

Ludwig van Beethoven to the Distant Beloved (An Die Ferne Geliebte)

The Story of Creation

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Abstract—The article discusses various assumptions on creation of the song cycle *To the Distant Beloved* by Ludwig van Beethoven, establishing connections between the first song cycles with German amateur vocal circles in the late 18th – early 19th centuries. The authors apply the comparative-historical method to take a closer look at its musical semantics.

Keywords—*Ludwig van Beethoven; song cycle; Liederkreis*

I. INTRODUCTION

The reasons and purposes of why Beethoven had created his cycle *To the Distant Beloved* continue to generate scientific debate. The authors of monographs, dedicated to the life and works of the great composer, often consider this work to be connected with his romantic affections, to begin with his “immortal beloved”. Larisa Kirillina, the author of the major Russian treatise dedicated to Beethoven, describes the cycle as an “epilogue to composer’s love story written in songs”, noting that it “happened to coincide with his shocking experience which survived 5 years before and which he still couldn’t forget” [3, Vol. 2, 130].

II. THE STORY OF CREATION

There are some evidence referring mostly to 1812, that Beethoven was captivated by a certain lady. One of it is memoirs of Fanny Giannattasio del Rio, the older daughter of the headmaster of the boarding school, which Beethoven’s nephew attended. The girl was in love with the composer and her father tried to talk with him about it. Fanny overheard a part of their conversation as evidenced by her diary: ... It started with my father’s words that Beethoven led a miserable existence and it could be changed, if he found a virtuous, loving woman, being able to overcome patiently numerous difficulties connected with his hearing loss. My father asked him if he had anybody in view. I listened very attentively from afar and found out a thing which deeply impressed me and which I had suspected for a long time – he was unhappy in love! Five years ago he met a woman and would consider the greatest happiness to be with her. But it was almost impossible, it was a chimera. “For me it’s like on the first day. I appeared not able to forget it” - these words

hurt me. It meant that, again, he had to suffer... From now on, he became estranged and I hid the pain deep in my heart [cited after: 3, Vol. 2, 127–128].

According to the diary, the conversation took place in the autumn of 1816. In it Beethoven mentioned that he had known the unnamed person for five years, which means that their romantic affair happened around 1811. These considerations allow to match Fanny’s diary record to another, more well-known document – Beethoven’s love letter dated June 6 without any year. For more than 150 years the document, first published by one of Beethoven’s biographer Anton Felix Schindler, has been interpreted differently by musicologists. The historical background is covered in Larisa Kirillina’s monograph [3, Vol. 2, 113–124].

The letter reads that the June 6 of the above mentioned year fell on a Monday, which made possible for researchers to conclude that the events specified in the letter could refer to 1795, 1801, 1807 or 1812. It can be seen from the letter that it had not been written in Vienna, but in some other place, where the composer came the day before. At that time the female recipient stayed in a town indicated by Beethoven by the letter K. He didn’t call her by name, addressing her as «my immortal beloved». The letter ended with “... forever yours, forever mine, forever us”.

Initially Beethoven experts dated the letter 1801. Some of them considered his 17-year-old student Giulietta Guicciardi, to whom he dedicated *Moonlight Sonata*, to be his beloved, interpreting the “K”. as “Korompa” – the Brunswick family’s estate in Hungary, their being Giulietta’s maternal relatives. Others, including Romain Rolland, connected the mysterious letter with Countess Terese Brunswick, another student of the composer.

The date was finally specified only in 1906, after a letter written by Beethoven to Hertel was found. It read that 5 July 1812, after a long trip mentioned in the love letter, the composer arrived in Teplitz. In light of the newly discovered evidence the “K” started to be interpreted as “Karlsbad”.

Researchers have not still determined for certain, whom of composer’s close friends staying at the beginning of July

1812 in Karlsbad, the letter was written to. One of the most probable assumptions, made by Maynard Solomon, is based on Beethoven's diary records referring to 1812 and 1816, respectively: "Therefore everything is crumbling with A."; "As for T., there is no other way but to leave it to God" ... Be kinder to T. Her affection deserves never forgetting about it, even if, regretfully, it never leads to consequences favorable for you" [cited after: 3, Vol. 2, 117, 118].

Solomon argues that the composer's immortal beloved was Antonie Brentano (née Birkenstock), the daughter of a Viennese scientist and music lover, the wife of Beethoven's friend Franz Brentano. In his letters to Antonie Beethoven called her Toni, therefore, the initial letters A and T. could mean the same person. Solomon's research also confirms that in July 1812 Franz and Antonie's family stayed in Karlsbad.

