

PROLOGUE

Mechelen (Belgium), Saturday, March 29, 1727. Michiel van Beethoven sits at his windowsill, reflecting on life. Having turned forty-three the previous month, he now feels he is getting old, and he yearns for new challenges. For twenty long years he has been rising early to run the bakery that once belonged to his father-in-law, and that novelty has well and truly worn off. In fact, he has derived far more enjoyment in recent years from the purchase of property in Mechelen, the city where his father had come to settle fifty years before. In addition to his own home on Jodenstraat, he has managed to acquire two others on the same street (albeit with the aid of a hefty mortgage). He inherited an additional two houses from his father's side—Meersman and the Appolonia Guild—and will soon take possession of a third (Molenkarre). His penchant for real estate has put him in the footsteps of his great-grandfather Hendrik, who had done exactly the same a century before, only on a more modest scale, as he had made it as a major landowner in Boortmeerbeek, a small village nestled between Mechelen and Leuven.

Most of Michiel van Beethoven's fortune, however, came from his (only slightly shady) dealings in antique furniture and artworks. This is the one area where he now wishes to expand, although he also has his sights set on the lucrative market for Mechelen lace. The risks, he knows, are substantial; earning real money in the lace sector would mean importing cheaper lace from Brussels and Courtray (Kortrijk), which in turn would require sizeable investments and the use of tenuous promissory notes. But he is determined to take the plunge, to satisfy his desire to enter high society and to secure a place among the city's wealthiest.

Michiel's motivation is also fueled by a score that he has to settle with history. Over a century earlier, his great-great-grandmother Josyne van

Beethoven was burned at the stake after having been accused of witchcraft by her neighbors. Josyne was a unique woman: emancipated, self-assured, and idealistic. She also had a lively and independent spirit, which hardly worked in her favor at a time when the lines between faith, naïveté, and superstition were very fine indeed. Paradoxically, this characteristic was precisely what prompted the suspicion that she had concluded a pact with the devil. A small, targeted campaign by several jealous villagers was all that was needed to gather the necessary evidence, and the deadly cocktail of intrigue, slander, and gossip worked its own magic. Josyne van Beethoven was arrested, and after initially refusing to confess (further proof of her diabolical collusion) and subsequently being subjected to horrendous torture, she finally submitted and was publicly executed. For a while it also seemed that all the property belonging to her bewildered husband would be seized, but that fiasco was staved off by a combination of dexterous diplomacy and Beethovenian tenacity.

This traumatic experience was deeply etched into the memories of the Van Beethovens, who went on to nurture a deep-seated and healthy distrust of society in general. At the same time, it also became a source of strength, as all the Van Beethovens possessed an unshakable conviction in their own beliefs and ideals, a quality that they owed to their ancestral mother and martyr, Josyne.

Michiel van Beethoven passed on this ethos to his two children. The eldest son, Cornelius, showed great promise. With his level head, sense of duty, and innate knack for business, he was certain to make a surefooted way through life and the world. The younger son, Louis, was the black sheep of the family. He had a fine voice and as a six-year-old was accepted into Het Koralen Huis, the choirboys' school attached to St. Rombout's Cathedral in Mechelen. Once his son's voice had broken, Michiel drew up a private teaching contract with cathedral organist Antoine Colfs, who was to instruct Louis further on the organ and teach him basso continuo. For make no mistake: Michiel might let his son pursue music, but not without ambition. A mere organist's post at some far-flung parish church was out of the question.

Vienna, Thursday, March 29, 1827. Ludwig van Beethoven died three days ago. Today is his funeral. Because of the many guests expected to attend—townsfolk and visitors from outside the city—the ceremony has been resched-

uled for the afternoon. But the turnout far exceeds all expectations; despite the cold (and even the odd remaining patch of snow), an estimated twenty thousand people from all levels of society flock to the House of the Black-Robed Spaniards (the Schwarzspanierhaus) near the city wall, close to Schottentor Tower in Alservorstadt. Beethoven's coffin lies prepared in the inner courtyard, and police have been called in to hold back the pressing crowds at the entry gate. Four trombonists and sixteen singers perform a special arrangement of the *Equali for Four Trombones* (WoO 30), which Beethoven had composed for All Souls' Day in 1812 in Linz. Another arrangement follows, of the funeral march from the *Piano Sonata in A-flat Major* (op. 26). The music, with its Beethovenian darkness and chilling penetration, stirs the emotional crowds to the very core.

