult to post-diagnose.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: Yes, it's worth mentioning at this stage that Vienna I think was notoriously I think the most unhealthy city in central Europe. People used to stand at the gates of the city selling scented nosegays because the stench was so unbearable and infections of all sorts were a legion,

weren't they?

JOHN SUCHET: Two things. Syphilis. Certainly, in the 50 or 60 years after his death everybody thought he died of syphilis. The lock of hair diagnosis showed no mercury in his blood when he died, which was the standard remedy for syphilis, so I think we can discount that. I must say one thing, I'm always getting emails at Classic FM from people asking the old, old story: if you knew a woman who was pregnant and she had syphilis and her two eldest sons had died of syphilis, she was going blind and deaf, would you abort her? Yes, you would. In that case you would have aborted Beethoven. I don't know where that story began. I've heard that so many times. Beethoven was the eldest son. His mother did not have syphilis, she was not blind, there was no disease that we know of in the Beethoven family. The father was descending into alcoholism but that's not the same story so if anyone has ever heard that story, just knock it on the head.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: Thank you for that, John, a very useful contribution there. [Laughter]. I'm extremely glad to hear that as well. Anyway, it's really time we brought you in at this point so we have a couple of roving microphones. If there's something you would like to ask, a point you would like to raise, please put your hand up and somebody will come towards you.

FROM THE FLOOR: Thank you. To what extent, John, do you think that Beethoven's awareness of his own talent was a major contributory factor in his determination to fight his disability?

JOHN SUCHET: Beethoven was aware of his own talent from the day he was born. Beethoven was never in any doubt of the talent, the great gift that he had, and when he left Bonn at the age of 21 years and 11 months to go to Vienna for a year or six months, to study with Haydn, and then never returned - he stayed there for the rest of his life - at first, the aristocratic circles of Vienna which he tried to penetrate didn't want to know. He was very fortunate in that his great patron, his first great patron, Prince Lichnowsky, introduced him to the highest levels but still he wanted to compose and have his own music played and that was exceptionally difficult. They had Mozart, they had Haydn and they heard a little of what he had written, it was just way out, they weren't interested. But when he sat at the keyboard, that was his entree into the aristocratic salons of Vienna. He could play the piano better than Mozart, better than anyone else in that city ever had, and they were musically really sophisticated. As you probably know they used to hold improvisations in those days, two aristocrats, each would sponsor a virtuoso and they'd have a play-off, a shootout together, and Beethoven saw off the local talent one after the other until one day he met Steibelt – a great story - saw him off, and we got the Eroica Symphony as a result of it, but it was when he was sitting at the piano, and his greatest skill was improvisation, and if he was in a good mood in a salon, he would ask somebody for a tune and would play on it for two hours and that was what opened doors for him. We know he took these appearances very seriously because he fell out with Baron Braun who ran the Theatre an der Wien which later employed him where he wrote Fidelio and so on and so forth. He fell out with him

because at one salon the Baron was talking to a woman while he was playing and Beethoven turned round and said: I will not play for pigs like you. He got up and stormed out and they said, "For God's sake, keep quiet, Beethoven is playing", and slowly he would introduce his own compositions and make them hear those, and then his concerts became extremely popular, not just for the music but because of the bizarre antics that would always happen like the premiere of the third piano concerto, knocking the candelabra out of the child's hand, and what have you, choral fantasia, going off the rails in that famous concert of 1808. But Beethoven was never in any doubt about his talent at the piano and he used that to get his compositions accepted, and there are so many anecdotal quotes for him. I think, what was it, the Razumovsky string quartet, the one with the cello opening that the cellist refused to play, "This is not for you, this is for future generations, my art is God-given", he knew absolutely from the word go just what an extraordinary person he was and if we want to be really charitable to him his failure or decision never to commit suicide was because he knew he had something to give humanity. If you are in any doubt of that, listen to the transition between the penultimate and final movements of opus 110 piano sonata, those repeated chords, that is Beethoven telling us about his deafness and his success in overcoming it.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: That's quite an important point I think that you have just made. We tend to take it for granted these days that artists are all raving egoists, usually infantile characters, desperately difficult to get on with, horrible to be around and their art is usually all about self-expression. Beethoven was one of those composers who seems to have had a very strong sense of duty, doesn't he?

