Journal of the Royal Musical Association, 146/2, 491–500
doi:10.1017/rma.2021.16

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Review Articles

Beethoven Biography at the 250th Anniversary

ERICA BUURMAN

Lewis Lockwood, *Beethoven's Lives: The Biographical Tradition*. Woodbridge: Boydell, 2020. xxii + 209 pp. ISBN 9781783275519.

Laura Tunbridge, *Beethoven: A Life in Nine Pieces*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020. xii + 276 pp. ISBN 9780300254587.

Mark Evan Bonds, *Beethoven: Variations on a Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 147 pp. ISBN 9780190054083.

Jan Caeyers, *Beethoven: A Life*. Berkeley, CA, and London: University of California Press, 2020. xxiv + 630 pp. ISBN 9780520343542.

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic led to the cancellation of most of the events planned for the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth in 2020, marking the composer's sestercentennial presented a number of challenges. The anniversary of a significant cultural figure offers an opportunity to celebrate their legacy and present new perspectives on their life and achievements. In the case of Beethoven, one obvious challenge is how to offer a fresh take on a composer whose life and works have been extensively studied to the point of saturation over the past two centuries. Furthermore, at a time when conventional notions of universal greatness that formerly accompanied canonical figures no longer go unchallenged (at least in academic circles), an increased focus on a composer who already gets plenty of attention in an ordinary year was bound to meet with a certain amount of pushback in some quarters. While many complete Beethoven cycles were predictably planned to take place in 2020, a number of arts organizations also aspired to more innovative or ambitious programming, much of which promised to move beyond tired myths and clichés and offer a reassessment of the composer's place in contemporary culture and society. One of the biggest casualties of the pandemic was the programme of Germany's Beethoven Jubiläums GmbH (Beethoven Anniversary Society), whose funding had been ring-fenced as part of the 2013 coalition agreement between Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats. The programme, whose motto had been 'Rediscover Beethoven',[1] was set to encompass 300 projects and thousands of events from

Email: erica.buurman@sjsu.edu

[1] Press release, 29 October 2019, website of the Beethoven Jubiläums GmbH, <https://www.bthvn2020.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Pressemeldungen/191028_Press_Release_Start_conference_BTHVN2020.pdf> (accessed 7 February 2021).

© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Royal Musical Association

https://doi.org/10.1017/rma.2021.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

December 2019 to December 2020. Besides major exhibitions, conferences and performance cycles, the programme was to include various creative projects encompassing crossover musical fusions as well as other art forms. Plenty of performances were due to take place outside the concert-hall environment, the most ambitious of which was a planned month-long musical river cruise from Bonn to Vienna on a freight ship that would serve as a floating stage.

In the event, efforts at innovation in Beethoven anniversary programming were overshadowed by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. As countries around the world moved into lockdown and the performing-arts world came to a temporary standstill, Beethoven entered public consciousness in unplanned ways. A campaign communicated largely by social media encouraged people across Germany to play or sing the 'Ode to Joy' from wherever they were isolated at 6 pm on 22 March, inspired by the Italians who sang from their balconies during the brutal first wave of the pandemic in Europe. As performers and arts organizations quickly sought new ways to connect musicians and reach audiences online, the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra was quick off the mark, releasing a virtual performance of the 'Ode to Joy' on 20 March in which the orchestra members recorded their individual parts while self-isolating at home. The video quickly went viral and has so far racked up more than three million views on YouTube.

The image of Beethoven that came to the fore in the early stages of the pandemic was the traditional one: that of the composer as a transcendental cultural figure whose music communicates a universal message of hope, freedom and triumph in the face of adversity. Already, the Covid-19 pandemic has joined a list of historic moments in which the 'Ode to Joy' has symbolized hope and resistance across barriers of nation, race and creed, from protest movements in Chile and China to the fall of the Berlin Wall. No doubt its lockdown performances will feature prominently in the long-term legacy of the 2020 Beethoven anniversary year.

