

THE Musical Times

ESTABLISHED IN 1844

Beethoven: Some Thoughts on the Man and His Genius

Author(s): J. B.

Source: *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, Vol. 33, Beethoven Supplement (Dec. 15, 1892), pp. 7-14

Published by: [Musical Times Publications Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3362715>

Accessed: 31/01/2015 19:34

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Musical Times Publications Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

BEETHOVEN:

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE MAN AND HIS GENIUS.

It is not always easy to say why one man has what we call personality and another is without it. Both may be distinguished by great gifts and acquirements, yet, while the first throws a spell upon all who approach him, the second is personally unregarded. I have heard the spell described, for want of a better term, as "personal magnetism" and it would really seem that something of the subtlety of magnetism is in it. The Ancient Mariner had this gift. "The Wedding Guest, he beat his breast," but could not get away from the old seaman's glittering eye. We need not, however, come into actual contact with the personally magnetic in order to feel their influence. Our electricians are credited with a scheme by which a ship can surround itself with a sensitive circle extending below the horizon, and through it communicate

with another ship long before the look-out has seen her top-masts. In like manner, there are individualities so potent that, however far removed, they hold us fascinated. We eagerly read the records of their doings; we go with them, in imagination whithersoever they journey; we buy every photograph of them as it appears, and treasure up their reported sayings as very pearls of wisdom. To these strangely endowed fellow-creatures Beethoven appears to have belonged. In another portion of our columns evidence is given as to the clearness and depth of the personal impression he made upon all who approached him. It is hinted in an authoritative Book that a man may survey himself in a glass and then forget what kind of person he was, and we all know as a matter of fact that, in the case



BEETHOVEN IN HIS 38TH YEAR.
From the picture by W. F. Mähler, 1808.

of an ordinary individual, it is difficult to obtain anything like consistency of description from the mouths or pens of observers. But it will be seen on reference to the "Word Pictures"



BEETHOVEN IN HIS 21ST YEAR.

From the original miniature, probably by Gerhard von Kügelgen, in the possession of Geo. Henschel, Esq.

that, with one or two exceptions, and allowing for difference of age, they thoroughly agree. We must remember that in some cases the writers of these sketches had but a passing opportunity for observation. That, however, was time enough for a mental photograph both vivid and truthful. Only with a great personality does this seem possible.

I shall not be expected to discuss the "magnetism" of Beethoven. That power—if, as appears, he had it—evades our grasp equally with the magnetic waves which, astronomers tell us, roll from the sun to the utmost bounds of his system, and, mayhap, pass far beyond into the illimitable wastes of space. Did it flash from those small but piercing eyes of which we read? or did it exhale from the whole person of the man? These are questions I can propound, but not answer. Happily, they do not cover the entire case, for there were features in Beethoven's individuality and conditions which it is possible to grasp and speak of with some confidence in relation to the personal impression he made. He belonged, for example, to a distinctly unconventional type. The man who adopts the ordinary usages of society, modelling his "walk and conversation" on the prevailing pattern, is passed in public places with no more regard than we bestow upon any given house in a street where all the dwellings are of one pattern. It is upon the man who defies custom and usage that we fasten our eyes, partly in curiosity, partly in admiration of a spectacle fast becoming rare. Recall for a moment the persons in various lines of distinction whose figures are most clearly remembered. Michael Angelo attracts

us by his strongly marked personal characteristics, by the manner in which he allowed his temper and feelings to influence his conduct before the world, and by the mingled greatness and littleness—both shown with equal candour—of his nature. He is a far more distinct figure than Raphael, who was satisfied with the usage and policy of common life. Among modern painters, the strange recluse, Turner, appeals most to our imagination. Among Churchmen, the savage Swift obtains far more of our regard than any amiable and learned prelate who has beamed benignantly from pulpit and episcopal chair. These examples need not be multiplied. In the matter now considered, as in many others, attention is arrested by divergence from the ruled line, and Beethoven diverged very widely indeed. Some people do this as a matter of calculation. The desire for notoriety is as strong in certain natures as was greed of wealth in him who said, "Get money; honestly if you can, but, at all events, get money." There is not the smallest reason to believe, or even suspect, that Beethoven was other than thoroughly honest in all his relations with those about him. He, assuredly, never studied effect, or lifted a finger to attract observation. Such conduct would be diametrically opposed to the

