

Psychobiography and the evolving Beethoven myth: *Maynard Solomon's Beethoven.*

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Maynard Solomon's biographical writings on Beethoven constitute the most significant and influential research into the life and personality of the composer in recent years.¹ Challenging many aspects of what might be called the 'Beethoven myth', Solomon presents a widely accepted psychological portrait of Beethoven that offers many new insights into the composer's life and actions. Solomon takes a particularly intriguing but problematic approach, which makes extensive use of psychoanalytic theory as a tool for interpreting the life of historical figures.

While Solomon is one of the few psychoanalytically inclined musicologists (or musicologically inclined psychoanalysts) to have become widely known, he is only one of a number of researchers who have applied Freudian theory to the field of biographical study. Freud himself wrote a paper examining the life and work of Leonardo da Vinci, and psychoanalysts since have written on figures ranging from Luther to Hitler.² This genre of works is known as 'psychobiography', and fits into the wider category of 'psychohistory'. For approximately the last thirty years, psychohistory has had an increasing impact on mainstream historical studies, with at least two scholarly journals now devoted to the area.³

The connection between musicology and psychoanalysis, while rarely prominent in either discipline, can be traced back to the early days of the twentieth century. The notable music historian Max Graf, a close friend and disciple of Freud (as well as being father of 'Little Hans', one of Freud's most famous case histories),⁴ contributed regularly to the so-called 'Wednesday Society'. This tightly-knit circle of Freud devotees discussed topics ranging from the personality of Wagner to the psychodynamics of music.⁵ While mainly concerned with the creative aspects of music, Graf's *From Beethoven to Shostakovich* contains several psychobiographical elements, particularly with regard to Beethoven.⁶

Solomon's Beethoven studies provide the musicologist with an intriguing set of questions, two of

which are immediately apparent: firstly, what the relative merits and limitations of his distinctively psychoanalytic approach to music biography are, for it is an approach that putatively offers much to musicology. Secondly, where his psychological portrait and general treatment of the long-dead genius can be located within the evolution of the 'Beethoven Myth'.

Before either of these questions can be addressed, Solomon's work must first be examined. At the risk of oversimplification, Solomon's thesis (as expounded in *Beethoven*) can be summarised briefly as follows. The son of a repressive and mediocre father and loving but submissive mother, the young Ludwig struggled with conflicting parental personalities as well as with an idealised image of his paternal grandfather, a successful *Kapellmeister*. Beethoven received his early musical training under the sometimes brutal guidance of his father, who suppressed the young Ludwig's nascent attempts at improvisation. Beethoven's mother, while fondly remembered by the composer in later years, was apparently ineffective as a counterbalance to his father's behaviour. With such a background, Beethoven sought to protect himself from this threatening reality by withdrawing into fantasy and immersing himself in his music.

Crucial to Beethoven's life was the development of his 'family romance'; this Freudian term is used to describe the fantasy which occurs when a child, dissatisfied with its real parents, wishes to replace one or both of them with superior, romanticised heroes. According to Solomon, the fantasy grew stronger with age in Beethoven's case. Solomon observes that the ramifications of Beethoven's 'family romance' are evident throughout the composer's life; examples include his 'nobility pretence' (Beethoven's allowing of rumours of his noble birth to persist) and his 'birth-year delusion' (Beethoven's belief, despite seeing evidence to the contrary, that he was two years younger than he actually was). Solomon suggests that such idiosyncratic behaviour can be explained with the help of Freudian theory, and there is the implicit assumption

that such behaviour is consistent with the expectations of the theory.

A detailed critique is beyond the scope of this paper, but some general observations can be made. The most obvious merits of Solomon's approach are that he seeks to explain aspects of Beethoven's behaviour which have been previously ignored or pushed aside, and that he raises the intriguing issue of the relationship between creative output and biography. However, Solomon's use of psychoanalytic theory is a double-edged sword. If his use of the theory is to be seen not as allegorical, but rather as a set of conceptual tools that posits causal explanations, then the scientific status and logical cogency of the theory must be considered.⁷

Recent 'Freud studies' have demonstrated that psychoanalytic theory is both internally inconsistent and also generally inadequate as a model for the understanding of the human psyche. Freud's heavily theory-laden concepts—the psychosexual stages and their supposed importance in later life, his reductionist 'hydraulic' model of the mind, his notion of instincts and his dream-theory—have all been demonstrated as either incorrect, or flawed to such an extent as to render them inappropriate for scientific use.⁸ Freudian theory itself is largely the result of an outmoded set of concepts which would have been jettisoned from scientific discourse many years earlier if it had not been for the insular and apologetic attitude of the psychoanalytic community at large.⁹

Solomon relies implicitly on several questionable Freudian concepts throughout the biography; in particular, his use of the concept of the 'family romance' is of dubious validity because of the close link between the concept and the discredited Freudian theories of childhood sexuality, child-parent dynamics and repression. If psychoanalysis were a secure basis for a model for human behaviour, then Solomon's psychological portrait would offer plausible interpretations of Beethoven's psyche. However, psychoanalysis fails to provide a sound methodological basis for such a portrait. In providing an interpretive framework psychoanalysis is not much better placed than many scientifically discredited theories (for example, phrenology).