Since the publishing industry was not derailed by the pandemic to the same extent as the world of the performing arts, new Beethoven biographies were released as planned in 2020 and offer a welcome chance to take stock of current thinking on the composer. Yet presenting current thinking on Beethoven in the form of a biography presents its own challenges. Musical biography has traditionally been bound up with the nineteenth-century aesthetic of the 'great composer', which has tended to emphasize notions of artistic genius and the heroic struggle of the individual. The life of Beethoven – a composer who forged an independent career in an era of social upheaval, and who overcame the barrier of his deafness to become one of the greatest composers of his age – is itself the archetypal narrative of the Romantic biography. This narrative is all the more compelling as it closely mirrors the struggle-to-victory trajectory in canonical works such as the Fifth and Ninth symphonies.

Much of the recent work in the field of Beethoven studies has highlighted the limitations of the 'heroic' narrative of his life and works, and has critically examined its impact on subsequent reception and canon formation. Scott Burnham's *Beethoven Hero* interrogated the historical processes through which a narrow body of works such as the Third, Fifth and Ninth symphonies came to be considered emblematic of Beethoven's output overall.[2] More recently, Mark Evan Bonds has examined the tendency for listeners to hear such works as an expression of Beethoven's inner self, a form of listening that emerged only after the composer's death and was greatly influenced by the publication of the Heiligenstadt Testament in October 1827.[3]

[2] Scott Burnham, *Beethoven Hero* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).
[3] Mark Evan Bonds, *The Beethoven Syndrome: Hearing Music as Autobiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

https://doi.org/10.1017/rma.2021.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Recent scholarship has sought to bring other aspects of Beethoven's life and career – those that do not fit within the 'heroic' mould – out of the shadows. The composer's occasional works have been given the kind of serious attention that was previously reserved for transcendent masterpieces, illuminating a broader spectrum of financial, political and aesthetic factors that shaped his artistic vision than previous generations of scholars were prepared to acknowledge.[4] Recent studies of the musical world around Beethoven have also increased our understanding of the context for his musical activities, while simultaneously decentring him from the music histories of Bonn and Vienna during his lifetime.[5]

Composer biographies address a broad public and have traditionally been on the periphery of musicology. Recent critical reflections on musical biography have nevertheless emphasized the important role they played in the early history of the discipline, particularly through reinforcing central aspects of nineteenth-century musical culture and thought.[6] Composer biographies contributed to the establishment of the musical canon and the related aesthetic of the 'great composer', and Bonds's work has highlighted the importance of composer biography on historical listening practices. Definitive multivolume composer biographies of the nineteenth century, furthermore, laid the groundwork for later musicological scholarship, along with the related 'complete works' publishing projects such as the Breitkopf & Härtel Bach-Gesellschaft-Ausgabe (1851–99) and the Beethoven Gesamtausgabe (1862–5).

Beethoven looms large in any discussion of musical biography, and Beethoven biographies are clearly implicated in the mythology that has surrounded his life and works in musical culture since the nineteenth century. Yet as Lewis Lockwood makes clear in *Beethoven's Lives: The Biographical Tradition*, the first critical survey of biographies of the composer, generations of Beethoven biographers have also been explicitly concerned with dismantling myths. The classic biography by Alexander Wheelock Thayer (1817–97), which occupied him for much of his adult life and was completed only after his death, was largely prompted by a need to separate the facts from the growing body of fictions about the composer's life.[7] Many of these fictions stemmed from the pen of Anton Schindler, whose reputation as a Beethoven biographer was damaged beyond repair in the 1970s when the editors of Beethoven's conversation books discovered that many of Schindler's entries had been falsified.[8] Even so, the Beethoven mythology was not the invention of romanticizing biographers like Schindler, as Lockwood

[4] See especially Stephen Rumph, *Beethoven after Napoleon: Political Romanticism in the Late Works* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), and Nicholas Mathew, *Political Beethoven* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[5] Examples of the many specialized studies in this area include John A. Rice, *Empress Marie Therese and Music at the Viennese Court, 1792–1807* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); David Wyn Jones, *The Symphony in Beethoven's Vienna* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Nancy November, *Cultivating String Quartets in Beethoven's Vienna* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2017).

