

# The Beethoven Question: Can Art Make Life Worth Living?

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

## TRANSCRIPT

### **The Need to Compose** (panel discussion)

Introduced by Nigel Osborne

with Stephen Johnson, Professor Barry Cooper and Lloyd Coleman

**PROF NIGEL OSBORNE:** Thank you. Welcome back, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the final talking session of today. Can I thank very much our signers, what a lovely job has been done for us today, so elegantly. [Applause]

So our topic is the need to compose, and I think the link to our Beethoven theme is more than obvious, but we hope that we will take Beethoven as our starting point and maybe look at it more broadly. We are in a wonderful position to look at it broadly because the people around me - Lloyd, Stephen, Barry - all come from composition from different angles.

Lloyd as a young composer, I hope you don't mind, that's as Stravinsky said, I spent my life being a young composer, then suddenly I was an old composer.

Then Stephen, who of course is one of our most inspiring commentators on and mediators about music, and so who better, and then Barry, our greatest Beethoven scholar on these islands if not anywhere, so it's a great group, but the other thing you maybe don't know but I know is that they are all composers. Inside information. So there you are.

We thought we might begin with a statement from Barry, since he hasn't been introduced yet, and then the rest of us will pick up on that in various ways. We have about 20 minutes altogether for us to talk.

**PROF BARRY COOPER:** Thank you very much. Yes, I was going to talk about Beethoven's own need to compose, to start us off. We might as well start with the Heiligenstadt Testament because Beethoven there says it seems impossible for me to leave this world until I've produced all that I felt was within me, and so I spared this wretched life. In other words, he was thinking of committing suicide, but his art held him back. His art and his love of humanity held him back. The idea here is he has to produce all that is within him, he has music inside which must come out. And he says something similar to his pupil, Carl Czerny. He says: I never thought of writing for fame and honour,

what is in my heart must come out and that is why I write. So he has this inner compulsion to compose and this compulsion is clear, right from an early age, in fact, because he published his first three piano sonatas in 1783 and there's a very interesting dedicatory letter in the preface and here he says: my muse in hours of inspiration has often whispered to me: try it and write down for once the harmonies of your soul. I was 11 years old, I thought how would I look as a composer? I was almost shy but my muse wished it; I obeyed and wrote.

Okay, slightly flowery language I know, the same sort of way he wrote in later life. Some people have suggested that this dedication letter must have been written by his teacher because he was too young to write that sort of thing but I think that's quite absurd. If he is capable of writing three decent piano sonatas he can surely write a little dedicatory letter like that.

So he has this inner urge to compose and I've found this actually with all child composers of the past I've looked at and I've looked at quite a few, the same sort of thing, the urge is always inner, for the child himself or occasionally herself. Never parental pressure to get the child to compose. It has always been a child wants to do it and Beethoven is no different in that respect, so he has this urge to compose right from the age of 11 and it was with him for the rest of his life. He says that: to me there is no greater pleasure than to practice and exercise my art. And so he feels he gets great pleasure from it and he is not impaired by his deafness. He says the deafness affects him least when he is composing, it affects him most in society. But when he is composing deafness doesn't really affect him so he knew exactly what sounds he intended. I've never yet seen any convincing evidence that his style changed as a result of his deafness. I know people have suggested this, and this has been suggested even by Carl Czerny himself, but I've never seen any convincing evidence that his style was modified by his deafness. He knew exactly what sounds he wanted, for example those very thick chords which Lloyd mentioned as occurring in his later works, they occur in early works as well, if you listen to the second piano sonata tomorrow morning you will hear some very thick textures early on.

