Libby. *J Cardiovasc Aging* 2023;3:26
DOI: 10.20517/jca.2023.17

The Journal of Cardiovascular Aging

Perspective

Open Access

Why the bee in our bonnets about Beethoven’s hair?

Peter Libby

Division of Cardiovascular Medicine, Department of Medicine, Brigham and Women’s Hospital, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA 02115, USA.

Correspondence to: Dr. Peter Libby, Division of Cardiovascular Medicine, Department of Medicine, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Harvard Medical School, 77 Avenue Louis Pasteur, Boston, MA 02115, USA. E-mail: plibby@bwh.harvard.edu

How to cite this article: Libby P. Why the bee in our bonnets about Beethoven’s hair? *J Cardiovasc Aging* 2023;3:26. https://dx.doi.org/10.20517/jca.2023.17

Received: 1 May 2023 **Accepted:** 3 May 2023 **Published:** 12 May 2023

Academic Editor: Ali J. Marian **Copy Editor:** Fangling Lan **Production Editor:** Fangling Lan

Genetic studies of putative specimens of the music composer Ludwig van Beethoven’s hair have provoked quite a stir of late[1]. Revelations about his heritage, relatives, and disease states and susceptibility have clearly captured the public imagination. The major news feeds, print and electronic alike have been abuzz with these revelations, as pedestrian as their conclusions may seem. Why, some two centuries after his death, do we care so much about Beethoven? Why this fascination with a long-dead composer of exact, often arcane, and difficult music? Why have generations of admirers regarded this man as a titan? How did he earn his place in splendid isolation at the apex of the proscenium arch of Boston’s hallowed Symphony Hall, chosen alone among the legions of worthy composers? [Figure 1]

The term “paradigm shift,” introduced by Thomas Kuhn, must be one of the most overused and hackneyed terms in all contemporary prose and parlance[2]. The term should be stricken from most serious writing. But it does apply, in all its rigor, to Beethoven. Most musically literate people know the canonical stories. The irony of his deafness. The breakout third symphony, originally intended to honor Napoleon, was rechristened “Eroica” when Bonaparte marched on Vienna in memory of the hero who might have been. The infamous entrance of the second horn a measure early before the recapitulation of the first movement could have startled or amused Haydn and the audiences of the day. Who has escaped the opening first four notes of the c minor Fifth Symphony, the supposed fate motif, that became a victory theme during the Second World War?[3] Well, those famous notes are not exactly the opening; the symphony actually begins with a rest or an instant of silence. Think about that.

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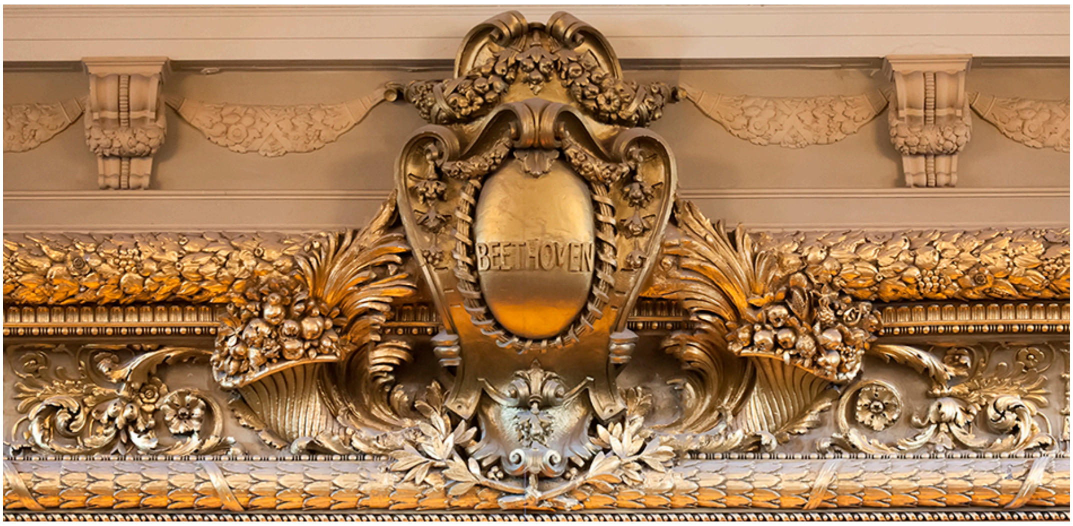

Figure 1. A detail of the proscenium arch of Boston's Symphony Hall; the sole name inscribed is Beethoven's. Note that cornucopias surround Beethoven's name. His work is indeed a horn of plenty. Photo Credit: Len Levasseur.