[6] See, for instance, the recent *Music and Biography*, ed. Joanne Cormac, special issue, *19th-Century Music*, 44 (2020–1), 61–132, with contributions from Simon P. Keefe, Joanne Cormac, Kristin M. Franseen and Paul Watt; and Christopher Wiley, 'Biography and Life-Writing', *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Intellectual Culture in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Paul Watt, Sarah Collins and Michael Allis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 77–102.

[7] Alexander Wheelock Thayer, *Ludwig van Beethovens Leben*, ed. Hermann Deiters, 3 vols. (Berlin: F. Schneider, 1866–79); 2nd edn, completed by Hugo Riemann, 5 vols. (Berlin: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1907–15); English edn as *The Life of Ludwig van Beethoven*, ed. and trans. Henry Edward Krehbiel, 3 vols. (New York: Beethoven Association, 1921), rev. Elliot Forbes as *Thayer's Life of Beethoven* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964).

[8] See Peter Stadlen, 'Schindler's Beethoven Forgeries', *Musical Times*, 118/1613 (1977), 549–52.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rma.2021.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

emphasizes with his opening quotation of the German-born conductor Charles Hallé: 'When I heard of Beethoven's death it seemed to me as if a god had departed, and I shed bitter tears' (p. 1).

Lockwood's survey of nineteenth-century Beethoven biography includes, somewhat surprisingly, Wagner, on the basis of the latter's abortive plan to collaborate on what would have been one of the earliest biographies of the composer, as Klaus Kropfinger explored in his study of Wagner's reception of Beethoven.[9] Beethoven, of course, features prominently in Wagner's writings, notably his essay on the composer written for the 1870 centenary.[10] Yet Wagner considered a biographical project as early as 1841, when he was residing in Paris. The previous year had seen the publication of the first full-length biography by Schindler, as well as Wagner's own novella *A Pilgrimage to Beethoven.*[11] Wagner was dismissive of Schindler's biography not because of its questionable interpretations and handling of facts, but because it was 'very incomplete, besides being written incoherently and in a dull and clumsy way' (p. 54). He therefore intended to co-write a Beethoven biography with the librarian Gottfried Engelbert Anders, a native of Bonn, which would 'avoid any pedantic display of scholarship, being more a great novel about an artist than a dry listing of data and anecdotes' (p. 55).[12] Had Wagner's project come to fruition, it would surely have played a significant role in shaping the Beethoven myth.

Throughout his survey, Lockwood positions biographical writings on Beethoven in the political and intellectual frameworks of their time. German politics impinged directly on biographical writings at the time of German unification (which coincided with the composer's 1870 centenary) and in the Nazi era, when German scholarship on Beethoven overtly reflected the racial and supremacist politics of the Nazis. Beethoven scholars often point to the 1970 bicentenary and the 1977 anniversary (150 years since Beethoven's death) as the beginning of a new era in scholarship on the composer, which saw a fresh interest in sketch and manuscript study and a burgeoning of the field in British and North American institutions. Lockwood highlights the vast change of the scholarly climate within this period. Particularly striking is the contrast between Beethoven conferences that took place in Vienna in connection with the two major anniversaries. In December 1969, the Austrian Academy of Sciences hosted an International Beethoven Symposium whose participants included only German and Austrian scholars. The proceedings were edited by Erich Schenk, who had been an active and apparently enthusiastic member of Nazi academic organizations.[13] In 1977, Vienna hosted a very different conference that included speakers from Denmark, the UK and the USA (including Lockwood himself).[14] The new wave of international scholarship that followed furnished Beethoven

[9] Klaus Kropfinger, *Wagner and Beethoven: Richard Wagner's Reception of Beethoven* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[10] Richard Wagner, *Beethoven* (Leipzig: Fritsch, 1870).