So who was he composing for? He says: my supreme aim is that my art should be welcomed by the noblest and most cultured people. So he is trying to communicate with all the best people in the world. He says: only art and knowledge can raise men to the level of gods. So music can do that for us; it can raise us to the level of gods in the way that other things can't. He is also trying to improve humanity, help humanity. He says: I am grateful to anyone who has enabled me to be of some use here and there by means of my art. He says: never from my childhood on did my zeal cease for serving poor suffering humanity with my art. So it's a very different image from one we sometimes get about the grumpy old man. He wasn't a grumpy old man at all, he was a very loving, kind man and very concerned to help humanity in any way he could, and particularly to help humanity with his art and he says that sort of thing. Since I was a child my greatest happiness and love have been to be

able to do something for others. And preferably through his art.

When he is writing his great mass in D, the Missa Solemnis, he says, "From the heart may it return again to the heart". He says my chief aim in composing this Mass was to awaken and permanently instil religious feelings, as much in the singers and is in the listeners, by which he means moral and ethical feelings as well, so he is wanting to make everybody else good as well, and by writing this music he hopes this music might be able to do this. So this is his need to compose. He wants to help humanity, he has this urge to compose and an urge to help us all. Thank you.

**NIGEL OSBORNE:** Thank you very much. So Stephen, the empathetic Beethoven, the almost social Beethoven, does that resonate with your view?

**STEPHEN JOHNSON:** Yes, it does. As I said earlier, we do tend to believe that artists are entirely involved in an entirely solipsistic ego trip these days but I really believe even a figure as recent as Shostakovich can be shown to have a very, very strong sense of great social responsibility, a desire to do something which clearly did benefit a great many people who lived under Stalinism. I've met people who have given very eloquent and moving testimonies to just how much Shostakovich's music helped them, and he knew that he was doing this. I think that Beethoven was a very paradoxical figure, one of my favourite remarks of Beethoven is one he wrote in one of his early songs: "Sometimes the opposite is also true." Sometimes with Beethoven the opposite is almost always true somewhere - I see Barry smiling there - even something as famous as the first movement of the Fifth Symphony, the number of analyses I've read saying that everything in that movement is derived from bah-bah-bah-bah, it's obsessive, it's a straight line, purposeful argument, but two-thirds of the way through that, the beginning of the recapitulation, suddenly the music stops and an oboe completely timelessly plays this little figure [sings] which has nothing to do with bah-bah-bah-bah, nothing to do with that driven tempo, nothing to do with heading anywhere, and for a moment the opposite is true. That's one of the things that makes him so great for me. Just to bring it back to the question about this: yes, the classic romantic idea is that an artist creates out of pain, as Heine did, out of the need to become whole, that you become whole somehow by creating. I think there is an element of that with Beethoven. You mentioned Per Nørgård, my Danish composer friend, two lovely remarks he made, I'd love to share with you because I think they just say it all, he had been in hospital, had caught MRSA and was in there for three months and he said, in this inimitable accent of his: I could not compose and when I cannot compose I become a little bit mad. [Laughter]

I remember his wife nodding in the corner. But the other one he said to me when he discovered that I was composing again after a long time was: Stephen, when you compose you will say to yourself, "When I finish this piece I will be happy", and you will compose the piece, and you will not be happy. [Laughter]. So you will write another piece."

And I think that is the other side, I think with Beethoven the opposite is also true, so that is true, but the same time there is a man with, exactly as Barry said, I am so grateful for you spelling that out so concisely, a very strong sense of duty, of social responsibility and if you remember those extraordinary stories I eluded to earlier about how he played for two friends, one whom was suffering from terrible paralysing depression and the other who lost a son at the age of 3, and was completely frozen, and his playing flooded them both with emotion, and they were able to begin to grieve and both to be able to escape from this horrible experience. He knew he could do that, he knew it wasn't all about self-gratification, but there was actually something as well.