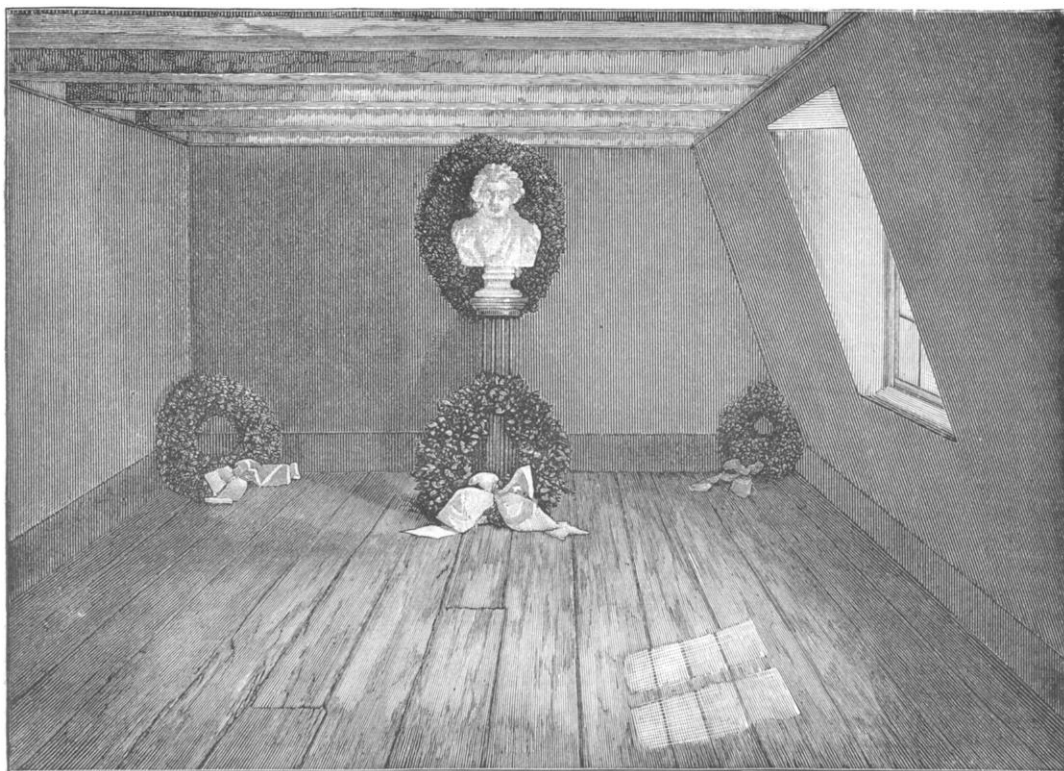


BEETHOVEN'S EAR-TRUMPETS.

whole nature of the man. Doubtless he was honest too, when, in his youth, if evidence be

true, he dressed in the prevailing fashion and actually wore a sword. It is difficult to fancy Beethoven with a sword, but very easy to be thankful that, when the plastic period had gone by and his nature hardened, no weapon made him the terror of friends and foes alike. The fashionable clothes and the sword marked but a passing phase on the way to full development. Beethoven was young, and nature stirred within him. There were "visions about"—vague pictures, such as float tantalisingly before the eyes of youth, and to realise them the master equipped himself as per regulation. They evaded him, and he soon made sartorial laws for himself, not rejecting

he would have been under any circumstances; perhaps obstinate and intractable likewise, for these qualities were, in some measure, a part of his nature. But proud and passionate men do not necessarily cut themselves off from their kind and set society at defiance. Two more powerful agents brought Beethoven to this pass—namely, a recognition of his genius which was inadequate to place him above the more vulgar trials and troubles of life, and the peculiarly distressing calamity of his deafness. These things, to my mind, made Beethoven what he became, and finally determined not only his relations with contemporaries, but also the figure he was to make in the eyes of



BEETHOVEN'S BIRTH-ROOM, IN ITS PRESENT CONDITION.

the "loose hairy stuff" described by Czerny, which reminded that observer of Robinson Crusoe.

At all points, Beethoven diverged from the ruled line. Yet his strange personal characteristics were not the consequences of Nature's sport so much as abnormal developments arising from the conflict of his genius with circumstances. The tree is often qualified to grow straight and shapely which becomes, by force of surroundings, gnarled and twisted.

