

What Can Old, Dead White Men Tell Us About Life?

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On April 5th, 1990, I came into the world five weeks early, but I maintain that it was not my fault. When my mother returned to work, a colleague asked her if she had, by any chance, been listening to Beethoven's third symphony in the weeks before my birth. She had.

"Well," he said, "no wonder she came early."

Beethoven's music is a testament to the joy of life. The joy of children who cannot wait to come into the world. It is fitting that the choral text for his ninth and final symphony comes from a poem by Friedrich Schiller entitled "Ode to Joy."

But for Beethoven, *joie de vivre* was not merely a matter of entertainment and pleasure. Rather, he believed it had the power to transform the world for the better.

The additions Beethoven made to Schiller's text are tremendously telling. Joy reunites, according to a line added by Beethoven, "what custom strictly divided." It is subversive. Joy has the power to upset the existing social order, transforming society to reflect the fundamental goodness of humanity.

Beethoven also added the next line of text: "all men become brothers."

Looking at the world today, the brotherhood and happiness in which

Beethoven believed can seem like an impossible dream.

I spent last summer in Jordan conducting interviews for my senior thesis. There was much I heard that made me wonder if a solution to the Middle East's problems is even possible.

A five-and-a-half-year-old girl told me, in the singsong, innocent voice of a young child, that if she saw a Jew, she would kill him for what he did to her brother in Gaza.

Can Beethoven's inspirational claims of joy and common humanity stand up to these stark, crippling realities?

After a long day of interviews in Amman, I was waiting for the bus that would take me to my apartment in a city an hour north. I had been on my feet all day, not stopping for lunch or dinner. I boarded the bus, taking my assigned seat next to a woman only a few years older than me. She was dressed conservatively and wore a *hijab*, a veil covering her hair.

My stomach growling, I took some pita and hummus out of my bag and began devouring it. A minute later, it occurred to me that I ought to offer the woman next to me a slice of pita. This was the hospitable thing to do, and the Arabs take hospitality very seriously. The ice was broken, and we struck up a conversation in Arabic. When she asked about my activities outside of school, I told her:

“I’m a musician. I play in an orchestra.”

“I love music!” Aram responded with enthusiasm.

I then asked about her favorite musician. I expected she’d tell me about the classic Arab singers that my other Jordanian friends admired. Instead, she answered:

“Beethoven.”

I was shocked. “Me too!” I exclaimed. “Which symphonies do you like best?”

“All of them,” she said. “They’re beautiful. When I listen to them, they always make me feel so happy.”

We were smiling and talking so animatedly that the people sitting across the aisle began to stare. It’s not often you see a woman in a *hijab* talking excitedly with someone so obviously foreign.

The afternoon before I left Jordan, Aram took me out for dinner in Amman. We talked like old friends – her telling of the anxiety and excitement she felt while waiting for her family to approve the man she wanted to marry, and the two of us plotting how I could best arrange a surprise for my boyfriend upon my return home.

We still keep in touch; just last week, she sent me an e-mail.

Beethoven’s affirmation of joy and human goodness was not a naïve claim. He watched with horror as the French Revolution evolved from liberty, equality,

and fraternity to bloodshed and authoritarianism. He contemplated suicide after becoming deaf. His resolution finally to live is all the more powerful because he knew darkness but ultimately chose light.

Aram grew up in a society unrecognizable from Beethoven’s 18th-century Germany, but, just from having listened to his music, she understood its power. “In his music, you can tell that there is truth,” she said.

Beethoven’s works are powerful because the goodness of humanity and the power of joy are true facts of life. His proof – black dots on a five-lined staff – cut through two centuries of cultural boundaries and convention to reach two young women, one American and the other Arab, bringing them together on a bus ride home.

This is the reason why Beethoven’s name alone stands, carved in gold leaf, above the stage in Boston’s Symphony Hall. The reason why the Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra has chosen to play Beethoven’s ninth symphony in Havana for our tour this summer in collaboration with a Cuban chorus.

No wonder a child who heard Beethoven’s music couldn’t wait to experience life.