Last point, that Beethoven lived as often pointed out at an age when the whole role of the composer was changing, when Beethoven was born, composers were still servants who wore uniforms and did what they were told to do. When Beethoven died, he had become the Generalissimo of the composers, of the artists, Napoleon embodied in art, rather more successful than even in politics. Yet at the same time there was a drawing back from the sense of the composer being part of an organised social function, belonging to a community and offering something important. I think that Beethoven was aware of the beginnings of that breach into individualism and was struggling in some ways to heal that, too, to hang on the fact of belonging, to be part of the community, just as much as a shaman or a witch doctor was part of the community, that we would once have called primitive. That embodiment was something he was not an innovator at all, he was determined to hang on to and enrich something traditional in that respect.

**NIGEL OSBORNE:** So a difficult question then for Lloyd coming out of that. Beethoven on the one hand, the individualist, the romantic hero, on the other, the person of responsibility. When you compose, is it an individual gratification or individual necessity, or do you feel some broader social responsibility in your work.

**LLOYD COLEMAN:** I think to be brutally honest, probably at my stage still very much born out of an individual gratification, I don't know whether I can sit here and try and be all pretentious and say that at the moment all of my music up until this point, I've really thought about how my music is going to make a difference to the world generally and adding to the canon of music, I think it would just be weird for me to think like that. I am still at the stage where I am very much developing a technique and of course yes, looking back at all of the composers, for a young composer today, it is quite intimidating I guess because like I referred to in the last discussion, there is just this sense I think that what more is there to say or what can I say now which is new and different? I actually do think that that is getting harder and harder, I think. You might have an interesting perspective on that, you have been around longer than me, so I don't know, whether you felt the same when you were starting out as composers and as music scholars, whether you felt this sort of, where can we go from here, is there anything I can add to the enormous and magnificent canon of music.

**STEPHEN JOHNSON:** I can remember someone asking the same question in a radio debate in about 1972, and there was still great works of Shostakovich and Britten to come after that, which are

still part of the repertory. It may seem that the addition of enduring masterpieces has become thinner on the ground, but they are certainly there. I have been to yet another performance of James MacMillan's Isobel Gowdey; there is a piece that is really lodged in the repertoire and not showing signs of leaving it. Yes, I think we have been through a bit of a crisis in classical music, in some respects, and I really feel for you Lloyd in a lot of ways. For one thing it wasn't until relatively recently in classical music history that we had this awareness of the musical past. Very important thing for Beethoven the past was Haydn and Mozart, and if you were lucky a bit of Bach. Brahms, his interest in composers like Bach and before that Schutz and Monte Verdi was considered very eccentric, this is towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, you have got recordings you can download in seconds of music that is a thousand years old. I do feel for you in a way, having to try and define yourself in a face of it. It is very difficult.

**NIGEL OSBORNE:** A couple of comments on what Lloyd said, first of all I think you are right, you don't go looking hypocritically for social responsibility, the fact is of course it comes and finds you. You don't have to worry about that.

The other thing is about, when I was starting to be a composer, trying to compose, it was at one of the cross roads in modernism where suddenly, every piece not only had to be original but in its own language, where composers were rapidly on a smash and grab raid, dragging things out of the sky that were possible and so, there was that phase and of course you can't go on the whole time like that, culture has its finite resources and in fact then we move into a bit of consolidation and integration which is what we are doing at the moment, which also has an excitement in its adventure. It seems to me that perhaps the problem of your generation, is not that there isn't a beautiful mission, there is, it's rather that the world that is supposed to support it is not supporting it, the level of debate and reflection. Sitting with Stephen Johnson and Barry Cooper, we are privileged because that level of discussion is not available in society very often, media is not doing it.

So coming to Barry as a composer, the world is used to you as a musicologist. As a composer, as I know you are, what drove you and what drives you, what is your need to compose?