JOHN SUCHET: That's true, and that's not a bad description of Beethoven to be honest with you. Somebody once said to me, a great Bach specialist, there are one or two of them around, said, "Mozart tells you what it's like to be a human being, Beethoven tells you what it's like to be Beethoven, and Bach tells you what it's like to be immortal", forget the other two but the Beethoven line I think is spot on. I like to think of his piano sonatas which incidentally is the only genre, not a word you will often hear on Classic FM, the only genre in which he ever composed throughout his life without a significant break. You know, symphonies 1 to 8 in a decade, a huge gap before number 9, quartets, early, middle, late, but the piano sonatas, the only serious break was during the court case and then what did we get? Bloody Hammerklavier for God's sake! It never really stopped, and the reason for that in my opinion is quite simple, the piano was Beethoven's voice. There's anecdotal evidence that if you asked him a tricky question such as "Do you believe in God?", he would go to the piano to give you his answer. I look on Beethoven's piano sonatas, 35 by the way, as Barry Cooper will explain to you tomorrow, the first three that he wrote for the Elector in Bonn are a crucial part of the sonata oeuvre - another non-Classic FM word - but he didn't give them opus numbers so they are generally disregarded, but they are part of the set. So it should be the 35 piano sonatas – they are his autobiography.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: Time for one more question I think before we have our interval. Yes, over

here.

FROM THE FLOOR: Thank you, John, such an interesting talk. I have a question about whether there's any anecdotal or historical evidence about whether Beethoven ever really questioned his ability to compose. I love all the stories about Beethoven's confidence in his own ability to play, but in terms of how his deafness affected his music-making I wondered whether there are specific examples of his questioning of his ability to compose?

JOHN SUCHET: That's a very good question. I have never come across a single instance of Beethoven doubting his ability to compose, ever. He would write to order, if he was in the mood. The Fifth Symphony, the famous Fifth Symphony - an aristocrat offered him 500 florins or whatever it was to write it so he wrote the Fifth Symphony for God's sake. He very rarely wrote to order. He wrote when he wanted to. I don't know, golly, does Beethoven ever doubt his ability to compose?

STEPHEN JOHNSON: He does sometimes retrospectively doubt the quality of what he has written. I remember the C minor variation for piano of Eroica, somebody shows him and he says, "Did I write that? Beethoven, what an idiot you were".

JOHN SUCHET: Yes, and he withdrew the first attempt at the sixth string quartet, saying at last I've learnt how to write string quartets so junk that. Also he drove his publishers mad, particularly with Hammerklavier, by saying after it was published, "No, no, I need to adjust that", and famously he wrote to Ries here in London and said I want to add two notes at the beginning of the slow movement of the Hammerklavier. Ferdinand Ries said "You can't do that, it's been published." "I want to do that", and today's musicologists will tell you that those two notes balance the entire movement, it's very important they are there, so he certainly rethought things. We know he struggled. The opening of the fifth, which every person in the history of the world knows, he struggled with, there are notebooks full of variations on that before he hit on the most simple way of doing it, so he doubted himself. That's not the same as saying he doubted himself. He would walk across the countryside with a notebook and scribble notes. One has come to light recently, this little hymn that Barry has discovered and a week before a piano sonata given its first performance in Amsterdam so we know from his sketchbooks he struggled to compose, he definitely struggled. Look at the ink blotches, look at the scratchings out of the manuscript of the Ninth. Is that doubting your ability to compose? No, it's like any writer saying I'm going to re-write that sentence. Mozart, down from God, into his head, down his arm, into the pen, straight onto the paper. Beethoven, a real struggle, but that's not the same as saying he doubted his ability. He is just re-thinking it. And if he had had a computer, God he would have loved it.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: But if he had a computer we would have lost all those sketches which are one of the most incredible documents we have I think about a composer. The next time you hear the Eroica Symphony, the slow movement theme of that went through 33 different shapes before it arrived

at the one we know today. The first one is not that impressive.

JOHN SUCHET: No.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: You realise that the sheer hard work that went into turning these things into the marvellous ideas that they are is sometimes - well, that's another story. Anyway, it is time for our first interval. Thank you John very much indeed for your contribution, and as I said, setting the tone ideally for this conference. Thank you very much indeed. [Applause]