



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Beethoven's Heiligenstadt Testament (1802)

At the recommendation of his physician, Johann Adam Schmidt, Beethoven spent the summer of 1802 in the quiet and rural Viennese suburb of Heiligenstadt. During these months he composed much of his lighthearted Symphony No. 2, although his thoughts about his deafness remained dark. During this summer Beethoven poured out these feelings in a last will and testament, addressed specifically to his brothers, Carl and Johann, but also to all of mankind. The document gives a rare insight into the composer's turbulent mind and conception of self, and it is given here in its entirety. Writing did not come easily to Beethoven, and the Heiligenstadt Testament was probably worked over repeatedly, and then written out in a fair copy. Beethoven kept this entirely to himself, and it was discovered only after his death. Among the many curious aspects of the testament is that Beethoven was unable to write the name of his younger brother, Johann, which is repeatedly left blank. Also, the composer miscalculated his own age, which he gives as twenty-eight, although he was thirty-one when the document was written.

For my brothers Carl and Beethoven

Oh you men who think or say that I am malevolent, stubborn, or misanthropic, how greatly do you wrong me. You do not know the secret cause which makes me seem that way to you. From childhood on my heart and soul have been full of the tender feeling of goodwill, and I was ever inclined to accomplish great things. But, think that for six years now I have been hopelessly afflicted, made worse by senseless physicians, from year to year deceived with hopes of improvement, finally compelled to face the prospect of a *lasting malady* (whose cure will take years or perhaps be impossible). Though born with a fiery, active temperament, even susceptible to the diversions of society, I was soon compelled to withdraw myself, to live life alone. If at times I tried to forget all this, oh how harshly was I flung back by the doubly sad experience of my bad hearing. Yet it was impossible for me to say to people, "Speak louder, shout, for I am deaf." Ah, how could I possibly admit an infirmity in the one sense which ought to be more perfect in me than in others, a sense which I once possessed in the highest perfection, a perfection such as few in my profession enjoy or ever have enjoyed.—Oh I cannot do it, therefore forgive me when you see me draw back when I would have gladly mingled with you. My misfortune is doubly painful to me because I am bound to be misunderstood; for me there can be no relaxation with my fellow men, no refined conversations, no mutual exchange of ideas. I must live almost alone like one who has been banished; I can mix with society only as much as true necessity demands. If I approach near to people, a hot terror seizes upon me and I fear being exposed to the danger that my condition might be noticed. Thus it has been during the last six months, which I have spent in the country. By ordering me to spare my hearing as much as possible, my intelligent doctor almost fell in with my own present frame of mind, though sometimes I ran counter to it by yielding to my desire for companionship. But what a humiliation for me when someone standing next to me heard a flute in the distance, and I *heard nothing*, or someone heard a shepherd singing, and again I heard nothing. Such incidents drove me almost to despair. A little more of that and I would have ended my life—it was only *my art* that held me back. Ah, it seemed to me impossible to leave the world until I had brought forth all that I felt was within me. So I endured this wretched existence—truly wretched for so susceptible a body which can be thrown by a sudden change from the best condition to the very worst.—*Patience*, they say, is what I must now choose for my guide, and I have done so.—I hope my determination will remain firm to endure until it pleases the inexorable Parcae to break the thread.

Perhaps I shall get better; perhaps not, I am ready.—Forced to become a philosopher already in my twenty-eighth year, oh it is not easy, and for the artist much more difficult than for anyone else.—Divine One, thou seest my inmost soul, thou knowest that therein dwells the love of mankind and the desire to do good. Oh fellow men, when at some point you read this, consider then that you have done me an injustice; someone who has had misfortune may console himself to find a similar case to his, who despite all the limitations of Nature nevertheless did everything within his powers to become accepted among worthy artists and men.—You my brothers Carl and as soon as I am dead, if Dr. Schmidt is still alive, ask him in my name to describe my malady, and attach this written document to his account of my illness so that so far as is possible at least the world may become reconciled to me after my death.—At the same time I declare you two to be the heirs to my small fortune (if so it can be called); divide it fairly; bear with and help each other. What injury you have done me you know was long ago forgiven. To you, brother Carl, I give special thanks for the attachment you have shown me of late. It is my wish that you may have a better and freer life than I have had. Recommend *virtue* to your children; it alone, not money, can make them happy. I speak from experience; this was what upheld me in time of misery. Thanks to it and to my art I did not end my life by suicide.—Farewell and love each other.—I thank all my friends, particularly *Prince Lichnowsky* and *Professor Schmidt*.—I would like the instruments from Prince L. to be preserved by one of you but not to be the cause of strife between you, and as soon as they can serve you a better purpose, then sell them. How happy I shall be if I can still be helpful to you in my grave—so be it.—With joy I hasten to meet death.—If it comes before I have had the chance to develop all my artistic capacities, it will still be coming too soon despite my harsh fate, and I should probably wish it later—yet even so I should be happy, for would it not free me from a state of endless suffering?—Come when thou wilt, I shall meet thee bravely.—Farewell and do not wholly forget me when I am dead; I deserve this from you, for during my lifetime I was thinking of you often and of ways to make you happy—please be so—

Ludwig van Beethoven [seal]

[on a separate leaf]

Heiligenstadt, October 6, 1802. For my brothers Carl and to be read and executed after my death.

Heiligenstadt, October 10th, 1802, thus I bid you farewell—and indeed sadly—yes, that fond hope—which I brought here with me, to be cured to a degree at least—this I must now wholly abandon. As the leaves of autumn fall and are withered—so likewise has my hope been blighted—I leave here—almost as I came—even the high courage—which often inspired me in the beautiful days of summer—has disappeared—Oh Providence—grant me at last but one day of pure joy—it is so long since real joy echoed in my heart. Oh when—Oh when, Oh Divine One—shall I feel it again in the temple of nature and of mankind—Never?—No—Oh that would be too hard.

Source: Alexander Thayer, *The Life of Beethoven*, ed. Henry Krehbiel (New York: Beethoven Association, 1921).