Beethoven started out, in what seems to me his youthful "*Allegro con Brio*" period, as optimistic, frisky, and conventional enough. Oh yes, the replacement of the courtly minuet expected in the third movement by a "scherzo" ("I joke"), even in the first symphony, was unexpected and playful, but hardly seriously disruptive. The opening unsettled chord of the Haydenesque slow introduction to this début symphony resolves rapidly enough to a harmonic comfort zone to relieve readily auditory discomfort. (This opening chord of Beethoven's first symphony is, after all, less dissonant than the chord that begins Bach's cantata *Wiederstehe doch die Sünde*, BWV 54, written over 8 decades earlier). Beethoven dedicated this first symphony to Baron von Sweiten, a learned aristocrat, also a patron of Beethoven's predecessors Haydn and Mozart. The symphony's innovative features would have announced, perhaps a bit impudently, to the musically sophisticated Baron: "I'm not them." But little in the six early string quartets (Opus 18) seriously threatened the status quo. As the composer matured, however, so did his music. Both he and his creations became much more disruptive.

The European Union adopted the "Ode to Joy" theme from the finale of the ninth Symphony, a popular cultural icon, as its hymn - the official anthem of Europe. It has played in a continuous loop on a loudspeaker near the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. I always wonder if this is an appropriate choice, given the sudden shift to a militaristic march, at the *Alla Marcia* marking, that is anything but peaceful and harmonious. And the poem Beethoven set to music states, "All men will be brothers" ("*Alle Menschen werden Brüder*"). What happened to the women and sisters in Schiller's Ode?

Moreover, consider Beethoven's seeming to convene a committee of the orchestra to decide how to launch this "Ode to Joy" during the introduction to the last movement of the ninth symphony, his last? To my ear, the orchestra tries out various solutions to starting the motor of this movement. The fleeting timpani (kettle drum) solo moments in the earlier scherzo movement of the ninth must have seemed shocking in 1824. But even more so, in the finale, the nine-measure-long passage for double bass and cello, giving their opinion about how to get the show on the road, evokes a recitative from opera. No 19th-century contemporary listener would miss this instrumental evocation of an operatic vocal staple. The score even states, "*selon le caractère d'un Récitatif.*" Why did he write in French, and why preserve the German practice of capitalizing nouns? Go figure. Beethoven did take a few composition lessons from Haydn, it is said. Perhaps this highly unusual use of a recitative in an instrumental piece echoes the "*recitativo*" (so marked) for solo violin in the finale of Haydn's Sinfonia Concertante in B flat major. But Beethoven inverted the ranking: he awarded the unadorned recitative to the bass and the cello, the lower members of the string choir, not the higher voices.

Beyond the familiar and perhaps oversold anecdotes, lies the intimate, struggling Beethoven. The Beethoven to listen to late at night. The Beethoven whose works may mirror our own struggles: the demanding, the difficult Beethoven. The one who draws us into the intractable morass of the messy human condition. The one who constructed the complex contortions of the anything but beautiful, perhaps grotesque, string quartet movement known as the *Große Fuge* (Opus 133). The mature piano sonatas, the late quartets challenge us. Beethoven even included a gloss to help us understand his struggle in his penultimate string quartet, Opus 132. The contemplative molto adagio suddenly gives way to a song of thanks (*Dankgesang*), a possible *ex-voto* after recovery from an illness. In the finale of this final quartet, Opus 135, he presents a difficult decision (*Der Schwer gefaßte Entschluss*): "Must it be?" (*Muß es sein*?) He answers swiftly in the affirmative: "It must be" (*Es muß sein*), and runs with this uplifting response. The musical motif he set to "It must be" may have reinforced his resignation and reinvigorated his mood. Recalling this inner conversation the composer shares with us may help each listener achieve acceptance when we ourselves face dire difficulty.

