

## Classically Speaking: Hearing Beethoven

**Kara McLeland:** By the time Beethoven conducted his 9<sup>th</sup> and final symphony, he profoundly deaf. As the oft-repeated story goes, Beethoven was so lost by the end of the performance that he didn't realize the music had ended, and that the audience behind him was on their feet, roaring with applause.

Sound (under): Excerpt from Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125, final movement

**KM:** The moment has even been immortalized by Hollywood, with a tear-jerker of a scene showing Gary Oldman, as Beethoven, wandering on stage and becoming absentmindedly lost in his own world until a musician turns him around to see his adoring public. The problem with this scene? It's most likely a lie. A lie that not only totally underestimates Beethoven's hard-earned & honed skills as a musician and a composer, but also to the way he navigated his disability.

**Robin Wallace:** According to contemporary accounts, including an eye-witness account of a performance of the 9<sup>th</sup> symphony, Beethoven was acutely aware of everything that was going on in music performed in his presence. He watched the musicians very carefully. He corrected their bowings and other aspects of their performance when they were playing too fast or too slow he knew it and would correct that.

**KM:** As a musicologist, Robin Wallace has spent years doing scholarly research on Beethoven: digging through eyewitness accounts and primary sources, analyzing music scores and historical documents, writing books and academic papers, and eventually making a pilgrimage to Beethoven's birthplace in Germany. You could call him a Beethoven expert. But even with all of this academic rigor, it was a deeply personal event that led him to new insights in his work. That event? His wife Barbara went deaf.

**RW:** Of course, when Barbara lost her hearing in 2003, I was struck by the rather bizarre irony of the whole situation. I wasn't yet ready to think beyond that. You know, I was too focused on just helping her and dealing with the adjustments in our lives to really think about the implications for Beethoven.

**KM:** As Robin witnessed Barbara adjusting to her deafness, and especially to her experience of music — she was, after all, a singer and an avid music listener — he thought, I bet Beethoven had similar experiences, frustrations, successes. It's the focus of his latest book, *Hearing Beethoven: A Story of Musical Loss and Discovery*.

Sound: Beethoven, Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125, mvt. 2

**KM:** I'm Kara McLeland in for Colleen Phelps, and this is Classically Speaking. On this episode, how Robin Wallace busts some major Beethoven myths and challenges the way the hearing world thinks about Beethoven's deafness.

So if the old story of Beethoven getting totally lost at the premiere of his 9<sup>th</sup> symphony isn't true, what does Robin think happened that night? Well, he says that the moment probably took place during the end of the second movement.

**RW:** And it wasn't unusual at that time, unlike today, for an audience to applaud at the end of each movement of a piece or even in the middle of a movement if they liked something that they heard. And so what I believe happened is that at the end of the second movement, Beethoven was aware that the music was over because he was watching, but he wasn't aware that the audience was applauding because they were behind him. So that was when the singer came and turned him around to see that. And that, of course, changes the significance of the story considerably.

Sound (cont.): Beethoven, Symphony No. 9, mvt. 2

**KM:** Browse the internet and you'll find lots of content about people "overcoming" their disabilities. There's this one of kind of meme I've seen several version of, showing an athlete running with prosthetic limbs, and a caption that reads something like "What's your excuse?" like it's the job of this disabled person to motivate you to go on a jog. Then there's the videos you've probably seen of deaf babies getting cochlear implants and being overjoyed at hearing their mom's voice for the first time. This video goes viral because this child's disability has been fixed, right? But lots of members of the disability rights community really take issue with this whole concept, which they've dubbed "inspiration porn." The argument is that it objectifies disabled people, and promotes this harmful idea that the most ideal way to have disability is to overcome it.

And this is one the biggest ideas about Beethoven's story that Robin Wallace wants to bust in his book.

**RW:** The idea that he overcame his deafness and managed to write music which was essentially the same as he would have written otherwise. I prefer the narrative that says that rather than

overcoming his deafness he adjusted to it, accommodated to it, and learned to work with it and produced different music as a result.