**PROF. BARRY COOPER:** When I was composing quite a lot, which was mostly as a student, I felt there was a need for a particular sort of piece. I had an idea, I thought that someone might like to share this idea, I might like to write it down and get a performance, but actually the performance wasn't quite as important as getting it written down because I thought well, this is a nice idea, I'll shape this piece, and once I started I had the urge to finish it and once the piece is finished well that is it then, I would happily leave that aside. But it was mainly the idea of, well, this is a nice idea and there were various other reasons as well. Sometimes somebody would say, could you write a piece for this instrument or that instrument, fair enough, you'd do that, there is this sense of what in Beethoven's case was professional pressure, but nobody ever paid me to write anything I'm afraid, I had to do it out of the love for my fellow citizens. Sometimes it was that sort of piece. Other times it

was just that I had an idea, and thought well this idea hasn't been heard before, let's see what happens when you put it together.

**NIGEL OSBORNE:** Last time we met, you had denied knowledge of this piece, I remember a lovely string quartet that you wrote that was looking at summation on difference tones and I thought that for its time, was well ahead of the game, it had spectralism in it, and would you expect to find that, in dusty old Oxford in 1966 there it was and Barry was doing it. There seemed to be in your creativity really quite an explorer spirit, exploring musical possibilities.

**PROF. BARRY COOPER:** Yes, I was always looking for slightly odd, eccentric ideas, for example, I wrote an organ piece in which you had to play with the nose because your hands and feet are fully occupied; and so I wrote col naso on the score, I did experiments to see what the nose could actually play on the organ. And I tried on the piano but the nose isn't strong enough to play on the piano because it hurts too much, for a piano piece I wrote col mento, with the chin, so these sorts of experimental things, when I tried an experimental piece where every chord was a triad and yet it was still a 12 note system, a rigorously 12 note system, and so it was Schoenberg in some ways and it was Palestrina in other ways, I wrote it in a sort of antique notation to make it look like 16<sup>th</sup> century music.

Writing music with triads was completely forbidden of course in the 1970's, major and minor triads were quite out, my piece was entirely triads; so it was either behind or ahead of the game, I'm not quite sure which.

**NIGEL OSBORNE:** Ahead Barry, absolutely! We are talking about the composer and the need to compose, but the composer is a relatively short part of our cultural history, it is a speck on the world's musical history, the composer. Prior to the middle ages we had more of a sense of the collective in creativity, certainly in most other world cultures did and it looks like through electronic media, we might be going back to the collective, even in my humble, musical life I find that happening. So, what are your feelings about that? So it is to everybody, what, is composition invested solely in the composer? Is that going to survive? Is there a future for that? Is it returning to collective, is that a good or a bad thing?

**STEPHEN JOHNSON:** Don't know! What about you Lloyd?

**LLOYD COLEMAN:** Well, I think that the first thing that comes to my head when you talk about the composer and I think about just how many more people are now composing actually because of the advancement of technology. So if we look at music software programmes like Sibelius and Logic and Protools, these are all programmes with which you can create music. What that has meant is, suddenly music composition has been sort of flung open and it means that actually, Joe Bloggs can now even without a single theory lesson and without being able to read a note of music, they can create music in their bedroom, not only that they can create and virtually perform it as well. So they don't need the Berlin Philharmonic to come and play it for them. They can use synthesisers and things like that. One would have to look at that really as you know, it going into the future.

For me personally, I don't know. There is, we have already talked about it but there is a slight sort of, I talk about the intimidation of the sort of history behind you and I am at music college now, you get the sense that you are constantly being asked to contextualise your work and what are you trying to say and what does it relate to, who are you inspired by - all this sort of pressure on a young composer, and when Barry was describing his earlier pieces, it reminded me that one should never forget that composition is an act of pleasure and that writing music in itself should just be enjoyed and maybe I shouldn't get too warn down with you know, that man up there and everyone else behind me that I am following and just enjoy the act of composition.