The majestic cortège sets off at three-thirty that afternoon. Led by a bevy of priests, the richly decorated coffin is borne by eight singers from the opera, surrounded by as many Kapellmeisters wearing white stoles, and joined by about forty other friends and fellow artists—poets, actors, composers, and musicians including Schubert, Czerny, Schuppanzigh, and Franz Grillparzer. All are dressed entirely in black (right down to the gloves), with a white lily in their left hand and a decorated floral torch in the right. Next comes a delegation of conservatory students (the schools are closed as a sign of mourning), and the procession concludes with an impressive assembly of dignitaries.

The entourage presses its way through the undulating crowds with great difficulty, taking an hour and a half to travel five hundred meters and reach the Minorite Church of the Holy Trinity on Alsergasse. After the funeral service, Beethoven's body is placed in a beautifully ornate hearse carriage led by four horses, and driven to Währing Cemetery, escorted by an impressive caravan of around two hundred coaches. At the gates of the cemetery, in a solemn, stirring voice, actor Heinrich Anschütz reads the funeral oration composed by Grillparzer. Graceful and elegant, and with the perfect blend of grandiloquence and pathos, Grillparzer speaks on behalf of the nation and of German-speaking peoples everywhere. He talks of Beethoven, who "is now among the greatest men of all time" and who "inherited and surpassed the immortal fame of Handel and Bach, of Haydn and Mozart." He foretells that all those succeeding Beethoven can go no further, since their predecessor "ended where art itself ends," and concludes with words of consolation to all those present: "Look back to this moment and remember: we were there when he was buried; and when he died, we wept!"¹

The crowd listens with bated breath, and tears are shed. Once the coffin, bedecked with three laurel wreaths, has been lowered into the ground, several hundred copies of memorial poems by Castelli and Schlechta, printed specially for the occasion, are distributed. As the last of the crowds trickle out of the cemetery, the sun sets.

Leuven, Thursday, March 29, 2007. With a sense of wonder, I picture the spectacle that took place exactly one hundred and eighty years ago around the Schottentor in Vienna. Even if the estimated crowd of twenty thousand is a little dubious, the massive turnout and all the pomp and circumstance must have lent an exceptional allure to the occasion. In Vienna such a funeral is what people would call a *scheene Leich*—literally, a “pretty corpse.” There can be no doubt that nowadays such a funeral would be televised live, to the great satisfaction of the Viennese, who have always held a fascination for both death and the theater.

Another sign of Beethoven’s importance was the sheer level of hypocrisy demonstrated that chilly afternoon. The surging crowds and emotions were, after all, directly at odds with the marginalized existence that Beethoven had led toward the end of his career. For nearly fifteen years before Beethoven’s death, the Viennese cultural scene had been dominated by the common tastes of the Biedermeiers, who wallowed comfortably in their cocoons of simple, pedestrian, nonthreatening art. They were captivated by the brilliant, effortless, and effervescent music of the next generation: Joseph Lanner and Johann Strauss senior, in particular. It was music that titillated the senses but placed no demands on the mind.

Beethoven stood for the opposite of Biedermeier values and had long ceased to be a man of his time. His later works were the very antithesis of agreeableness and elegance. It was willful music, requiring much effort to write, to perform, and to hear—very different from the works he had written for performance at the Congress of Vienna more than ten years before, which *were* pleasing to the ear and had earned him the greatest fame and fortune he had ever known.

Eyebrows might also be raised at the Italian opera singers who literally bore Beethoven to his grave, since not a single note of the late master’s music had crossed their lips for over fifteen years. Vienna was under Rossini’s spell and had fallen head over heels for his light and bubbly “champagne music.” Beethoven and Rossini were musical antipoles, living in different times and

writing for different audiences. Rossini's remarks during their only meeting in April 1822 most likely fell—both literally and figuratively—on deaf ears.

