



Ode to Joy

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

Imagine a great musician losing her eyesight. What a setback to never be able to read music again. But what if loss of hearing were the impairment, or worse yet, a “roar” in the ears that made music and conversation unbearable. So it was with German composer Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827).

I was reminded of him this morning. One of the Sunday hymns, “Remember Not, O God,” was sung to a tune he composed two hundred years ago in 1807.

One of the lines, though penned by another, gives voice to his own anguish: “In tender mercy visit us, distressed and humbled low.”

How desperately Beethoven needed God’s tender mercies as he was distressed and humbled low. Just five years before he wrote this tune, he had written a letter to his brothers, not to be opened until after his death.

Here he poured out his distress: “For six years I have been a hopeless case...I live in loneliness...for I am deaf...what a humiliation...to the verge of despair...would have put an end to my life...this wretched existence.”

Despite his despair, Beethoven continued writing music—classical compositions that have snubbed the dust and decay of time. Whether at the world renowned annual Beethoven Festival in Bonn, Germany, or the Beethoven Festival in my home town of Grand Rapids, Michigan, the notes seem to dance for joy right off the page. It is uncanny how the sounds in the head of this deaf, despairing composer two centuries later bring joy to the listener.

Indeed, the composition for which Beethoven is best remembered, his Ninth Symphony, is popularly known as the “Ode to Joy.”

Later the tune became associated with the text of the great hymn, “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee.”

But there was no joy for the composer. He cried out to God in desperation:

“Divine One...grant me at least but one day of pure joy—it is so long since real joy echoed in my heart—O when—O when, O Divine One—shall I find it again.”

To have just one day of joy is the longing of many who suffer chronic physical and psychological pain. For some that day never comes.

But there are moments of tender mercies—if we but recognize them.

Might that have been true for Beethoven? In Barbara Nichol’s children’s classic, *Beethoven Lives Upstairs*, the young son of a landlady is troubled by the eccentric, cranky loner who rents the upper floor.

The boarder has not only cut the legs off his pianos, but he stands naked in front of the window while composing, and he pours cold water over his head to aid his concentration.

He’s crazy.

But the boy, prompted by letters from his uncle, is patient and kind to the boarder who affectionately calls him “little gatekeeper” because the boy is often sitting on the steps when the composer comes and goes. It is here in this upstairs loft where Beethoven composes his Ninth Symphony, an “Ode to Joy”—joy that eludes its creator.

Yet there were glimpses of tender mercies that lessened the pain of his earthly pilgrimage. The book ends with the boy encountering Beethoven after he had moved away from the home:

“I ran up to him and caught him by the sleeve. He looked confused at first, but then he recognized me. He said, ‘It’s the little gatekeeper,’ and took my hands in his...I told him that we miss him. He squeezed my hands and looked down at the ground.” □

—Ruth A. Tucker

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