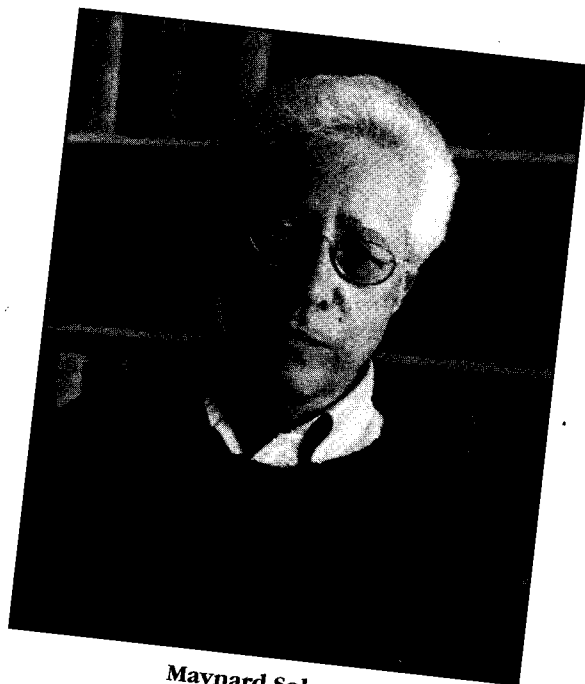


The Art of Musical Biography

a talk with
Maynard Solomon

BY JOSEPH SMITH



Maynard Solomon

Some musical biographies are prized for presenting new factual information, others for offering fresh insights. Maynard Solomon's Beethoven and Mozart biographies are among the few to boast both virtues.

"Solomon's Beethoven biography is now the authoritative one," declared pianist and scholar Charles Rosen; critic Donal Henahan, in *The New York Times*, described it as "already a classic." Schirmer Books has recently issued a second, revised edition.

In conversation, Mr. Solomon is, like his books, serious and circumspect. He is unusually wary of speaking carelessly, and takes time to consider each question before offering an answer. He is also one of those rare individuals who tends to speak in complete, syntactical sentences. Here are some of his thoughts on the art of musical biography, offered by Maynard Solomon for readers of *Piano Today*.

JS: *What aspects of the revised Beethoven will be most striking to readers of the first version?*

MS: I think I should explain that there have been some revisions through the years, although this is the most thorough. The most important changes have been in two areas. I had always believed, on the basis of the early biographers, that Beethoven had been reared in poverty. I was startled to find, as proven by new documents, that this simply isn't true. For instance, his father was able to make a loan of six hundred florins—double his annual salary—indicating that he had a substantial amount of capital.

JS: *Often, successful men tend to exaggerate the poverty of their beginnings, in order to enhance their own achievements.*

MS: But there is no evidence anywhere that Beethoven himself ever made this claim—it is a sentimental invention of his biographers based on lack of documentation. The other principal revision concerns the myth that his

works declined in popularity after 1815, the Congress of Vienna period. In fact, there was actually an upturn in his popularity, at least on orchestral programs. The myth comes principally from Rochlitz—one of the early memoirists, and an utterly unreliable source. In a supposed conversation with Beethoven, Rochlitz attributes to him the quote, widely repeated, beginning: "Fidelio? They [the Viennese] cannot give it, nor do they want to listen to it. The symphonies? They have no time for them..." This at a time when Beethoven was dominating Viennese concert programs!

But to know this, one had to look at the programs. One source was amazingly helpful—I happened on a certain Viennese musical journal of the time, and within ten minutes I found half a dozen listings of Beethoven performances that were completely unknown in the literature!

A really interesting question would be: why, in his last years, did he abandon the forms that brought him the greatest popular acclaim—the overture, symphony, and oratorio?

JS: *No composer ever feels his works are performed often enough. Is it possible that, in this instance, Rochlitz was quoting an authentic remark that reflected Beethoven's frustration, rather than the actual facts?*

MS: Absolutely right, that is possible.

JS: *I think it is interesting that two important Beethoven scholars, you and Thayer, are Americans. Can you think of any explanation?*

MS: Don't forget Sonneck, as well—he didn't write a biography, but he was one of the most knowledgeable Beethoven scholars. Perhaps our being outsiders is an advantage, in respect to giving us objectivity, and allowing us to break taboos. For instance, the identity of the "immortal beloved" could have been known as early as 1909...

JS: *Yes, your identification of Antonie Brentano as the "immortal beloved" of Beethoven's famous letter has been*

almost universally accepted. Yet, as you say, all the facts that you used to come to your conclusion were known previously. Why did no one figure it out before?

MS: Too many taboos stood in the way—she was married, she was Catholic, she was born of the nobility, and she was married to a member of a great artistic family. I think previous biographers protected her.

JS: You think they suppressed the conclusion?