And what of the eight Kapellmeisters who with great humility (and possibly even greater relief) accompanied Beethoven to his final banishment outside the city walls? Among them, only the Bohemian composer Johann Nepomuk Hummel could boast enough talent, personality, and success to be justified in his effulgent words and estimation of Beethoven.

And yet there are reasons why so many Viennese felt the need to bid farewell to a man with whom they fundamentally shared little, and whom for years they had treated almost exclusively as a local curiosity. They must have known that Beethoven's principal works were being performed in Europe's major capitals. The *Missa solemnis* had premiered in St. Petersburg, and by 1827 the Ninth Symphony had already been aired in London, Frankfurt, Aachen, Leipzig, and Berlin. They might also have already caught wind of the fact that Beethoven had declined a potential commission from Boston, in far-off America. They knew that Beethoven—born as a common citizen in an age that was extremely sensitive to the subtlest shifts in social hierarchy—had succeeded in penetrating the uppermost echelons of society. The list of emperors who knew and appreciated his music and who commissioned or even played his works was long indeed: Emperor of Russia Alexander I, Kings Frederick William II and III of Prussia, King Frederick Augustus I of Saxony, King Jérôme Bonaparte of Westphalia, and King Charles XIV John of Sweden—not to mention the Hapsburgs, among whom the Archduke Rudolf stood out as an excellent pianist and Beethoven interpreter. And although by then the noblest aristocrats had already withdrawn into their complacent bubbles of seclusion and social irrelevance, Beethoven's status as an icon of their elite cultural identity must still have appealed to the common people.

I too am fascinated by the sheer dimensions assumed by Beethoven's fame within the space of only a few decades. Nowadays the notion of a “meteoric rise to fame” is all too familiar: stories of children making it from paperboy to media tycoon or escaping abject poverty and neglect to become a head of state. But such tales were unimaginable in the eighteenth century, when society was far more static and lines of communication infinitely slower. In this context, the legend of how the great-grandchild of a provincial Belgian baker came to be one of the most illustrious residents of the Viennese musical metropolis, as well as a pivotal figure in European cultural history, captures our imagination—even today.

It is this exceptional tale that I wish to tell: of the journey made by the little boy from Bonn; of the abundance of improvised ideas cascading from his piano and captivating the minds of those around him; of the subsequent struggle to channel his creativity effectively as a piano virtuoso in Vienna; of a tragic auditory condition that forced him to give up his career as a performer and seek renewed and deeper meaning as an artist by devoting himself exclusively to composition; and finally, at the end of his life, of Beethoven the *Tonkünstler* (or the “tonal artist,” as he wished to be known), who had obtained such a mastery of his craft that—in complete liberation, utter detachment, and full self-assurance—he could once again give free rein to his imagination despite, or perhaps because of, his deafness.

I also wish to describe the perilous nature of his journey: the many obstacles and setbacks that Beethoven was forced to overcome, as well as the bouts of uncertainty, desperation, and crippling doubt to which he fell victim more than once. I will occasionally even suggest that things might have turned out differently, as Beethoven’s fate was not always in his own hands. Several weeks after Beethoven’s death, Georg August von Griesinger (a Saxon diplomat in Vienna, friend to Beethoven, and Haydn’s first biographer) had the right notion when he claimed that the principal driving force in Beethoven’s life was his profound genius.² Genius is hardly a guarantee of world fame, however. The same can be said of a genius as of a child prodigy: no gifted child ever becomes a wunderkind through sheer force of will alone. The child’s surroundings, support base, upbringing, and circumstances—even marketing—are all factors that help exceptional talent achieve exceptional status. I therefore wish to unravel the networks that influenced Beethoven’s career, to paint portraits of those who supported him, and to outline the many interests (both direct and indirect) that were at play.