As far as the use of psychoanalytic theory for interpretive ends only is concerned, problems still remain, irrespective of the status of the theory. The literary critic Frederick Crews made the observant and critical point when he wrote:

Many otherwise canny humanists and social scientists would think it boorish and intolerant to care whether the ideas they invoke have received any corroboration, since only a soulless positivist would want to pass judgement on a theory before seeing what illuminating effects its application can provoke. A trail of sensibility is the only precaution needed: the theory will have demonstrated its cogency if it brings out meaning in a given text or problem. Of course such bogus experiments succeed every time. All they prove is that any thematic stencil will make its own mark.¹⁰

So too is the case with psychobiographies. While they provide new and colourful insights and 'explain' much, to a large extent this is dubiously predetermined by the faulty model they invoke. As one author writes, psychohistory tends to reduce history to 'a kind of Greek chorus confirming what is already there'.¹¹

To return to the question posed earlier regarding the location of Solomon's *Beethoven* in the development of the Beethoven myth, the revision and reassessment of past biographies as a product of their times poses the intriguing question of how far one must be removed from a document, historically or intellectually, in order to be able to apprehend its social and intellectual context, and thus its strengths and weaknesses. In finding some nineteenth-century portraits of Beethoven unconvincing, the revisionist-minded twentieth-century musicologist should be wary that it may only be the sophistication of myth-making that has changed, not the basic myth or the need it serves. As Hans Lenneberg writes:

What makes the study of biography so interesting... is, in fact, a shuttling back and forth between earlier views and modern interpretations of them. Yet not even the most cynical reader of biographies wants his icons disturbed, even while realising that the sentimentality of the past is a handicap to historical realism. One can trace in many cases an awareness on the part of a historian that the facts we know do not match the image we are preserving. Yet, even when that historian suggests that the image is not appropriate, the suggestion is likely to be ignored.¹²

Solomon's de-mythologising is problematic, lest a great composer should end up being portrayed with a less than appropriately great life and problems; the idea of Beethoven as a liar and bully, for example, is not conducive to the mythology. By examining Solomon's

treatment of two 'Beethoven myths', it can be seen how he does not dispense with previous myths, but merely transforms them to suit modern sensibilities.

Beethoven mythology was well under way during the composer's own lifetime. Beethoven biographers have long noted that Beethoven's 'nobility pretence' was a significant factor in his social life, and it fuelled rumours surrounding him. Soon after the composer's death, E. T. A. Hoffman's literary creation of an 'archetypal mad musician provided an enduring mould into which Beethoven's eccentricities. . .were inextricably blended'.¹³

It was Wagner, however, who formed the most appealing and enduring of Beethoven myths, that being the myth of 'adversity-turned-into-good-fortune' surrounding Beethoven's deafness.¹⁴ The following two passages regarding his deafness provide an interesting comparison between different writers:

[Beethoven's deafness] served to protect his creativity from the external world and from memories of a submissive past at a moment when he was about to embark upon what he termed his 'new path'. . . [His] deafness may have been...a form of magical ascetism, a rite of passage, a prelude to an ecstatic and 'holy' state from which emerged the masterpieces of his maturity.¹⁵

The ear was the only organ through which the outer world could still reach and disturb him; it had long since faded to his eye. . .A musician without hearing! Could a blind painter be imagined? But we know of a blind seer. . .[T]he deaf musician who listens to his inner harmonies undisturbed by the noise of life, who speaks from the depths to a world that has nothing more to say to him—now resembles the seer. Thus genius, delivered from the impress of external things, exists wholly in and for itself.¹⁶

The former passage is from Solomon's highly psychoanalytic 'On Beethoven's Deafness', the latter from Wagner's *Beethoven*, published in 1870. Both stress that deafness was an essential part of Beethoven's genius, and indeed a necessary part of his creative development. The unwritten and assumed notion appears to be that such an ailment could not, even possibly, have had a commonplace or detrimental effect on the composer. Instead, deafness is made into part of Beethoven's greatness.