**STEPHEN JOHNSON:** Probably the most envied composer in this case is someone like Haydn, who famously said, I was stuck on my own in the middle of nowhere, with a very musical prince and so I had no choice but to become original. In other words, he didn't have much to measure himself against. Not only not a musical past, but hardly any musical contemporaries. Getting hold of music and hearing it, was quite a major labour for someone like Haydn. He had an excellent orchestra, a duke, a patron who was marvellous interested in music, he wrote 104 symphonies because probably he wouldn't have expected any of them to have been heard more than a couple of times, a good discerning audience, just him, in isolation. It's about as far removed from your situation as you can imagine isn't it? It often seems to me that everybody these days talks of originality and innovation and it can often seem there is less of it around than at any time.

**NIGEL OSBORNE:** It's a little bit like sex, the more you talk about it, probably the less you are doing it. I would have a quite an optimistic view actually. I think that the things that Lloyd has so well-described, that the bedroom composers, that the, on the one hand, and the collectives that I have pointed towards are related to that, people have often worked together on those things, I think that is interesting and some of the things that it has done is in a quite unconscious and unself-conscious way has revalidated many aspects of modernism because in those processes a lot of young people are rediscovering things that the generation of Paderewski and Xenakis and so on, created but they are making it in their own way and in a strange way arriving at it from a different position, so the plurality of this great access to creative activity, encouraging the schools, gives the opportunity for people such as yourself who are going to devote their lives to it, to offer people models and good practice, I think that the academic institutions should stop this business of encumbering musical creativity with tosh. Either you do research which is great, real research, that's wonderful, but not this, these glosses that are constantly required - just do the music, if it is not capable of expressing itself it is not got anything to say has it? It has to be in the music itself.

**STEPHEN JOHNSON:** Did Beethoven ever seriously analyse one of his own scores? That's a very good question.

**NIGEL OSBORNE:** There are some composers that can thrive on that. Oddly enough Harrison Birtwistle was one of them, there are a few, but mostly not, it is horses for courses in a system that tries to put everyone in that one bracket is probably doing a disservice.

It's now just past 5.20 so it's time to throw this open. A question over there, please.

**FROM THE FLOOR:** Hello, this question is probably aimed at Barry Cooper. Would you agree that Beethoven has maintained such a high acclaim, after so many years, because he actually composed music for humanity, and also human emotion and the basic needs of humanity and human emotion very rarely change? So therefore Beethoven's music is unlikely to ever become dated because so many people from so many backgrounds can actually relate to the feelings in his compositions?

**PROF BARRY COOPER:** Yes, I think that's certainly part of the story, that he did have this extraordinarily wide range of emotions that he was able to express, and he could express them so deeply, so when you get Beethoven expressing joy, it seems to be sort of even more joyful than anyone else in the Ninth Symphony, and similarly, when he is expressing real tragedy, you feel again this is more anguished than any other composer practically because he is able to find musical means to express these things so deeply. So it's partly that these are emotions that we all can feel, and that's one reason why it has survived, and partly because he wrote the music so extraordinarily well. It's got the intellectual depth as well as the emotional depth and this is partly because he spent such a long time sort of making sure the pieces he wrote were really great, by spending a long time sketching and re-drafting and possibly writing 10 or 15 versions before choosing the best version of any particular passage.

**IAN RITCHIE:** A question about the need to compose, but in relation to two other needs that we've deliberately included in the shaping of the two days, the need to perform and the need to listen. Thinking of those three important needs of music, which I think many people, but Britten included, I think called it a sacred triangle, needing all three components. Would it be true to say that in Beethoven's case but also in your cases, those of you that are currently active as composers, the need to compose is also about the need to be played and the need to be heard in the way that many writers that I've come across would say that actually there's also the need to be read at the end of writing?

**PROF BARRY COOPER:** There are one or two composers I've come across that say they've written this fantastic symphony or whatever and they don't mind if it's not performed because they can perform it in their inner ear and that will be sufficient for them so there are some composers who don't feel this need to communicate. Others obviously do want their music to be received by audiences and therefore performances are much more essential for them. So there are two different approaches. This is one of the things about composition, that you have so many different ways of thinking about it. You can either write for yourself and just admire the beautiful sound you've created or you can say: I want to communicate this to everyone, as many as possible, as many as will receive it, or in Beethoven's case as many cultured and noble people who will receive it.