As far as my study of this man's character goes, I find no difficulty in conceiving a very different development. Proud and passionate

posterity. A wise writer remarks, "Every man has in himself a continent of undiscovered character. Happy is he who acts the Columbus to his own soul." Beethoven was not thus happy. He drifted with fierce currents, and stranded on rocks, where he beat out his heart.

His feeling of resentment against the world reached an absolutely morbid height, aggravating the consciousness of genius, and making him quick to perceive, even to imagine, affronts. A person is rude enough to talk while he plays the pianoforte; the master jumps up, exclaiming, "I play no longer to such hogs." He is

greatly angered by the absence of an instrumentalist from the orchestra, but Prince Lobkowitz treats the matter lightly. This is an insult to be avenged, and, on his way home, Beethoven rushes into the courtyard of the Prince's house, shouting, "Ass of a Lobkowitz!" He declines to play at a country house, and is jocularly threatened with con-



THE PIANO PRESENTED TO BEETHOVEN BY THOMAS BROADWOOD.
From a photograph.

finement by the host. He, thereupon, rushes off to the nearest town and posts back to Vienna. Ordinary civility seems to have been as offensive as no civility at all. A host enquires after his health each morning. He leaves the place in ungovernable irritation. Prince Lichnowsky, having the master as his guest, makes an arrangement for prompt attention to his wants. He goes out and engages a servant of his own. Some critics express an unfavourable opinion of his music. He takes refuge in the consciousness of his artistic might and exclaims: "Let them write what stuff they please about me, and call me all the hard names they will; they can no more extinguish the light of my genius than I can darken the moon." Instances of this kind might be multiplied indefinitely, and all point to the existence of profound discontent with the conditions and circumstances of his life.

To the same cause may be due his revolutionary ideas in religion and politics—his wrath against established institutions. To him, the First Consul, "barking for the thrones of kings," was a regenerator, an avenger, to be acclaimed by discontent everywhere. "The intellectual realm," he once said, "is the most precious in my eyes, and far above all temporal and spiritual monarchies." Goethe, the courtier, bowed low before the Imperial Majesty of Austria;

Beethoven held up his head, for this was his faith: "Kings and princes can indeed create professors and privy-councillors, and confer titles and decorations, but they cannot make great men—spirits that soar above the base turmoil of the world." He received the Communion on his death-bed from the hands of a Roman Catholic priest, but he lived a philosophic Pagan, in undisguised revolt against accepted dogmas. Yet he had in him the essence of Christianity. St. John wrote with beautiful persistency, "Little children, love one another." So Beethoven to his brothers: "Farewell. Love one another." And again: "God looks into my heart, He searches it and knows that love for man and feelings of benevolence have their abode there." This was true, and will more fully appear hereafter, but while resting on the basis of all religions, he revolted against the superstructure which represented to him the faith of a world he despised. There is only one reasonable explanation of the master's discontent with the established order of things—he felt himself undervalued. We may exclaim: "So do most men, and what would become of the world were most men to show their disgust in like manner?" True; but the measure of Beethoven's unreasonableness is the measure of his intense resentment, and a gauge of the very serious view he took of his own claims and their treatment.

"O loss of sight, of thee I most complain," thus Milton's Samson, and thus, with the changing of a single word, the Mighty Man of music. We cannot too gravely consider the effect upon Beethoven of the deafness which shut him out from the world of sound—a king in hopeless exile from the realm he best could rule. When the danger of loss of hearing first confronted him he stood appalled. One thinks of the vision of Eliphaz the Temanite: "Fear came upon me and trembling, which made all my bones to shake. Then a spirit passed before my face, the hair of my head stood up." Like Job, he cursed his existence, and declared himself "the most unhappy of God's creatures." As the precious sense waned and waned, Beethoven's pitiful complaints sounded more and more like sobs. We read, when hope of cure had to be given up: "As autumn leaves fall and wither, so are my hopes blighted. O Providence, grant me one day of pure felicity. How long have I been estranged from the gladness of true joy! When, O my God, when shall I again feel it in the temple of nature and of man? Never! Ah! that is too hard." Too hard to bear; almost incredible in its seemingly fantastic cruelty. Yet he thought, if not of resignation, at any rate of courage: "I shall strive, if possible, to set fate at defiance!" No resolution, however, could prevent the iron of affliction entering into his soul and corroding

all it touched. The poet's eye, looking on the universe, sees

. . . central peace, subsisting at the heart
Of endless agitation.