**KM:** In other words, Beethoven didn't write the music he did despite being deaf. He wrote it the way he did because he was deaf. Disabilities are complex and personal and there's usually more to the story than you can see on the surface. Barbara Wallace passed away in 2011, but eight years earlier she received a cochlear implant. Robin explains that her experience was far more complicated than the heartwarming videos of kids you might see on your Facebook page.

**RW:** I get kind of upset when I see those videos because I know that those clips that they show are very carefully chosen, as I'm sure the people who put them together know. Many children who get implants, their initial reaction when they start hearing something is they're scared. When the implant is first activated, what you hear is not anything like normal hearing. And Barbara, far from being delighted at those first sounds was kind of disappointed in them and didn't quite know what to make of it. But the implant is not a magic fix. It's— you don't just turn it on and you can hear.

**KM:** Robin says that this is, in part, because hearing doesn't actually happen in the ear.

**RW:** It's actually the brain that hears. The ears are just a delivery mechanism. We had a lot of experiences where she would hear a sound that she didn't recognize because it didn't sound at all like what she remembered hearing. So I would have to identify it for her. That's a dog barking, that's a plane flying by overhead. And after I made those connections— this was really bizarre— but she would say then the next time she heard that sound, not only was she able to identify what it was but it actually sounded the way that she remembered it hearing.

**KM:** Together Robin and Barbara began to file sounds into what they referred to as the “Rolodex” in her brain. Coming up after the break, the music filed away in that Rolodex that changed everything.

Sound: Ad for 91Classical.

**KM:** Imagine being a musician and having to re-learn how to hear music. That's what Barbara Wallace had to do after she received her cochlear implant.

**RW:** She was riding around on the car listening to the radio and the Beatles song “Eight Days a Week” came on and at first it just sounded like sort of staticky bad reception.

Sound (under): Radio static

**RW:** But suddenly she figured out what the song was. And from that moment on it kind of clicked and she heard the rest of the song just like she remembered it.

Sound: static gradually fades into “Eight Days A Week.”

**RW:** Another example was when our daughter Jennifer was playing the Offenbach can-can on her violin. And Barbara was suddenly able to recognize what it was. And the reason for that, I think, is that the can-can— that's the [sings] bum bum bum bum bum bum...

Sound: Offenbach Can-Can enters under Robin's singing

**RW:** It's a melody that is easy to recognize, because it was short, it's catchy, it's memorable. Now what else is short, catchy, and memorable in music?

Sound: Opening of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67

**KM:** Four notes. Two pitches. A short, catchy motive that Beethoven built an entire symphony around.

**RW:** So that was another one of those aha moments. That yes, short recognizable material works for somebody who is hard of hearing. So, you know, we tend to think that Beethoven wasn't writing music for people with hearing problems, but he may have actually been doing so, both for himself and for others.

Sound (cont.) Beethoven's Symphony No. 5

**KM:** The cochlear implant was invented in 1957, well over a century after Beethoven died. But the composer did have other ways to enhance his diminishing hearing. Some of the most persistent stories, though, aren't true:

**RW:** Beethoven did *not* take the legs off of his piano and put it on the floor. He did not hold a rod between his teeth and connect to the piano. The kinds of experiences he had are more subtle.

**KM:** Beethoven did have ear trumpets, an old-timey hearing aid that Robin says works surprisingly well. He tried an exact replica of one while visiting Beethoven's birthplace of Bonn, Germany.

**RW:** So, you know, another myth I had to bust is the idea that Beethoven didn't get much out of his ear trumpets. I think they helped him for at least a decade in conversing with other people and possibly in hearing music as well. One thing he would not have been able to do was play the piano with one of them, because you have to use one or both hands to hold them in place.

**KM:** When he played, Robin says that Beethoven experimented with removing the lid to his piano and attaching a special resonator, which was essentially this arch of metal that directed the sound right back at him. Robin tried a cardboard replica of one of these resonators too, while wearing sound-cancelling earmuffs, so he could hear as little as possible. He said this helped him understand how Beethoven experienced music as so much more than sound.