The Romantic image of Beethoven retreating from the external world to become a quasi-musician/mystic is doubtless an appealing one; nonetheless, a less melodramatic perspective suggests that this is entirely erroneous. Beethoven fought his encroaching deafness with medical treatment and hearing devices, and he mourned deeply the loss of his conversational abilities. George Ealy has recently demonstrated that the composer had functional hearing for considerably longer than was generally recognised, and his paper provides evidence against the image of the creative genius retreating from the outside world.¹⁷ As Ealy concludes:

Innovative adaptations characterised Beethoven's response to his hearing impairment. Using early technology for the amplification of sound, he was apparently able to hear throughout his adult life. . .his late works not composed in complete deafness but in a state of limited hearing. Beethoven should not be remembered as the great composer who was deaf by 1801 but as the great composer who overcame his impairment by using the technology of his time.¹⁸

The on-going myth that deafness was a necessary aspect of Beethoven's creative development is an unfounded regression back to Wagnerian-style (composer-as-tragic-hero) mythology. It also robs Beethoven the man of empathy for his everyday humanity and suffering. After all, we have had nearly two hundred years to become accustomed to his hearing impairment and to find its place in the great scheme of things; Beethoven had no such luxury.

Similarly, Beethoven's 'nobility pretence' provides a striking example of how Beethoven mythology can metamorphose, rather than merely fade away. It is clear, due to research by Solomon, that Beethoven allowed and probably encouraged the circulation of rumours purporting to his noble birth and was very proud of the various honours bestowed upon him. In the often bitter custody battle over his nephew Beethoven made much of the fact that, owing to his presumed nobility, the case would be heard in the upper court. Beethoven was also aware that in the lower court the chance of a favourable outcome would have been less likely.¹⁹ As it transpired, Beethoven was forced to admit that he had no proof of his nobility, and the case was moved to the lower court.

Some contemporaries of Beethoven (notably Wegeler and Schindler) were under no illusions as to the composer's pretence at nobility and the purpose it served. Schindler went so far as to write: 'Had the nobles not believed him to be one of them, neither his genius nor his works of art would have won for him the favoured position he had enjoyed in aristocratic circles up to that time'.²⁰ Yet Thayer, as keen to cleanse his hero of spurious tales as he was to prove his hero's noble character, writes indignantly: 'It is scarcely conceivable that Beethoven should have cherished the thought that possibly he was of noble birth or that he seriously encouraged such a belief among his exalted friends'.²¹

Solomon writes of this opinion that 'the evidence is overwhelmingly against this view'. However, two separate views are contained in Thayer's statement: one that Beethoven could not have believed himself of noble birth, the other that he would not have encouraged such a belief. It is only the latter that does not stand up to scrutiny. Yet Solomon apparently only finds the need to support the notion that Beethoven encouraged his nobility pretence in order to assume that Beethoven must have somehow believed it himself as well. Solomon writes: 'neither his dramatic exclusion from the nobility nor the exposure of his pretence at aristocratic descent fully dissuaded Beethoven from continuing to believe that he was of noble birth'.²²

But did Beethoven really believe he was of noble birth? There are no extant documents from contemporaries that indicate unequivocally that Beethoven actually believed himself to be of noble birth. Solomon interprets the composer's refusal to admit non-nobility and his occasional written allusions to nobility as an indication that Beethoven genuinely believed it; but the onus is on Solomon to prove how it is anything other than a deliberate and fully conscious deception by the composer. A letter from Beethoven to Schindler from 1823 implies that Beethoven did not believe in his 'official nobility', for he writes: 'as for the question of "being noble", I think I have given you sufficient proof to you that I am so in principle'.²³

Solomon suggests that, labouring under various repressed desires and fears, Beethoven was somehow driven to dishonest behaviour, yet there is no evidence to suggest this was the case. At the time, there was a

prevalence of such spurious claims in Vienna (even Weber's father added a false 'von' to his name); this leads naturally to the opinion that Beethoven was no different nor driven by differing motivations from many 'lesser' men. Yet this is an uncongenial thought to attach to such an icon as Beethoven, and that is why Solomon's solution is so appealing. He presents an explanation that fits both the facts and the basic myth: Beethoven did indeed pretend to be noble, but only because he was in the grip of powerful, unconscious demons. It is apparent then that Beethoven can be 'bad' as long as it is for reasons befitting such a great figure. No mass psychological explanation is deemed necessary to explain the countless others who had pretensions of nobility.

With his biography and essays on Beethoven, Solomon has provided a rich source of biographical and archival material which has been justly lauded for the addition it has made to Beethoven scholarship. However in writing biographies of great individuals, there is an obvious temptation to see everything surrounding them as a reason for, or consequence of, their greatness. This implicit mythmaking is detrimental to gaining an understanding of the person as a reflection of both the specific as well as the everyday.