Beethoven's immediate predecessors, Haydn and Mozart, generally strove to entertain, divert, and please. On the contrary, and perhaps the nubbin of his originality for me, Beethoven often begs us, and indeed constrains the careful listener, to confront the uncomfortable. Of course, the social context that surrounds the pivot point in the role of the artist in society during the early 19th century has provided fodder for many a learned treatise. But rather than wading through words, I suggest that the reader spend some minutes listening, for example, to the Diabelli Variations. This collection provides an accessible "brain biopsy" of the composer. The music publisher Anton Diabelli wrote a little waltz, and modestly asked the major composers in the Viennese community to contribute variations on his theme. Beethoven, who was notoriously irascible, was at first contemptuous, and missed the deadline for sure. But eventually, he presented no less than 33 variations on Diabelli's theme (Opus 120).

Diabelli's waltz itself is, to my ear, a model of Biedermeier self-satisfaction, a catchy tune suitable for the shift in the center of music making from the patrician palace to home music rooms of the ascendant bourgeoisie. Beethoven deconstructs Diabelli's theme piece by piece as the collection progresses. In my listening, the composer reduces the tune to a three-note motive, a two-note motive, and even one note (Beethoven could do a lot with a single note, as the 2nd movement of the 7th symphony demonstrates.) And interspersed, with a wink, there are moments of homage or humor. There is a "fughetta" (variation 24) and a "Fuga" (variation 32) - a clear tipping of the composer's hat to Johann Sebastian Bach, whose Well-Tempered Clavier collection of 48 preludes and fugues Beethoven knew well. And unexpectedly, there is what must have been a laugh-out-loud moment for the audience of the day, when the collection suddenly bursts into a parody of a well-known Mozart opera aria (Leporello's *Notte e giorno faticar* from Don Giovanni, Variation 22). Although that opera debuted in Prague, not Vienna, Viennese audiences surely knew the tune from "*Harmonie Musik*" - woodwind band adaptations of popular tunes of the day played in Vienna's innumerable coffee houses, restaurants, and inns.

The "Eroica variations" (Opus 35) furnish a similar window into Beethoven's tenacious character. This set of variations takes the 13 note bass theme from the eponymous symphony and massages it obsessively, interlaced with the treble theme. He wrings and wrestles the most out of the simple starting materials, and concludes with perhaps the best fugue he executed. Testing his mettle in this complex and challenging contrapuntal form seems to me to have consumed Beethoven in a career-long struggle.

So why do we in the 21st century still have Beethoven so much in our hair, such that analysis of DNA from his own locks causes such a public stir? Many view Beethoven's personal torments - as put forth poignantly in his letter known as the Heiligenstadt Testament - as placing him in the vanguard of the romantic era. But beyond the tabloid human interest story, the gossip column quest to unveil his "immortal beloved," and the fodder for professorial musings on the evolution of art and its place in society, the substance of the music itself may best explain our enduring fascination. Beethoven dared not to be beautiful. He dared to shatter the molds. He exposes to us musically his personal innermost feelings, desires, and disappointments and even some triumphs. He does so courageously, starkly, unashamedly, and unapologetically. His later music is intensely personal. He stands emotionally naked before us. He invites us to join him on his intimate journeys. We now know the supposed secrets of Beethoven's DNA, but his music already told us all we really needed to know. If you really want to understand him, the human condition, and yourself better, you need only listen.

Note: This certainly unscientific screed was commissioned by *The Journal of Cardiovascular Aging* founding Editor-in-Chief A. J. Marian upon the publication of Ref.[1], and the attendant flurry of interest in the lay media. I thank Dr. Vern Falby, a real musician, for reading a draft of this manuscript to make sure I was not too far off base.

DECLARATIONS

Authors' contributions

The author contributed solely to the article.

Availability of data and materials

Not applicable.

Financial support and sponsorship

Not applicable.

Conflicts of interests

The author declared that there are no conflicts of interest.

Ethical approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

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