It does not appear that Beethoven knew anything of peace within the circumference of his nature. The silence that deepened around him drove him in upon himself, whence he looked out upon the world as between the bars of a prison, chafing at restraint, morbidly sensitive to what he considered the ignominy of compassion, and only anxious to conceal himself from sight. As regards outward relations, no man, perhaps, was ever so unhappy. When the Rossini fever

with the love of woman over that worthless prodigal, his nephew and adopted son. How tender he could be with the youth! How forgiving! One almost detects in his letters to Carl the intonation of maternity, with its boundless and inexhaustible flood of affection: "Now, farewell, my darling. Deserve this name." "Be my own dear, precious son, and imitate my virtues, but not my faults; still, though man be frail, do not have worse defects than those of your sincere and fondly attached father." "Say no more; only come to my arms; not one harsh word shall you hear. . . . Only come, come to the faithful heart of your father." "I embrace and kiss



BREUNING'S HOUSE IN THE MÜNSTERPLATZ, BONN, NOW OCCUPIED BY HERMANN NEUSSER, ORIGINATOR OF THE BEETHOVEN HOUSE.

began to rage in Vienna, and the people among whom he had lived and laboured turned from him to hang on the lips of the brilliant Italian, Beethoven's cup of misery was full, and he might have cried, with Elijah: "It is enough, O Lord, now take away my life!" Who can wonder at the woeful, moody, irritable Beethoven, with such influences as I have just described working upon a nature by creation sensitive, impulsive, and proud?

Have we all a dual nature? Is "Mr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" but truth in a fantastic parable? Certainly, the Beethoven whom we have just seen was not the man who yearned

you a thousand times over—not my lost, but my new-born son." This is in the spirit of the parable, "But when he was a great way off his father saw him, and ran and fell on his neck, and kissed him." The letters to Carl reveal in Beethoven the possibility of a very different man from him we know. But who shall say that the order of Providence was wrong?

We now see clearly why the personality of Beethoven has a fascination for every observer, and why the march of time affects in no degree the vividness of his outline. He is a pathetic figure; heroic, too, and sometimes, but for sorrow's majesty, of ludicrous aspect,

while through all shines the incomprehensible splendour of a genius which, perhaps, no mere man could be happy in possessing.

It is vain to discuss genius in the abstract; almost vain to examine it in the concrete. Great men have sought to define it, with the result that no two of them agree. It is "understanding, feeling, and perseverance," says one; it is "a lamp lit by nature," declares a second; it is "the faculty of growth," protests a third; it is the "faculty of taking pains," exclaims a fourth, while a fifth qualifies it as the result of "a special act of Divine will and creative energy . . . honourable to God as well as to men of genius, who thus appear to derive their being more directly from an act of free-will on His part." Perhaps the fifth is right. At any rate, he assigns the nature and origin of this particular gift to a region whose products are not limited to the range of human nature and experience, and whence we might expect things incomprehensible.

For my own part, I incline towards the "special act of creative energy," which, indeed, seems necessary to a result so subtle and so rare. But what it is thus created, and how it operates, are questions which evade the wisest. One thing is certain: Beethoven had it. Is there any story more impressive, more suggestive of a manifest destiny and mission, than the story of this master's artistic career? It seems to me the most dramatic manifestation in the records of art; as stately as the procession of a conqueror, as natural as the order of bud, blossom, and fruit. We are told to regard it as having three periods; first, the period of progress in accepted ways; second, the assertion of a glorious independence—of a splendour of light and colour with which the genius of the man invested forms and thoughts not beyond the grasp of those who studied them; third, the period in which the master, advancing into a realm mysterious and unexplored, became hard to follow, and left to us problems difficult to solve. An analogue of this development is often found in human life. We see the imitative child; the young man with all the inspiration of his years to do great deeds; the mature philosopher, who, in meditation, discovers that which, if not in itself incommunicable to all, is so through defect in receptivity. Shall we ever learn from the later works of Beethoven the fulness of the message which, through them, the composer strove to convey? Perhaps not, since it is conceivable that the language of music was too weak for the burden of the thought. But the key may yet be found. Messrs. Morris & Ellis assure us that, at last, the secret of William Blake's prophetic books has been wrested from the keeping of obscurity and that what seemed confused and unintelligible now resolves itself into order and

