

The Tomb of Scarlatti

Average depth of graves, four feet –
 the illusion of allegro in our light
 is hard: that Iberian heartlessness
 is still with us but not such sweetness.
 What miracles for the twentieth century
 among castrati, melons, and the dribbling kings!
 Average length of sonata, four minutes, with repeats.

I hate the idea of Spain, yet for Domenico
 I'd round each corner with its urine smell,
 tickle the garden fish with a martyr's bone,
 sit in the shadow of a cancered priest.
 So many slaps of black! The old dust jumps
 for American recordings, keyboard clatters
 like cruel dominoes – E major fills the afternoon.

Santo Norberto gone: cat stalks complacent
 pigeons. The old gods swim for home.
 What are the conversions? Scholars' rules
 and lace handkerchiefs become duennas' breasts
 leaning from all top windows. A tourist bus
 is draped with moonlight while the sounding notes
 go past like carloads of the glittering dead.

PETER PORTER *Preaching to the Converted* 1972

The Heiligenstadt Testament is surely one of the most tragic documents in the history of music. Written with evident care, and carefully preserved, it was not discovered until some twenty-five years later, when Beethoven died

For my brothers Carl and [Johann] Beethoven:

O my fellow men, who think or say that I am churlish, obstinate or misanthropic, what injustice you do me! You do not know the secret cause which makes me seem so to you. Ever since I was a child my heart and mind have been filled with tender feelings of goodwill towards humanity: to achieve great things has always been my desire. But you must know that for six years now I have been suffering from a grievous affliction, aggravated by the unskilful treatment of medical men, disappointed from year to year in the hope of relief and compelled at last to face the prospect of a chronic infirmity whose cure might take years – if indeed it was possible at all. I was born with a

fiery, impulsive temperament, even susceptible to the diversions of society, yet at an early age I found myself forced to isolate myself from the world, to live in loneliness. If at times I tried to disregard my condition, it was only to be driven back more harshly still by the doubly painful experience of my defective hearing. Yet I could not bring myself to say to people, 'Speak louder – shout – for I am deaf!' Ah, how could I possibly proclaim myself deficient in the one sense which I ought to possess in greater perfection than anyone else, which I did once possess in the highest perfection, to a degree in which few of my fellow musicians know it or have ever known it? I cannot do it. Forgive me, then, if you see me draw back when I would so gladly mingle with you. My misfortune is doubly painful since it cannot but cause me to be misunderstood: for me there can be no relaxation in the company of friends and acquaintances, no refined conversation, no mutual exchange of ideas. I dare not venture into society more than absolute necessity requires: I must live alone, almost like an outcast. If I so much as approach other people I am overcome by burning terror lest the real nature of my condition should become known. Thus it has been during these last six months that I have spent here in the country. By advising me to spare my hearing as much as possible my doctor showed intelligence, and at the same time confirmed my own present instinct – even though I sometimes ran counter to it by yielding to my longing for companionship. But what humiliation I felt when someone standing beside me heard a flute in the distance *that I could not hear*, or a shepherd singing when I could not distinguish a sound. Experiences like this brought me to the brink of despair, and I was not far from putting an end to my life. Art alone held me back: ah, but it seemed impossible to leave the world before I had produced all that I knew myself capable of! And so I continued to endure this wretched existence – wretched indeed with a body so sensitive that any passing change can plunge me from one extreme of emotion to another. *Patience*, I am told, I must now choose for my guide, and I have done so. I hope that my resolution will remain steadfast to persevere until it shall please inexorable Fate to break the thread. Perhaps I shall get better, perhaps not. I am ready for what may come. I was forced to become a philosopher at 28: it is not easy – perhaps less easy for an artist than for anyone else. O Deity, thou who lookest down into my innermost soul, thou knowest that it is filled with love for mankind and the desire to do good. O fellow men, when one day you read these words, reflect that you did me wrong, and let any of you in affliction take comfort at finding one like himself who, in spite of every obstacle which Nature threw in his way, yet did all that lay in his power to gain

admittance to the ranks of worthy artists and men. You my brothers Carl and [Johann], as soon as I am dead, if Dr Schmid be still living, request him in my name to describe my malady and attach this written document to his description so that, as far at least as is possible, the world may be reconciled to me after my death. At the same time I declare you two the heirs of my small fortune (if such it can be called); divide it fairly, agree together and help one another. Whatever injury you did me in the past, you know that it is long since forgiven. To you, my brother Carl, I give special thanks for the affection you have shown me of late. It is my wish that your life may be better, more free from care, than mine has been. Recommend *virtue* to your children, for that alone, not money, will make them happy. I speak from experience, for it was this that sustained me in times of misery, and to it, and to my art, I must give thanks that I did not end my life by suicide. Farewell, and love one another. I thank all my friends, especially *Prince Lichnowsky* and *Professor Schmidt*. I should like the instruments from Prince L to be preserved by one of you, but let there be no quarrel between you on their account. If it serves your purpose better, then sell them: how happy I shall be if, even in my grave, I can be of help to you still. So be it. With joy I hasten to meet death. If it comes before I have had the opportunity to develop all my abilities as an artist then, in spite of my cruel fate, it will come too soon and I shall probably wish it later. Even so, I shall be content, for will it not release me from a state of endless suffering? Come when thou wilt: I shall meet thee bravely. Farewell, and do not quite forget me when I am dead. I have deserved this of you, for in my lifetime I have often thought how to make you happy. Be so.

Ludwig van Beethoven.

Heiglstadt [Heiligenstadt]

6 October 1802

... Thus I take leave of you, and indeed sadly. Yes, that fond hope, which I brought with me when I came here, that I might in some degree still be cured – that hope I must now abandon entirely. As the withered leaves of autumn that fall to the ground, so has my hope been blighted. I leave here almost as I came, and even that courage that often still inspired me in the beautiful days of summer has gone from me. O Providence, grant me still but one day of *pure joy*! It is so long now since I felt true joy in my heart. When, oh when, Divine Power, shall I once more feel it in the temple of Nature and of Man? Never? Oh, but no, that would be too hard.