[11] Richard Wagner, 'Une visite à Beethoven', *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, November–December 1840, trans. William Ashton Ellis as 'A Pilgrimage to Beethoven', in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, 8 vols. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1892–9), vii: *In Paris and Dresden* (1898), 21–45.

[12] Original text in Richard Wagner, *Sämtliche Briefe*, ed. Gertrud Strobel and Werner Wolf, 8 vols. (Leipzig: Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1967–93), i: *1830–42*, 483.

[13] *Beethoven-Studien: Festgabe der Oesterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zum 200. Geburtstag von Ludwig van Beethoven*, ed. Erich Schenk (Vienna: H. Böhlaus, 1970).

[14] Proceedings published as *Beiträge '76–78: Beethoven-Kolloquium 1977: Dokumentation und Aufführungspraxis*, ed. Rudolf Klein (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1978).

https://doi.org/10.1017/rma.2021.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

biographers of the past few decades with much new and revised information about the composer's life.

In the final portion of his study, Lockwood reflects on the overall purpose of artistic biography and identifies its abiding problem: 'how to do justice to the life and to the works and how to relate the two dimensions' (p. 170). Earlier in the book, Lockwood identifies Thayer's biographical approach as opposite to that of his contemporary the sketch scholar Gustav Nottebohm (1817–82), with both authors representing extreme ends of the spectrum between a focus on the life and a focus on the music.[15] Thayer sought to provide a factual account of Beethoven's life without offering any analytical commentary on the works, whereas Nottebohm focused on Beethoven's creative life as documented in his sketchbooks without reference to the composer's personal life or social and political context. Today's Beethoven biographers, however, must provide something more than just 'a new report of the known facts', but must have a premiss that underpins their narrative and interpretation of the life and the music (p. 169). Lockwood's own suggested approach, which underpins his own 2003 Beethoven biography,[16] is 'to separate what we see as the artist's "life" – as a story of personal events, experiences, and encounters of every kind – from his or her "career", that is the part of the life that the artist devotes squarely and directly to the making and promotion of works' (p. 172). Within this framework, Beethoven's 'career' encompassed not only his composing but also his dealing with patrons, friends and publishers, much of which also reflects his character and personality and therefore helps us to understand the 'life'. For the biographer, 'the subject's life and work are not independent categories, but […] nevertheless they can't be treated as if there were no important differences between them' (p. 172).

Laura Tunbridge's *Beethoven: A Life in Nine Pieces* deals with the fundamental issue of artistic biography, namely the intersection between the life and the works, but does so in a way that reflects much of the recent work in music scholarship that places greater emphasis on context and seeks to decentre the composer from the narrative. Rather than presenting a linear account of Beethoven's life, Tunbridge focuses each chapter on a specific Beethoven work and pairs it with a biographical theme. The themes include many familiar issues in Beethoven biography, such as 'ambition', 'love' and 'liberty', though the pieces are an eclectic mix that represents the full range of Beethoven's output, from the 'Eroica' Symphony to the little song *An die Geliebte*, WoO 140. This selection of pieces presents a different image of Beethoven from the one represented by the works that dominate concert programmes today, which, as Tunbridge stresses in the introduction, form only a fraction of his output. The selection, furthermore, includes works that are more valued today than they were in Beethoven's lifetime, and others (notably the Septet op. 20 and the Choral Fantasy op. 80) for which the opposite holds true.

Tunbridge approaches the works discussed in each chapter as a starting point for a discussion that opens a window onto an entire cross section of Beethoven's life. This approach comes at the necessary expense of large sections of the composer's biography: the story begins in 1800 with the Septet, for instance, and leaves out Beethoven's early years in Bonn and his roots in the courtly culture of pre-revolutionary Europe. On the other hand, through its selective focus on

[15] Nottebohm's main publications on Beethoven's sketches are *Ein Skizzenbuch von Beethoven* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1865); *Beethoveniana* (Leipzig: Rieter-Biedermann, 1872); *Ein Skizzenbuch von Beethoven aus dem Jahre 1803* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1880); and *Zweite Beethoveniana* (Leipzig: C. F. Peters, 1887).

