

José Vega

BEYOND THE SENSES

Hearing Great Beauty: Beethoven and Helen Keller

This is the edited transcript of the presentation by youth leader José Vega to Panel 2, “The Science, Culture, and Great Projects of a Global Renaissance” of the Schiller Institute Youth Conference, “The World has a Choice: Extinction, or Era of LaRouche,” September 26, 2020. To watch the entire conference, click [here](#).

Let me begin my presentation on Beethoven without musical examples, due to copyright problems.



Schiller Institute

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But that’s OK. I think it might even work in my favor because I’m going to prove something interesting to you. Beethoven, in 1799, starts realizing that there’s something going on with his hearing. It’s looking like he might be going deaf. So, in 1799-1800, he’s trying to figure this whole thing out. Then in 1802, he writes that he has come to terms with the fact that he may never be cured; he holds out hope that he might be cured someday, somehow. But ultimately, he says, it is what it is.

Then 12 years later, in 1814, Beethoven is completely deaf. Beethoven continues to live another 13 years until 1827, but he's completely deaf. So, from the age of 44 to the age of 57, he's deaf; can't hear a thing. Can't hear a lick of anything; let alone his own music. But, what does that mean, exactly? Because, between the period of 1814 to 1827, Beethoven wrote six piano sonatas—Nos. 27-32. He wrote two cello sonatas—Nos. 4 and 5. He wrote Symphony No. 8, and his most famous symphony, No. 9. It's the one with the Ode to Joy chorale in it. He wrote the Late String Quartets—the Op. 127, 130, 133, and the 135, which includes the *Grosse Fuga*, or in English, the Great Fugue. If you haven't heard it, you should; it's amazing. There's a double fugue there—what does that mean—well, you should listen and then you will figure that out. But ultimately, it's amazing. And of course, the *Missa Solemnis*, which is a mass, a vocal work. People call it the most difficult choral piece to perform today.

But, how did he do it? He wrote so much more than just those things. So how was he able to do it without hearing anything that he wrote after 1814? What was going on? Beethoven used to remark that music is not about what you hear. What does that mean? Mozart, and probably Bach, would have said the same thing; that music is not about what you hear. Although, in Beethoven's case, it's kind of different, because Beethoven actually couldn't hear in the last period of his life. And yet, the last period of his life is when many people say he produced his greatest compositions. I happen to think they're all great, though some are better than others. My personal favorites are the Late String Quartets. But how did he do it? What is happening there that you can compose such great pieces of art and music, and you can't hear anything?

Maybe it's not what you hear. Take Helen Keller, for example. Helen Keller, in 1924, writes a letter to the New York Symphony Orchestra. Here's what the letter said:



Michael Katzaroff, 1938

Ludwig van Beethoven

Dear Friends,

I have the joy of being able to tell you that, though deaf and blind, I spent a glorious hour last night listening over the radio to Beethoven's 9th Symphony. I do not mean to say that I heard the music in the sense that other people heard it. And I do not know whether I can make you understand how it was possible for me to derive pleasure from the symphony. It was a great surprise to myself. I had been reading in my magazine for the blind of the happiness that the radio was bringing to the sightless everywhere. I was delighted to know that the blind had

gained a new source of enjoyment, but I did not dream that I could have any part in their joy.

Last night, when the family was listening to your wonderful rendition of the immortal symphony, someone suggested that I put my hand on the receiver and see if I could get any of the vibrations. He unscrewed the cap, and I lightly touched the sensitive diaphragm. What was my amazement to discover, that I could feel not only the vibration, but also the impassioned rhythm, the throb, and the urge of the music. The intertwined and intermingling vibrations from different instruments enchanted me. I could actually distinguish the cornets, the roil of the drums, the deep-toned violas, and violins singing in exquisite unison. How the lovely speech of the violin flowed and plowed over the deepest tones of the other instruments. When the human voices leaped up, thrilling from the surge of harmony, I recognized them instantly as voices more ecstatic, up-curving, swift, and flame-like, until my heart almost stood still. The women's voices seemed an embodiment of all the angelic voices rushing in a harmonious flood of beautiful and inspiring sound. The great chorus throbbed against my fingers with poignant pause and flow. All the instruments and voices together burst forth—an ocean of heavenly vibration—and



Grinberg/Paramount/Pathé Newsreels, 1921

By lightly touching the peg box of his violin with her fingers, Helen Keller is able to “listen” to the music of Jascha Heifetz.

died away like winds when the atom is spent, ending in a delicate shower of sweet notes.

Of course, this was not hearing, but I do know that the tones and harmonies conveyed to me moved a great beauty and majesty. I also sensed, or thought I did, the tender sounds of nature that sing into my hand—swaying reeds and winds and the murmur of streams. I have never been so enraptured before by a multitude of tone vibrations.

As I listened with darkness and melody, shadow and sound filling all the room, I could not help remembering that the great composer who poured forth such a flood of sweetness into the world was deaf like myself. I marveled at the power of his quenchless spirit by which out of his pain, he brought such joy for others—and there I sat, feeling with my hand the magnificent symphony, which broke like a sea upon the silent shores of his soul and mine.

Now, why was she able to hear Beethoven’s 9th Symphony, despite the fact that she’s deaf, and blind, too? Yet, she was able to envision something. She says herself, she was able to distinguish between two tones. I believe she herself says in her own letter, she says, “How the lovely speech of the violin flowed and plowed over the deepest tones of the other instruments.” Clearly she could recognize higher and lower tones. She can even recognize human voices. This is someone who has

no idea what a human voice, let alone a singing human voice, would even sound like. Yet, she was able to distinguish what a human voice sounds like, versus what an instrumental voice sounds like. So, what does that say about the human voice? And what does that say about instruments? And what does that say about listening? The senses actually prevent us, or withhold us from really understanding what it is that Beethoven is getting at through his 9th Symphony and his other compositions. What is that “getting at” that Beethoven is trying to get to? What is Beethoven really trying to convey?

Beethoven said, “Music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy.” And he also said, “Don’t only practice your art. Force your way into its secrets, for it and knowledge can raise men to the divine.” What secrets was Beethoven able to unlock through his music, and why is it in what you can’t hear? Maybe there is

something behind the notes; something un-nameable. An un-nameable world that exists between the notes, above the notes, below the notes. This is something that Helen Keller understood, because in the beginning of her letter, she says, “I do not mean to say that I heard the music in the sense that other people heard it. And I do not know whether I can make you understand how it was possible for me to derive pleasure from the symphony.” Because she can hear things and see things in ways that we can’t, because our own senses betray us.



Atlanta History Photograph Collection

Her eyes wet with tears of joy, by placing her fingers on tenor Enrico Caruso’s throat, mouth, and nose, she “heard” him sing “The Lament of Samson” from Saint-Saëns’s opera, Samson et Dalila, April 24, 1916.