Of course, no Beethoven biography would be complete without an examination of how the nineteenth-century music scene—and indeed music itself—was radically altered by his influence. After Beethoven, nothing was the same. Composers were no longer the default performers of their own music; musical scores became straightjackets, granting fewer liberties to performers; the onus of creativity had shifted from improvisation to interpretation; composition had become a separate discipline, subject to loftier abstract and aesthetic ideals; music was infused with greater complexity and gravitas, forcing audiences to take a different approach to listening; the gap between connoisseurs and ordinary music lovers widened; and composers enjoyed a new social status, accompanied by the associated economic perils and pros-

pects (we need only recall Beethoven's rocky dealings with the increasingly influential publishing world). In short, composers had evolved from craftsmen into artists, a fact of which they were themselves only too aware. In Beethoven's case, one sign of this mindset was the fact that he rarely threw away a single score, draft, or sketch—he was cognizant of his own “oeuvre” from the very beginning. It is an intriguing realization that this metamorphosis took place within the span of one man's career, a man who fought constantly and mercilessly against the limitations of his time. Of course, these shifts in society were already brewing to some extent. But is genius not characterized by the ability to grasp latent and nebulous trends and bring them to expression with brevity and clarity? Any Beethoven biographer, therefore, cannot sidestep the analysis of what Egon Friedell dubbed the “complicated and inscrutable reconciliation between a genius and his time.”³

Beethoven biographers are also expected to pepper his life story with other commentaries on that very story. Biographers are, of course, at the mercy of the arbitrary manner in which history covers its tracks, and the portrait one paints is largely determined by whatever information still happens to be available. (One can only imagine how different this account would be if, for example, we still had access to the ten thousand or so letters that specialists believe were sent to or by Beethoven, of which only slightly more than two thousand remain.) In Beethoven's case, the view afforded us is especially blurry due to the egregious treatment suffered by many of the source materials immediately following his death, supposedly with the aim of protecting his image.

The perpetrator of these acts was a man named Anton Felix Schindler. He was a prototypical sycophant, obsessed with infiltrating the famous composer's intimate circle of friends in the hopes of somehow—if not during Beethoven's lifetime, then at the very least afterward—deploying his status as a “Beethoven watcher” to catapult himself out of his own mediocrity. (The fact that Schindler warrants extensive discussion in this very prologue is a testament to his unwavering dedication in this respect.) Schindler claimed to have worked as Beethoven's personal secretary from 1816 until the composer's death and to have done so unpaid, thus earning him the rare and privileged title of *ami de Beethoven*.⁴ That he did perform secretarial duties for Beethoven cannot be denied (although it should be noted that matters of genuine import were attended to by others). Beethoven's supposed regard for

him as a true friend, however, is a barefaced lie. In reality Schindler was a source of irritation, and Beethoven was usually cold and abrupt with him. In their mutual correspondence, Schindler was one of the rare figures on whom Beethoven never wasted a term of address or even a friendly greeting, and his tone barely rose above a snarl. Schindler was also seldom tolerated at the table. And the more Beethoven rejected Schindler's attentions, the more Schindler longed to be a meaningful presence in his life.

Along with Beethoven's trusted friend from Bonn, Stephan von Breuning, Schindler eventually succeeded in spending the final few weeks of the ailing composer's life at his bedside and thus became a privileged witness to the grim battle with death waged by one of the most important figures of the day. What is more (according to Schindler), several days before Beethoven's passing, he and Breuning had been charged with the solemn responsibility of preserving his creative legacy and reputation. They were asked to see that the right person was appointed to write his biography so that Beethoven could be certain that his name and body of work would not be tarnished by his many enemies who stood to benefit. To this end, Breuning and Schindler were permitted to leave with important documents in hand: Breuning took the papers of a more commercial nature, and Schindler took the rest. Two months later, however, Breuning himself passed away, and his death marked the disappearance of the only eyewitness who could testify to Beethoven's (extremely profitable) bequest to Schindler. The suspicion that Schindler did not receive but rather appropriated his biographical remit and the accompanying documents would shadow him forever.