[16] Lewis Lockwood, *Beethoven: The Music and the Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).

https://doi.org/10.1017/rma.2021.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

nine themes and works, the book includes extensive discussions around a particular topic that could not be accommodated in a standard biography. These discussions help to illuminate aspects of the wider musical world of Beethoven's lifetime, rather than focusing narrowly on the composer's creative achievements. In the chapter on the 'Kreutzer' Sonata, op. 47, for instance, Tunbridge explores the theme of 'friends', and portrays Beethoven as a collaborative artist who learnt and benefited from his associations with other musicians. This chapter deals not only with Beethoven's collaborations with George Polgreen Bridgetower on the sonata's composition and first performance, but also with the systems of networking through which musicians helped each other to navigate the new professional musical world of the early nineteenth century. Beethoven helped Bridgetower to make professional connections during his stay in Vienna, composed a sonata for him, and performed it in a concert for Bridgetower's benefit, in the expectation that he would receive similar support from fellow musicians for his own future projects. The chapter, furthermore, touches on Beethoven's interest in new musical technologies and developments in virtuoso performing techniques, with the 'Kreutzer' Sonata forming the node that connects the chapter's various musical and biographical strands.

By giving equal weight to canonical and lesser-known Beethoven works, Tunbridge captures the variety of his activities as a working musician, beyond the concert repertoire for which he is best known today. She likewise gives weight to biographical themes that feature less prominently in the Beethoven mythology ('friends' is one such example). Even when exploring familiar biographical themes, however, Tunbridge moves beyond many of the standard tropes in Beethoven biography. The chapter on 'love' (paired with the song *An die Geliebte*, WoO 140), for instance, has a far wider focus than Beethoven's unfulfilled desire to find a life partner as expressed in his famous letter to the 'Immortal Beloved'. In discussing the song, Tunbridge explores the various motivations that prompted Beethoven to compose songs and the sociable aspects of song that played an important role in his life. The chapter includes a relatively detailed account of Beethoven's relationship with the poem's author, the poet and dramatist Joseph Ludwig Stoll, who is a marginal figure both in literary history and in Beethoven biography. Tunbridge's discussion of Beethoven's relationship with Stoll (for whom he once acted as guarantor) touches on a broad array of themes, from aspects of banking and finance, to commissioning practices, to the ways in which the composer mixed friendship with business. The effect is to move away from the familiar focus on Beethoven's inner drive and desires, as famously expressed in the 'Immortal Beloved' letter, and to consider the wide range of circumstances and motivations that shaped both his actions and his compositions.

Like Tunbridge, Mark Evan Bonds dispenses in *Beethoven: Variations on a Life* with the linear narrative of traditional biography. Although the book is not a biography and does not follow a chronological path, as stressed by Bonds in his introduction, it nevertheless focuses on the fundamental issue of artistic biography by considering the relationship between Beethoven's life and his works. It serves as a short introduction to the main themes in Beethoven biography, and builds on Bonds's own recent work on historical listening practices. In his 2019 book *The Beethoven Syndrome*, Bonds explored the long-standing tendency for listeners to hear Beethoven's music as autobiography and demonstrated that this tendency emerged only after the composer's death. *Beethoven: Variations on a Life* essentially seeks to rediscover Beethoven's music as it was heard and understood by his contemporaries, whose listening was not shaped by biographical interpretations. Bonds furthermore offers an alternative conception of the relationship between the life and the music: rather than considering how particular events shaped particular works in the manner of traditional biography, Bonds instead considers 'how the events of his life shaped his broader vision of his art, which ultimately served to frame everything he wrote' (p. 3).

https://doi.org/10.1017/rma.2021.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In Chapter 1, Bonds considers 'The Scowl', or the stern visage of popular Beethoven iconography. The Scowl, as Bonds explains, has traditionally been understood as the manifestation of the composer's inner turmoil, which listeners have come to hear expressed in heroic or turbulent works (and to consider as typically Beethovenian). Listeners of Beethoven's own lifetime, as Bonds outlines here as well as in *The Beethoven Syndrome*, did not expect to encounter The Scowl in the music. This was partly because they were not yet familiar with the details of Beethoven's personal life, but also because they regarded composers more as playwrights, capable of bringing to life a whole range of characters and situations in their music without necessarily projecting their own inner self. Whereas later critics have struggled to account for the role of Beethoven's biography in works that manifest a character or mood other than The Scowl (such as the non-heroic even-numbered symphonies), contemporary listeners did not attempt to reconcile the music with the man and therefore faced no such struggle.