As we can see, there are mostly assumptions, not evidence on who Beethoven's immortal beloved really was. Not less doubtful is the above assumption on his love story with Fanny Giannattasio del Rio. Even if we consider Fanny's diary record on a conversation between her father and Beethoven to be a true fact, should we be sure that the composer was absolutely sincere at that moment? The words about a long standing romantic passion could be said by him as a polite brush off not to hurt Fanny and her family's feelings (the girl never married). Taking into account the mentioned above, the connection between the song cycle *To the Distant Beloved*, written in April 1812 and Fanny's diary record seems to be hardly probable.

It's a reliable fact that the composer's private life was not happy. Beethoven fell in love for several times, having a strong liking for musically gifted women, but he never got married. There is no point to speak about the only passion in his mature and late years. In a secret drawer there were two portraits – of Giulietta Guicciardi and unnamed woman – carefully kept by the composer. His love affections seemed not to fade away as time went on. However, it's quite groundless to consider the song cycle's lyrics as autobiographical, as an epilogue for the love story being referred by modern researchers to the summer of 1812.

Unlike a classical story of Alban Berg's *Lyric Suite*, the music of Beethoven's song cycle tells a story of love and parting in general, with no indication for addressee or the composer's longings. It must have seemed the height of indelicacy for Beethoven to encrypt details of love collisions in the score of the musical piece.

Hence, it is reasonable to exclude speculations on life and love of the great composer from the history of the cycle's creation. However, knowing of some biographical details, including above mentioned evidence and documents, may become helpful, especially for those singing *To the Distant Beloved*, adding up to Beethoven's personality, i.e. his generous and noble nature, sources of lyricism in his works. One should not link the music of the cycle to the only romantic affair, as Beethoven's private life, though being with many gaps, which researches have to fill using

assumptions, are rather numerous. Due to generality of lyrical mental images and feelings of the song cycle *To the Distant Beloved*, singers can involve their life experience into interpreting of the masterpiece to make it convincing.

III. TRUTH AND MYTH

But is the cycle actually confined to lyrical mental images and feelings? And is there any hidden sense other than associations with events of the composer's life?

An interesting hypothesis is given by American researcher of amateur vocal circles of the late 18th – early 19th century Lionel Peak.

She was the first to notice that in the cultural context of the 19th century the notion of *Liederkreis*, which had been used by Beethoven regarding to his work, conveyed a meaning different from that of today. In the Beethoven's times the notions of *Liederkreis*, *Liederkranz* or *Liederzirkel*, first of all, referred to circles of amateur poets and singers – informal groups of non-musicians occupying a prominent position in German musical culture in those days. In contrast to the latest vocal academies (*Singakademie*) such circles did not imply choral singing, their being for music lovers and their members being mostly women. This distinguished them from other kinds of musical circles called *Liedertafel*, where vocally skilled men were involved. One of the most famous examples was *Wednesday Circle* (*Mittwochskränzchen*), organized by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in Weimar in 1801, which was intended to replicate Medieval singers' culture and their Courts of Love (*cours d'amour*), where music lovers met every two weeks after theatrical performances.

Another meaning read into the above notions is connected with publishing of vocal collections for musical amateurs, a tradition appeared in Germany in the early 17th century, one of the first circles being mentioned by Peak as the edition of *Venuskränzlein* by Johann Schein (1609). In this connection, we can also mention the notion of *Songbook* (*Liederbuch*), used by German romantic composers, in particular, Hugo Wolf (*The Italian Songbook*, *The Spanish Songbook*). As a rule, the songs from such books were performed by turn, including women, who in most occasions organized such meetings.

According to musical publications of the early 19th century, making music was a part of a sophisticated entertainment. For example, there could be a short amusing plot, as in Johann Friedrich Reichardt's *Liederspiel* with lyrics by Goethe "*Liebe und Treue*" (*Love and Loyalty*) (1800), presented in the composer's house at his birthday party. Eventually Reichardt's *Liederspiel* developed into a theatrical genre, involving professional actors, but the tradition of home song-plays with props and costumes, accompanied by "live pictures" continued to exist.

The large popularity was gained by five poems "*Die Farben*" (*Colors*) by Karl Friedrich Mùchler, set by Friedrich Hurka, and first published in Berlin in 1795.

Each singer could choose ahead a song celebrating his favorite color, learn it, put on a proper costume and perform it at a musical and poetic party.

Such musical circles were popular even before the Baroque music (for example, the third and fourth parts of *Clavier-Übung* (Keyboard Practice) by Johann Sebastian Bach. Due to printed editions, which became popular at the beginning of the 19th century, *Liederkreis*, etc., being a genre indication, started to combine traditional musical practice with entertaining elements. Unlike the song cycle, coming into common use nowadays, *Liederkreis* existed as a whole not only because it was almost always performed in succession to the end, but because, conceiving a musical idea of a circle's creator, one might consider it as a book.

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