MS: I think they wouldn't allow themselves to reach the conclusion.

JS: What are your favorite musical biographies?

MS: I like the big documentary, non-interpretive biographies.

JS: ...which seems ironic, considering that your own are so interpretive.

MS: Yes, isn't it!

JS: I find that in your books, it is partly the choice among known facts that makes me see things that I have missed in the larger books... Should we welcome popularizations, like the movies *Amadeus* and *Immortal Beloved*, because they interest the public in Mozart and Beethoven, or should we deplore them for fictionalizing?

MS: The problem comes when they pose as historical truth, rather than fiction. Peter Shaffer makes that claim and tries to justify his portrait of Mozart in *Amadeus* by saying that in all the documentation that he has read, there is no sign that Mozart ever suffered! To believe that, one has to overlook a wealth of evidence in Mozart's letters and in the reminiscences of his friends and family.

JS: Would you ever exclude a piece of information because you felt it was to the discredit of a composer?

MS: I would never exclude something which had the potential for changing our understanding of a composer's personality out of fear that others might accuse me of appealing to prurient interest. I believe that, if properly understood, no aspect of a person's behavior is alien to us.

JS: Yes, I find that you don't shrink from anything, but you never indulge in sensationalism, either. But you discovered, for instance, that Charles Ives had manipulated the dating of his works in order to make himself seem more of a pioneer than he was. Did you regret having to expose him?

MS: I did suggest that Ives's dating of his own works was inconclusive, and we should not rely on them, but should use the traditional tools of historical musicology to establish the actual chronology of his works...

JS: But surely it is to Ives's discredit that he would falsify in order to promote the myth...

MS: Is it really to his discredit? People, noble people, do these things. Ives was an extraordinarily upright person... desperate for performances. He achieved performances, and we are all the better for it. There is a nexus between his falsifications and a good result. The information about his questionable datings, in fact, makes it now possible for us to understand him in a more interesting way.

JS: In reading a quote, how do we distinguish figurative from literal speech? When Beethoven says of Karl, "I am the boy's physical father," your interpretation is that Beethoven is actually suffering from a delusion. I would have assumed that he was saying "I am as much the boy's

father as if I were his physical father."

MS: Why do you say that?

JS: Because we all frequently use figurative language.

MS: But your interpretation can be taken as a way of gliding over an unpleasant fact.

JS: So, you are questioning my motive for seeing it that way?

MS: You are not confronting the plain meaning of it—you're converting it into something else.

JS: It's true, but meaning isn't always plain.

MS: But you have to allow for the possibility that Beethoven meant exactly what he said. At that moment, he may even have believed that he was the father.

JS: Your biography quotes Beethoven's story to Neate of the origin of his deafness. [A primo tenore kept demanding revisions of an aria for an opera only identified as "not Fidelio." The last time, Beethoven hurled himself to the floor in frustration, and found himself deaf.] This explanation is so bizarre that I can't help wondering if Beethoven was joking.

MS: I agree that it is a story that is difficult to comprehend—there are all kinds of internal contradictions. However, the person to whom he told it, and who then related it to posterity was a highly intelligent individual—not at all gullible. And I don't see anything in Neate's account that hints at it being said in jest. It is not a conclusive statement—Beethoven doesn't actually say that the incident caused his deafness, although he does strongly imply it. He isn't sure what happens—he says that when he arose, he found himself deaf. But elsewhere, he gives other explanations. Beethoven did have a sense of humor, but not on issues like this. Never. His sense of humor consists mostly of heavy-handed jokes and punning. Anyway, you're raising an alternative way of disposing of the sheer craziness of the story.

JS: What interests me is the problem of interpreting even authentic quotations, in the absence of the speaker's tone of voice.

MS: That's why I try to present all of my interpretations as interpretations—as just one way of looking at the material, as what I regard as a cogent reading of it.

JS: Should we judge the behavior of genius by a different standard than the behavior of ordinary people?

MS: We probably do—but we shouldn't. I don't think I do... well, maybe in relation to Mozart—maybe in relation to his promiscuity in his last years. It's possible that I didn't sufficiently allow for the hurt that he caused others. That's possible. I hadn't thought of that. I tried to hold Beethoven to that standard in his cruel treatment of his nephew Karl. At the same time, I try to understand it so that we can forgive him. The family forgave Beethoven—they understood him. I think they may have had a less dire view of his actions than we have—he was just the out-of-control member of the family, and they had to put up with his problems. His sister-in-law, Johanna, in particular, was remarkably forgiving, in light of all he did to her. That's what we can bring to a biographical subject—the capacity to understand and forgive.

JS: Do you think either Karl or Johanna made allowances for his genius?

MS: No, I think they made allowances for him as a human being—as a loving human being. I think they both loved him. ■