Seeking new perspectives on Beethoven's works that do not conform to the 'myth' has, of course, been a major concern in Beethoven scholarship in recent decades. Here, however, Bonds goes further than offering new interpretations of individual works, and instead posits that the great variety of Beethoven's music reflected a core aspect of his artistic vision. Bonds points to similar variety in Beethoven's personal life and behaviour, from his love of wordplay and punning in his personal correspondence to his mutable relationships with close friends and family, and considers his ability to 'adopt multiple perspectives toward any given object' as characteristic of his approach to life as well as art (p. 10). Beethoven 'liked to look at whatever was before him – a musical idea, a name, a word, a poem, a social situation, even another person – from many different angles and explore their implications and consequences to the fullest' (p. 10). In this succinct summary, Bonds provides a new take on what might be considered 'Beethovenian': not The Scowl in isolation, but rather the variety that characterizes Beethoven's output as a whole.

In other chapters, Bonds deals with biographical themes that have similarly shaped perceptions of Beethoven's music, such as deafness, money, love and politics. The book's non-chronological approach allows each to be considered in the context of Beethoven's life as a whole, and in many portions Bonds finds variety to be the common denominator. The chapter on politics, for instance, discusses the full range of political sentiments that Beethoven expressed both in his music and in his private letters and conversations. Bonds concludes that they must be viewed pragmatically: 'Almost everything he said or did about politics has to be evaluated through the prism of his overarching drive to fulfill his calling to compose' (p. 62). On Beethoven's 'Ideals', the subject of the book's third chapter, Bonds takes a similar position, focusing on the ways in which the composer's religious, ethical and philosophical beliefs tended to collide with the reality of his need to earn a living. The one constant that Bonds recognizes in Beethoven's personal ideals, which arguably influenced his politics as well, is the concept of *Bildung*, the 'imperative to develop and realize one's fullest potential', which characterized Beethoven's approach to life and art, with all its complexities and contradictions (p. 30).

It is telling that the chapter entitled 'The Music' (chapter 10) appears – only after detailed handling of the biographical issues that have clung to interpretations of Beethoven's works since the nineteenth century – as the penultimate chapter in the book. While the earlier chapters also include discussions of the music, this chapter is devoted to an overview of the major genres in which Beethoven composed, without recourse to biography. In describing the distinct profile of each of the symphonies, Bonds makes no mention of the Heiligenstadt Testament or Beethoven's self-professed 'new path' of musical composition in connection with the 'Eroica', and no mention of fate, deafness or struggle in connection with the Fifth. The string quartets are summarized in a single paragraph, without reference to Beethoven's close collaborations

https://doi.org/10.1017/rma.2021.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with the Schuppanzigh Quartet or the illness and family tragedy that plagued him during the composition of the late works. The chapter ends with a summary of the Beethoven performance tradition, from Wagner's and Mahler's reorchestrations to the rise of the historically informed performance-practice movement. At less than 15 pages, the chapter reads like a musical encyclopedia entry for a composer who earned a legitimate place in music history through a varied body of important works. As this chapter demonstrates, it is only by stripping away the biographical tradition that came to dominate Beethoven reception after his death that we are able to view his contribution in similar terms to those of his contemporaries, whose biographies have taken less of a hold in the cultural imagination.