clearness. Learned students can help us little in solving the Beethoven enigma. We must study it independently, each for himself and not by another, since it is the glory of music to convey a personal message which none can receive for us. The attitude of musicians and amateurs towards the works in question is now almost all that can be desired. True, we do not hear the so-called posthumous Quartets at the Popular Concerts, as once we did, nor are performances of the great Mass increasing in number. But neither do we hear the language of derision. There is less said about Beethoven's "madness," and more recognition given to the fact that the composer who steadily progressed through two great stages would be likely to advance through a third, albeit, in the last stage, our eyes do not see him so clearly. Decidedly, the general attitude is now correct. It is that of men disposed to receive the light if haply it shine upon them.

Whatever the future may have in store for the works of the third manner, those of the second will always most effectively represent Beethoven to the multitude. In them he astonishes without perplexing. He is a giant rejoicing in his strength and frankly displaying it; not a mystic uttering dark sayings. And what a splendid giant!—mighty enough to snatch us up to the third heaven of music and show us realms of glory unsuspected. It is this power of revelation which distinguishes Beethoven from his predecessors and contemporaries. They gave to the world works of faultless symmetry, marvels of ingenious device; pages eloquent with the beauty of melody; gems of loveliness which will shine for ever on Music's breast. But, with one or two exceptions, they were as pretty children weaving garlands of flowers in a summer glade, and looking askance at Bach and Handel, their big brothers. To these gifted scions of humanity Beethoven came as one divine; majestic, masterful, like Shakespeare amid the crowd of Elizabethan poets.

If it be asked in what consisted Beethoven's immense superiority to all rivals, the answer must necessarily be complex. But, as I am now speaking of the second and, in most people's estimation, greatest manner, there is, perhaps, no need to go outside the Symphony in C minor for an illustrative example. I take that work as an epitome of the qualities which made the master what he was. It respects the essentials of classic form (Beethoven never omitted to do that), but on the frame-work thus provided for him by his predecessors, this astonishing musician laid the product of an original, daring, and inventive genius. The first few bars opened a new world to his contemporaries, who had never heard anything like them in all their lives. Those short, impetuous unisons, checking themselves almost

as soon as started—what could they mean? Surely an opening so unprecedented must have some special significance! The question was put, and the answer came back: “Thus fate knocks at the door!” Oracular words, but simple enough if they meant: “Thus Fate knocks at the door of the old order in music.” Emerson remarks somewhere: “Every revolution was once a thought in one man’s mind.” The idea is no less striking than true, and it may be said of the leading bars of the “C minor” that they contain the whole romantic movement in music. After them anything was possible and much came about. To understand their portent, and the composer’s superb independence, let us fancy ourselves hearing them at the memorable concert when

and Mozart strictly regulated their perorations; the present composer goes on with one fancy after another till the unaccustomed hearer enquires, “Will he never end?” Is this a case of possession in the supernatural sense? If so, use no exorcism. We may have been listening to an angel unaware. The Scherzo amazes us, and, hearing it for the first time, we are not quite sure whether the movement should be taken seriously. Those passages for the double basses in the Trio!—the struggling performers cannot play them, and, if they could, what might the ponderous wallowings of the great instruments signify? Ah! but hark to that suddenly interrupted cadence! to the mysterious A flat of the basses; the sustained C of the drums; the slowly changing harmonies



PARENTS OF BEETHOVEN.

From the pictures by Kaspar Benedict Beckenkamp.

first the Symphony was produced. Their effect is that of a bolt from the blue. It excites surprise, wonder, and curious expectancy, with an uneasy sense of something impending the nature of which cannot be guessed. At once we are in a new world of sound—not the most orderly, some may think—and with excited imagination we await developments. Developments come crowding on each other’s heels. The four notes of the first brief phrase, how they pervade the orchestra, everywhere originating new conditions and leading to new effects. Then the slow movement, with its long-drawn melody and varied treatment. Something like this we have heard before, but what means the strange reluctance to come to an end? Haydn

of the upper instruments, and then the triumphant burst into the glory of the Finale. It is all wonderful; we have listened breathlessly, with fast-beating pulse, and we have witnessed a manifestation of the genius of Beethoven. At the present time the “C minor” is familiar, but the experience of those who heard it in the early years of the century is impossible to any of us. That, nevertheless, supplies the true gauge of the composer’s wonderful advance into the unknown. But mark, for this is important, how, launching forward on untrodden ways, Beethoven kept in touch with the art of his day. He invented no new orchestra, he did not reject the forms upon which his predecessors

had worked, and he asserted his superiority by intellectual and emotional power, which gave to the body of music a new soul, re-animating it from within, and not obtaining a semblance of life by working with machinery from without. With these thoughts, all inadequate to their mighty subject, I leave the genius of Beethoven as that which may be worshipped, but never fully understood.