Solomon's studious and thoughtful exploration of Beethoven's life has provided a view of the composer which forms a curious mix of the old and the new. On the one hand, there is his painstaking research into the documents and events surrounding the composer, research that has deepened our understanding of Beethoven beyond previous explanations and accounts. On the other hand, there is his distinctive biographical offering—his psychological portrait of Beethoven—which in many ways is a regression to romanticised notions of creativity and the artist. These seductive yet flawed notions prevent the reader from gaining a real understanding of and empathy for the individual concerned, and counter Solomon's own intentions as writes in the preface to *Beethoven*:

It is a reasonable assumption. . . that Beethoven wished us to know something more about him than a mere chronology of his life and work. He wanted understanding as well, as though sensing that both forgiveness and sympathy inevitably follow in its train.²⁴

Notes

¹ Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1979). Virtually all of Solomon's significant essays on Beethoven are collected in his *Beethoven Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

² Freud's classic study on Leonardo was published in 1910, and although it contains several glaring errors it has remained a model for later psychobiographies. See Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 11. (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), pp. 63-137 (hereafter referred to as 'S.E.'). Another frequently cited psychobiographical work is Erik H. Erikson's *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1958).

³ *The Journal of Psychohistory* and *The Psychohistorical Review*.

⁴ Freud's case history of 'Little Hans' is contained in S.E., vol. 10, (1955) pp. 3-149.

⁵ A useful overview of Graf's writings and thinking can be found in David M. Abrams, 'Freud and Max Graf: on the Psychodynamics of Music' in S. Feder, R. Karmel and G. Pollock eds., *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Music: Second Series* (Madison: International University Press, 1993), pp. 279-307.

⁶ Max Graf, *From Beethoven to Shostakovich: The Psychology of the Composing Process* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947). In some areas, Graf's book is an important precursor to Solomon's *Beethoven* for he posits that Beethoven's early life, particularly his relationship with his mother, was of great significance.

⁷ Solomon's own approach makes it clear that his psychoanalytic portrait of Beethoven is not allegorical, metaphorical or mere 'interpretation' without factual basis.

⁸ For a convincing and often damning critique of the logical and methodological inadequacies in psychoanalytic theory see Adolf Grünbaum's *The Foundations of Psychoanalysis: A Philosophical Critique* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) and *Validation in the Clinical Theory of Psychoanalysis* (Madison: International University Press, 1993). A brilliantly argued account of Freud's intellectual development and the evolution of the 'Freudian Myth' is contained in Frank Sulloway's *Freud, Biologist of the Mind: Beyond the Psychoanalytic Legend* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1992). The

psychoanalyst Robert Holt's 'A Review of some of Freud's Biological Assumptions and their Influence on his Theories' in *Freud Reappraised: A Fresh Look at Psychoanalytic Theory* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1989), and Sulloway's *Freud* are invaluable guides to the outdated aspects inherent in Freudian theory. Morris Eagle's *Recent Developments in Psychoanalysis* (New York: McGraw-Hill Books, 1984) offers a cogent critique of both classic and recent Freudian theory.

⁹ There are, however, several notable exceptions; for criticisms and revisions of Freudian theory from within the psychoanalytic community see Robert Holt, *Freud Reappraised* and Marshall Edelson, *Psychoanalysis: A Theory in Crisis* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988).

¹⁰ Frederick Crews, *Skeptical Engagements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 173.

¹¹ Richard Ellman, *Golden Codgers: Biographical Speculations* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 8.

¹² Hans Lenneberg, *Witnesses and Scholars: Studies in Musical Biography* (New York: Gordon & Breach, 1988), p. 132.

¹³ Alessandra Comini, *The Changing Image of Beethoven: A Study in Mythmaking* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), p. 83.

¹⁴ Comini, *The Changing Image of Beethoven*, p. 290.

¹⁵ Solomon, 'On Beethoven's Deafness', *Beethoven Essays*, p. 95.

¹⁶ Richard Wagner, *Beethoven*, Trans. by E. Dannreuther, 3rd ed. (London: William Reeves, n.d.), pp. 53-54.

¹⁷ See George Thomas Ealy, 'Of Ear Trumpets and a Resonance Plate: Early Hearing Aids and Beethoven's Hearing Perception', *Nineteenth-Century Music* 17 (Spring 1994), pp. 262-73.

¹⁸ Ealy, 'Of Early Trumpets and a Resonance Plate', p. 273.

¹⁹ Elliot Forbes ed., *Thayer's Life of Beethoven*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 707.

²⁰ Quoted in Solomon, 'The Nobility Pretense', *Beethoven Essays*, p. 44.

²¹ Forbes ed., *Thayer's Life of Beethoven* vol. 2, p. 712.

²² Solomon, *Beethoven Essays*, p. 53.

²³ Emily Anderson ed., *The Letters of Beethoven* vol. 3 (London: MacMillan, 1961), p. 1049 (letter number 1194). Solomon explains this letter away by suggesting that Beethoven had 'invented' a new kind of nobility.

²⁴ Solomon, *Beethoven*, p. x.

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