**RW:** Music is a very physical thing. I think that physical experience of music is something that Deaf people are still very aware of. They experience music as vibration. They experience that as

something that they can connect with through their bodies. Playing with the resonator in place was also a very physical experience. But it also in my experience increased the intensity of the vibration.

Sound: Opening of Beethoven's Grosse Fuge for string quartet, Op. 133

**KM:** When I was in school, one of our music theory assignments was to analyze the score for a fugue, which essentially functions like a musical puzzle. A theme is introduced and then imitated in succession and with variation by other voices or instruments. Our assignment was to circle the entrance of each voice, to see visually how each of these puzzle piece fit together in harmony. And seeing how the notation functioned on the page suddenly made it easier to understand the fugue when we listened to it.

**RW:** But I think it's no coincidence that Beethoven became increasingly interested in fugal writing in the last years of his life because it is so visual. The deafer he got, the more Beethoven sketched and sketched and sketched and worked and revised and changed things on paper.

**KM:** And this goes against some common held ideas that Beethoven, especially as he became more deaf, was just able to hear full-formed pieces of music in his head and write them down without revision. We're hearing part of the Grosse Fuge for string quartet, which is now considered one of Beethoven's finest achievements. He wrote it in 1825, two years before his death and some 30 years after he first began to lose his hearing in his mid-twenties. And it's a testament to just how sharp he was musically all the way until the end, and how he used the visual aspect of composing to push the envelope, musically speaking.

**RW:** Beethoven was experimenting rather extravagantly with voice crossings, with effects that are visible on paper but considerably more confusing if you tried to sort them out with your ears alone.

**KM:** As Beethoven's hearing declined, the more music became this physical and a visual experience for him. He found ways to accommodate and adapt to his disability, and wrote music that was directly informed by it. But as it turns out, Beethoven never really expressed any concern that becoming deaf would affect his ability to write music. Even in his famous Heiligenstadt Testament, this letter he wrote to his brothers in 1802 lamenting about his encroaching deafness, Beethoven says that the thought of creating more music was the only thing keeping him from taking his own life.

**RW:** What he exclusively—and I really do mean exclusively—lamented in that that testament was how difficult a time he was having socially, and particularly his fear that if it got out that he was losing his hearing he would become kind of a laughing stock among other musicians, which was an idea that was just horrendous to him. And I found that's another very deep connection that I made with my experience with Barbara, that the social isolation caused by deafness is really overwhelming. Barbara said that the time between when she lost her hearing and when she got the first implant was like being in solitary confinement.

**KM:** Did Beethoven write music about these feelings? If you look at the old narrative- the one where he overcomes deafness, you might hear it in his defiant and ultimate triumphant fifth symphony. But no one in Beethoven's day, or Beethoven himself, ever claimed that any of the composer's own story was embedded in that symphony. If you want to hear autobiography in music, Robin says you need to listen elsewhere.

Sound: Excerpt from Beethoven's *Fidelio* Op. 72

**RW:** The dungeon scene in *Fidelio* which he wrote just a few years after the Heiligenstadt Testament in which you come upon Florestan being held in solitary confinement, in darkness, in total isolation from other people. And that is what he laments— that in the springtime of his life his joy has been taken away from him. I really believe that that's Beethoven speaking there.

Sound: *Fidelio* excerpt cont.

**KM:** Since his death, Beethoven has become this towering figure of music, for both the composers and audiences that came after him. He's been called a genius, the greatest composer to ever live. But here's what Robin hopes you take away from his book:

Sound: Beethoven Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major, Op. 109, mvt. 3

**RW:** Oh that Beethoven was a human being just like the rest of us. That he was working and dealing with very human concerns and experiences, including disability, which is something that many of us face at some time in our lives. Beethoven's music is not some kind of freak show or some sort of miraculous product of a superpower, but it is music that is profoundly human because it comes out of human experience and speaks to the rest of us very directly.

**KM:** Classically Speaking is a production of Nashville Public Radio's 91Classical. Anita Bugg edits the show, Carl Pedersen is our engineer. Be sure to subscribe so you don't miss an episode, and while you're there, go ahead and rate and review us to help spread the good classical word. I'm Kara McLeland, thanks for listening to Classically Speaking.