Reverting, in conclusion, to the nature of the man, let me close—egotistically, but, I trust, excusably—with a replica of a cheerful picture drawn, a few years since, by the pen now busy with these words: “In art Beethoven lived another and a greater life than that which men saw. There he was supremely happy, ever dwelling in an enchanted Paradise, surrounded by beautiful and gracious forms, the children of his imagination. Nothing troubled him there, and he could at any moment withdraw himself from a world of uncharitableness, from a world of doubtful friends and heartless relatives, from a purblind world which could see very little and laughed at that, to a region where all was light and joy, and into which no discord entered. Every life has its compensations, and this was the compensation given to the poor deaf musician, against whom the storms of adverse fate raged with unceasing fierceness. In the inner sanctuary of his art he must have foreseen immortality—‘a broad approach of fame, and ever-living avenues of song.’”

J. B.

THE BIRDS IN THE PASTORAL SYMPHONY.

By GEORGE GROVE.

EVERY one who is at all versed in music knows the three birds whose names and notes Beethoven has introduced into his score just before the close of the Andante, or “Scene at the brook,” which forms the second movement of his Pastoral Symphony. In fact, these three birds have played a more important part in the history of this beautiful piece of music than their author probably anticipated. They gave desperate offence to the German critics of the day, when the Symphony was first played in 1808, even to the point of making them leave on record that “Symphony” was no term for such music, but that it ought to be called “The caprices of a composer” (*Phantasieen eines Tonkünstlers* *). These same birds are said to have driven old Mr. William Horsley (*clarum et venerabile nomen*) out of the room when the work was first performed by the Philharmonic Society, with the indignant exclamation, “Call *that* music!”; and, to judge from what one occasionally hears in

concert-rooms in 1892, they are to some the most interesting part of the whole Symphony—to some of those curious people who frequent good concerts and endure the classical music of the programme for the sake of violently encoring a silly song, or a mere bit of executive display. To such hearers the three birds play a similar part with the “real water” in an Adelphi melodrama.

So much for nightingale, quail, and cuckoo, who have thus excited the wrath of the ancient and the sympathy of the modern nobodies. These delightful creatures, of whom we may truly say—

You were not born for death, immortal birds,

are, however, not the object of this paper. It is to a fourth warbler that we would now draw attention.

A curious story is told on this subject by Schindler, the author of the biography of the great composer. This gentleman, to whom, with all his faults, lovers of music are immensely indebted, was a singular personage, with an absolute devotion to his illustrious chief—Boswell himself had not a more absolute—but with none of the power necessary to form a real attachment between the two men, or to gain any salutary influence over Beethoven’s disorderly habits. There is no doubt that by the date of the occurrence on which we are going to speak, Beethoven was tired of the awkwardness or want of tact of his so-called secretary, and was longing to emancipate himself, a process that was accomplished in about a year from that time. It was then, according to Schindler’s narrative,* in the latter part of April, 1823, that Beethoven, who had not been on the North side of Vienna for some years, proposed to Schindler to take a walk to Heiligenstadt, formerly a great resort of his. It was a lovely spring day; the trees in their brightest tints, and the sun as hot as summer. They looked in at the bathing house and the garden surrounding it, and then crossed the Wiesenthal, at that time peopled with elms, and traversed by the brook which then ran down from the Kahlenberg, and will run for ever in the Pastoral Symphony. At length, seating himself on the turf at the foot of one of the elms, Beethoven—then entirely deaf—asked his companion if any yellow-hammers were to be heard in the branches above; but Schindler could hear none. “That is strange,” said he; “this is the spot on which I wrote the Scene at the brook, with yellow-hammers calling over my head, and quails, nightingales, and cuckoos, helping me all round.” I naturally asked, continues Schindler, why he had not named the yellow-hammer in the score with the others;

* *Allg. Musik. Zeitung*, 1809, col. 437.

* *Biographie von L. van Beethoven*, Ed. 3, i. 155.