**NIGEL OSBORNE:** Yes, and things can change this status, can't they? The thing that went into the bottom drawer can come out of the bottom drawer and be played by an orchestra. Some things which you may have been shy about suddenly become important, and important things can happen that way. It's rather like not trying to pre-empt social usefulness, similarly sometimes just letting a piece come into life and then hoping that serendipity takes it where it should.

**STEPHEN JOHNSON:** Perhaps the most spectacular case of that is Beethoven's contemporary Schubert. I was astonished the other day to find a letter that Schubert wrote in about 1823 - he has written by this stage symphonies 1 to 6 and the unfinished symphony and a fair amount of other important music as well, not to mention huge quantities of songs and he has a letter from a conductor saying we have been playing your songs, your little choral pieces and we are interested, have you written anything for orchestra that we could perform? Schubert sends his letter back saying: alas there's nothing I could send out with a clear conscience. Please turn to Beethoven as I would far rather you played him than contented yourself with something mediocre by me. When Schubert died the epitaph on his tomb was: music is buried here a rich treasure, but far fairer hopes. Because even his closest friends didn't know how much great music on a large scale he had actually written, the great C major symphony, the string quintet, many of his larger works simply weren't performed and heard, let alone published, and it sat there until gradually people like Mendelssohn and Schumann and other experts in Vienna started to unearth this stuff and we have this incredibly rich treasure, but yes, absolutely the opposite of Beethoven in that respect. Yes.

**NIGEL OSBORNE:** Yes, I think also one of the things behind Ian's question if I understand correctly, that has been broken, that triangle, to a certain extent, our media have not served us well in keeping the triangle of creativity, listening and performance, and certainly the pressures on our performing world mean that not many composers get contacted by orchestras to say, "Have you got a piece for us?" Very rarely. I mean, I, for example, did a lot of work for orchestras as a younger man, loads of stuff. Do nothing now. Nothing. Anywhere in the world. It's fine. But I think it's a problem for the orchestras.

**LLOYD COLEMAN:** Linking it with the need to perform, for me personally composition, whilst it has existed pretty much since I started learning music, it has always run concurrently with my performing activities as well, and that has been a really important thing for me as a clarinet player and as a conductor. I do feel that my composition informs my performing, and vice versa. And I could not imagine it any other way. Then that has very practical sort of benefits as well because, by being a clarinet player and by being a conductor, it means that in a way I'm held in a higher regard by other players at academies, for instance, because they know that I'm also a practising musician. I'm not sitting in some kind of ivory tower and just writing music which is impossible to play and with too many high notes and all the rest of it. I actually do work as a musician as well, and I would like to

carry that on, and that very obviously has been the case with many, many composers. I can't think of many composers actually who perhaps haven't had performing activity very much, I'm trying to think of somebody currently who is maybe an exception of that.

**STEPHEN JOHNSON:** It is interesting, if you go to Beethoven's time, the idea of a composer who wasn't a practitioner, it was just impossible to find. In fact, the phenomenon of "the composer" which you get in the late 19th century and the 20th century is just not something you find. It really isn't. There are very rare exceptions of great composers who were also great performers in the 20th century like Rachmaninoff, for instance, but this seems to be a bit of a historical aberration in many ways and maybe we are returning to something which is a little bit closer to what organically it should be, if there are shoulds in this question.

**NIGEL OSBORNE:** Absolutely. On that extremely encouraging note, organic and as it should be, can I suggest that Michael give us some guidance as to how we wind up this session?

**MICHAEL PUGH:** I think it's very simple, ladies and gentlemen, we will take a break now and the pre-concert talk followed by the concert is at 6.45, so do please be back in good time for that. Thank you very much indeed, Nigel, Barry, Stephen and Lloyd. [Applause]