In September 1827, Schindler asked German music critic Friedrich Rochlitz to do the final editing for the first Beethoven biography. Schindler claimed it had been Beethoven's express wish; it was more likely Schindler's own confection. Rochlitz refused, citing health reasons. Franz Wegeler, a doctor from Koblenz and a childhood friend of Beethoven's, was also asked to supply the material for part 1 of the biography, but ceased collaboration once he saw that Schindler was making little headway with the publication. Wegeler suspected that Schindler had a hidden agenda, and in 1834 he began work on his own biography project. Almost immediately he was joined by Ferdinand Ries, a former pupil of Beethoven's whom Schindler had asked not long before to write about Beethoven's early years in Vienna (to replace the deceased Breuning). But Ries felt it was also important for readers to learn about the great artist's less congenial qualities, and on that score he had several juicy anecdotes of his own to tell. This met with a veto by Schindler, who was deter-

mined to keep his deathbed vow to Beethoven; the book was to be a hagiography, plain and simple. As a result, Schindler was ultimately isolated. The circumstance was not entirely to his disadvantage, as he thus retained the exclusive rights to an official biography supposedly authorized by the composer himself, although this can never have been Beethoven's real intention.⁵

The truth is that Schindler was not in a position to bring the project to a successful end. He had only known Beethoven for a short while, after all, and most of the accounts at his disposal were secondhand at best. He also knew too little about music to write effectively on Beethoven's works, and all evidence suggests that his claim of having taken lessons from Beethoven was a further concoction. When his *Biographie von Ludwig van Beethoven* appeared in 1840, the reviews were scathing. Schindler's authority in general was called into question, which troubled him deeply given his primary aim of putting himself in the spotlight. He defended himself by appealing to the unique source materials in his possession, which he called his "magic books"—the nearly two hundred conversation notebooks that he had scavenged from Beethoven's lodgings after his death.⁶ Beethoven had been almost completely deaf since 1818, with no choice but to communicate with others in writing, especially in public spaces where for reasons of discretion or to avoid embarrassment he wished to avoid having people bellow into his ears. Occasionally he would use a slate, which was periodically wiped clean. But generally he would resort to small notebooks, in which mainly his interlocutors but sometimes he himself jotted down words and phrases. Like his musical scores and sketches, Beethoven held on to these notebooks, clinging to artifacts from the past as though they could compensate for a lack of human contact. The notebooks are a rich source of information, although they usually contain only half of the "conversation," and it is sometimes impossible to guess what Beethoven himself might have said. (The notebooks can probably best be compared to cassette tapes used to record only one half of a telephone call.)

Schindler had access to this unique body of material, and in the second edition of his biography he included an appendix with key citations from the notebooks, in an attempt to show how implicitly Beethoven trusted him (Schindler even compared their friendship to that between the mythical heroes Orestes and Pylades⁷), and also to demonstrate the elevated caliber of their discourse.

Scholars worked out early on that Schindler—in his well-intentioned attempt to keep Beethoven's image intact—had destroyed many of the

conversation books and ripped pages out of others that he believed contained compromising material. But it was not until the 1970s that a far more serious offense was unearthed: the addition of fictitious exchanges between Beethoven and Schindler himself. It was then that researchers from the criminology department of Berlin's Humboldt University made one of the most important discoveries in all of Beethoven research. Using techniques that were originally developed to decipher terrorist communications and letter bombs, they not only demonstrated that many of the notebook entries had been added later by Schindler, but through meticulous analysis of the ink they could also date the forgeries to the precise period between 1840 and 1845. Their forensic expertise also revealed that the culprit's personality had changed in the meantime; whereas Schindler had previously been a timid and subservient party to the conversation, by 1840 his handwriting had changed to that of a scared, threatened, and even neurotic man who, with his back against the wall, doctored the facts to suit his fiction.

The discovery sent shockwaves through Beethoven scholarship, as it proved that much of the information used to sculpt his likeness over the previous 150 years had been falsified and could be relegated to the scrapheap. Even certain seemingly incontrovertible theoretical insights about Beethoven's music—which had provided the basis for an entire tradition of Beethoven interpretation—could no longer be maintained.

But possibly even more distressing is the fact that all of the events reported faithfully by Schindler in his biography are now enveloped in a shroud of uncertainty and are the subject of endless and futile debate between believers and nonbelievers. Conscientious Beethoven biographers will often—and far more often than they would like—face agonizing choices, and the temptation is great to perpetuate fabricated or embellished anecdotes for the sheer pleasure they give in the telling. The stories about Beethoven are, after all, as much a part of the Beethoven story as the story itself.