

I read a marvellous article in *the Tablet*

how towards the end of his life, Beethoven,

unmoored from the world by advancing deafness,

further isolated by family conflicts and romantic failures

began to lose his grasp on basic civilities and behaviour.

He went ungroomed, his clothes unwashed,

his rooms unswept by servants - they had long since fled

this angry, unkempt bear of a master

who kept used chamber pots under the piano.

Wandering the streets of Baden in his scruffy state one day,

he lost his bearings.

Forced to peer into the windows of houses

to try and find his way back home

he was arrested by the local constable.

Beethoven defended himself vig-or-ous-ly,

protesting his identity.

‘Of course you’re not Beethoven,’ replied the constable.

“You’re nothing but a tramp.

Beethoven doesn’t look like a bit like you.’

Locked up in a cell Beethoven continued to protest,

and eventually in the middle of the night,

Herzog, the music director in Wiener Neustadt,

was summoned to prove his identity.

This he duly did,

much to the constable’s horror,

and the dishevelled prisoner

was released and driven home in style.

It’s a revealing story of the composer

who was born 250 years ago this year,

because it hints about important elements of his music.

Beethoven might stand alongside Bach and Mozart
as a monumental, towering figure in cultural history,
but his was not a smooth, amiable, polished sort of genius.
Ragged around the edges, defiantly experimental
and often baffling to his contemporary listeners,
his music is pitted and fissured.

We hear traces in the chequered performance history
of the challenging Ninth Symphony,
which in its final movement suddenly turns into an opera.

It found me in my teenage years in Newby
advertising Blueband margarine on ITV!

That it should come to this.

Now restored to glory as the European National Anthem.

I learnt it off by heart and could even sing it,

hoping it would help me pass my German O Level.

It didn't.

Never mind the gender-bending Ninth Symphony,
the Eighth Symphony is genre-bending
with its closing statement of an opening
and its questioning, unresolved ending.

In both symphonies and elsewhere
we hear traces of Beethoven's process,
of his blind alleys and dead ends as well as his inspiration.

He shows us not only his finished products,
but the workings that created them.

It's in those fissures,
the gaps between ambition and achievement,
between his vision and our comprehension,
that we find a foothold.

Beethoven's genius was hard-won;
his victories are those of determination
and dogged persistence rather than easy brilliance.

His battling, raging, uncouth, unkempt assault on tradition
gives his art a humanity,
even as it reaches towards the sublime.

Never mind the 250th anniversary of Beethoven,
today we mark the 2020th anniversary of Candlemas
with Jesus cast as Beethoven par excellence.

Poor parents with their poor baby
entering the Temple and jarring with its heart
which had polished up religion
on a positively industrial scale.

Uncouth, unkempt,
plunging into the bargain basement for sacrifices,
just two doves.

‘Of course you’re not God.

You’re nothing but a tramp, God doesn’t look like you.’

‘Oh yes he does!’ Simeon and Anna proclaim,
combining the role of pantomime and Herzog
and seeing such light
in the midst of such terrible darkness.

All very Eighth Symphony-ish
with Simeon’s chill closing statement of an opening:
‘This child is destined for the rising and falling of many...
...and a sword shall pierce your own soul too.’

We once had a very poor teenage couple with a tiny baby
wander into Evensong at Helmsley at Candlemas.

Our matron of a churchwarden’s wife
was going to see them off until I intervened.

It’s a long story but I ended up taking their wedding
and baptising the babe.

Such light in the midst of such terrible darkness.

And the music that light produced jarred so.
Impossible, challenging, genre-bending,
God crooning an opera instead of thundering a symphony.
The dissonance of *You must love your enemy;*
Sell all you have and give to the poor;
If you try to save your life you will lose it;
Father forgive them;
Today you will be with me in paradise;
Lo I am with you always to the end of the world.

It's in those fissures,
the gaps between our ambition and Christ's achievement,
between his vision and our comprehension,
between his faith and our fumbling with faith
that we find a foothold
a light to enlighten us Gentiles on our path to eternity.