Of all the books under consideration here, Jan Caeyers's *Beethoven: A Life* is the only one that follows the traditional format of artistic biography by presenting a linear account of the composer's life and works. A revised and translated version of Caeyers's major biography previously published in Dutch (2009) and German (2012), it was published in collaboration with the Beethoven-Haus in Bonn for the 2020 anniversary year. In the balance between the music and the life, Caeyers devotes more attention to the life, though he offers much passing commentary on the music that draws on his own perspective as a conductor, touching on practical issues of performance. Caeyers deliberately avoids many of the myths and clichés that have traditionally shaped interpretations of Beethoven's canonical works, though he does not shy away from his own role as an interpreter in his account of the composer's life and music.

The book is divided into 59 relatively short chapters, which would be more than enough to devote one to each year of Beethoven's life, though Caeyers does not always place Beethoven at the centre of the narrative. The early portion of the book sets out a particularly broad contextual landscape for Beethoven's early years in Bonn. The contexts Caeyers touches upon include the history and politics of the two dynasties (the Wittelsbachs and the Habsburgs) that furnished the Bonn court with its elector during Beethoven's early years, as well as the musical heritage of Bach's city of Leipzig, in which Beethoven's teacher Christian Gottlob Neefe received his musical education before arriving in Bonn. The discussion of the Beethoven family also extends back by several generations. The book's prologue begins by introducing Beethoven's great-grandfather Michiel van Beethoven and identifying certain Beethovenian family traits (a firm conviction in their own beliefs, combined with a mistrust of society) both in Michiel and in his sixteenth-century ancestor Josyne, who was burnt at the stake as a witch. The notion of direct influence is clearly a stretch in some of these contexts, though they highlight the perspective that underpins much of the book's narrative, in which Caeyers portrays the composer's character and world view as the product of a particular social and cultural heritage.

In discussions of the music that weave through the entirety of the book's narrative, Caeyers offers a variety of perspectives on the issue of the relationship between life and art. In some places, he consciously avoids the autobiographical interpretations. In discussing the Heiligenstadt Testament, for instance, he avoids reading its profoundly personal confrontation with notions of fate and suffering as something that became manifest in specific works composed in its aftermath. Instead, he offers a refreshing take on the document as a 'masterpiece of rhetoric' which offered Beethoven catharsis as he came to terms with his deafness while also blurring the lines between reality and betraying influences from contemporary fiction and poetry, particularly Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (p. 176).

The Heiligenstadt Testament is conspicuously absent from Caeyers's account of the 'Eroica' Symphony, which occupies an entire chapter and focuses more on the circumstances of its composition and publication than on identifying the work's 'heroic' trajectory as expressive of personal struggles. Caeyers characterizes the composer's original intention to dedicate the

https://doi.org/10.1017/rma.2021.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

symphony to Napoleon as 'more pragmatic than ideological' (p. 218), given that he had his sights on Paris, and that the balance of political power in Europe had been shifting in Napoleon's favour. He also links the symphony's published title, *Sinfonia Eroica composta per festeggiare il sovvenire di un grand Uomo*, to the influence of Beethoven's patron Prince Lobkowitz, who paid for the initial performing rights to the symphony, supported the first rehearsals and performances, and eventually received the dedication. Caeyers suggests Prince Louis Ferdinand of Prussia as a possible candidate for the 'hero' of the work's title, given that he was a leading and much respected figure in the new anti-French coalition, and that his death in October 1806 (just before the publication of the 'Eroica') prompted widespread mourning in Vienna. Noting that Lobkowitz commissioned Dussek to compose an elegy on the death of Louis Ferdinand, Caeyers suggests that he 'also succeeded in convincing Beethoven to give "his" symphony its heroic title' (p. 227).

While Caeyers downplays the traditional autobiographical interpretations in the case of the 'Eroica' Symphony, he nevertheless reads a number of other works as expressive of Beethoven's personal convictions, particularly those that relate to his love interests. Of the relatively few music examples that furnish the book, three present melodies overlaid with text that incorporates 'Josephine' as a suggested motto theme (these are the 'Andante favori', WoO 57, the first movement of the Piano Sonata op. 110, and the Bagatelle op. 126 no. 6). These examples relate to Caeyers's broader interpretation of Beethoven's long-standing emotional involvement with Josephine Deym (née Brunsvick), whom he considers the most likely intended recipient of the 'Immortal Beloved' letter.

The social and cultural world in which Beethoven lived receives more detailed treatment in Caeyers's biography than in many previous life-and-works narratives. Beethoven's visits to spa resorts, for instance, loom large in standard biographical accounts, but few biographers provide much detail about what these spa visits actually entailed. Caeyers presents a colourful picture of life at the Teplitz spa, including the rigorous daily regime of morning bathing and medicinal beverages, and the general holiday atmosphere among the beau monde who visited the spa during the summer months. This context helps to illuminate, among other things, Beethoven's famously disappointing encounter with Goethe at Teplitz in 1812. The meeting took place outside the normal traffic of business and networking in Vienna; rather, it took place in a somewhat superficial environment of high society where Beethoven was never entirely at home. Goethe, by contrast, was an enthusiastic and celebrated regular visitor to fashionable spa towns, and Caeyers effectively characterizes this as part of a wider clash of world views that meant Beethoven and his literary idol never truly 'hit it off' (p. 328). Other portions of the biography similarly illuminate unfamiliar aspects of Beethoven's life and times, though Caeyers's relatively sparing approach to bibliographical referencing means that the reader is sometimes uncertain where the account is rooted in reliable documentary sources and where there is interpretation or speculation. On several occasions the biography makes reference to 'rumours' about Beethoven's activities and motivations, without specifying whether such rumours circulated during the composer's lifetime or first emerged in subsequent biographical writings. The vast quantity of existing documentation of the composer's life, much of it contradictory, is one of the reasons why Beethoven continues to be both a complex and a rewarding subject for biographers.

New biographical facts about Beethoven emerge only sporadically, and they rarely warrant an entire re-evaluation of our understanding of the composer's life and works. The bigger task for Beethoven biographers is to strip back the layers of knowledge that have accumulated across almost two centuries of biographical writings. Yet while Thayer and other nineteenth-century

https://doi.org/10.1017/rma.2021.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

biographers endeavoured to create definitive accounts of their subjects' lives, as true to the essence of their life and works as could be achieved, today's biographers do not attempt to deny their role as interpreters. Lockwood characterizes the biographer's role with reference to Max Klinger's iconic statue of the composer, created for the fourteenth Vienna Secession exhibition in 1902, a version of which is depicted on the cover of his book. Klinger's Beethoven is bare-chested, and Lockwood views the biographer's task as being 'to find ways to clothe the figure imaginatively' (p. ix). Acknowledging the interpretative nature of biography also gives today's biographers licence to be selective in their approach to the life and works, thereby dispensing with the standard teleological narrative, as Tunbridge and Bonds demonstrate in their theme-based approach.

As well as providing a convenient metaphor for the biographer's role, the statue depicted on the cover of Lockwood's book provides further cause for reflection. The image of Beethoven that emerges in these recent publications is strikingly different from that of the mythological composer whose scowling visage, as we are reminded by Bonds, 'confronts us everywhere', from dust jackets and album covers to statues and busts (p. 4). The scowling Beethoven of Joseph Karl Stieler's famous portrait adorns the dust jacket of Bonds's own book, and a modified version of the same appears on that of Caeyers. The Scowl still has a firm hold over the iconography of biographical book covers, even if their contents present a much wider range of perspectives on the composer.

The events of the anniversary year remind us, however, that the public conception of Beethoven is shaped by more than biographical writings and commercialized iconography. When Germans played and sang the 'Ode to Joy' from their balconies during Europe's first Covid-19 lockdown, Beethoven's music became a symbol of unity and brotherhood. That this universal concept of Beethoven should emerge at a time of crisis, despite the demythologizing efforts of music scholars in the past decades, highlights the ongoing emotional appeal of the Beethoven myth. The task of rediscovering Beethoven will continue with each new generation of scholars, but the myth clearly has a life of its own.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rma.2021.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press