Beetclas Essay, Research Paper

The Prophecy of the Heiligenstadt TestamentThe rise of Ludwig van Beethoven into the ranks ofhistory’s greatest composers was paralleled by and in some waysa consequence of his own personal tragedy and despair. Beginning in the late 1790’s, the increasing buzzing and hummingin his ears sent Beethoven into a panic, searching for a curefrom doctor to doctor. By October 1802 he had written theHeiligenstadt Testament confessing the certainty of his growingdeafness, his consequent despair, and suicidal considerations. Yet, despite the personal tragedy caused by the “infirmity inthe one sense which ought to be more perfect in [him] than inothers, a sense which [he] once possessed in the highestperfection, a perfection such as few in [his] profession enjoy,”it also served as a motivating force in that it challenged himto try and conquer the fate that was handed him. He would notsurrender to that “jealous demon, my wretched health” beforeproving to himself and the world the extent of his skill. Thus,faced with such great impending loss, Beethoven, keeping faithin his art and ability, states in his Heiligenstadt Testament apromise of his greatness yet to be proven in the development ofhis heroic style. By about 1800, Beethoven was mastering the Viennese High-Classic style. Although the style had been first perfected byMozart, Beethoven did extend it to some degree. He hadunprecedently composed sonatas for the cello which incombination with the piano opened the era of the Classic-Romantic cello sonata. In addition, his sonatas for violin andpiano became the cornerstone of the sonata duo repertory. Hisexperimentation with additions to the standard forms likewisemade it apparent that he had reached the limits of the high-Classic style. Having displayed the extended range of his pianowriting he was also begining to forge a new voice for theviolin. In 1800, Beethoven was additionally combining thesonata form with a full orchestra in his First Symphony, op. 2. In the arena of piano sonata, he had also gone beyond the three-movement design of Haydn and Mozart, applying sometimes thefour-movement design reserved for symphonies and quartetsthrough the addition of a minuet or scherzo. Having confidentlyproven the high-Classic phase of his sonata development with the”Grande Sonate,” op. 22, Beethoven moved on to the fantasysonata to allow himself freer expression. By 1802, he hadevidently succeeded in mastering the high-Classic style withineach of its major instrumental genres — the piano trio, stringtrio, string quartet and quintet, Classic piano concerto, duosonata, piano sonata, and symphony. Having reached the end ofthe great Vienese tradition, he was then faced with either theunchallenging repetion of the tired style or going beyond it tonew creations. At about the same time that Beethoven had exhausted thepotentials of the high-Classic style, his increasing deafnesslanded him in a major cycle of depression, from which was toemerge his heroic period as exemplified in Symphony No. 3, op. 55 (”Eroica”). In Beethoven’s Heiligenstadt Testament ofOctober 1802, he reveals his malaise that was sending him tothe edge of despair. He speaks of suicide in the same breath asa reluctance to die, expressing his helplessness against theinevitability of death. Having searched vainly for a cure, heseems to have lost all hope — “As the leaves of autumn fall andare withered-so likewise has my hope been blighted-I leave here-almost as I came-even the high courage-which often inspired mein the beautiful days of summer-has disappeared.” There issomewhat of a parallel between his personal and professionallife. He is at a dead end on both cases. There seems to be nomore that he can do with the high-Classic style; his deafnessseems poised inevitably to encumber and ultimately halt hismusical career. However, despite it all, he reveals in theTestament a determination, though weak and exhausted, to carryon — “I would have ended my life-it was only my art that heldme back. Ah, it seemed to me impossible to leave the worlduntil I had brough forth all that I felt was within me. So Iendured this wretched existence…” Realizing his own potentialwhich he expressed earlier after the completion of the Second

Symphony — “I am only a little satisfied with my previousworks” — and in an 1801 letter — “I will seize Fate by thethroat; it shall certainly not bend and crush me completely” –he decides to go on. At a time when Beethoven had reached theend of the musical challenge of the day, he also faced whatseemed to him the end of hope in his personal life. In hisTestament, death seems imminent — “With joy I hasten to meetdeath” — but hope and determination, though weak and unsure,are evident. In the Heiligenstadt Testament the composer comes to termswith his deafness and leaves what is beyond his control to whatmust be, trying to make a fresh start. It is quite evident thatthe Testament is filled with a preoccupation with death — hewrites as though death were at his doorstep, waiting for him tofinish his letter — “Farewell…How happy I shall be if I canstill be helpful to you in my grave…With joy I hasten to meetdeath. Come when thou wilt, I shall meet thee bravely.” He hasset his old self — the almost-deaf, tired, hopeless Ludwig –to rest through the Testament so that he may rise and liveagain. Beethoven had stated previously that he has not yetrevealed all of which he is capable. Coming to terms with hiscondition, he moves on to “develop all my artistic capacities.”This eventually leads to his heroic period in which Symphony No. 3 in E-flat (”Eroica”) composed in 1803 became one of the earlyprincipal works. The work broke from the earlier Vienese high -Classic style; many older composers and music pedagogues, notable to accept his new style, called it “fantastic,” “hare-brained,” “too long, elaborate, incomprehensible, and much toonoisy.” In fact the style drew much from contemporary Frenchmusic — the driving, ethically exalted, “grand style” elementscombined with the highly ordered yet flexible structure ofsonata form. It seems undeniable then that the Heilingenstadt Testamentin which Beethoven came to terms with and put to rest theincurable tragedy of his growing deafness, also set forth adetermination to prove his skills before death should take him. This quest coincided with and perhaps led to his graduation fromthe Vienese hi-Classic style to the development of his ownunique heroic style, a blend of French and Vienese elements. The “Eroica” can be viewed as a deliverance of both his life andhis career from despair and futility. Beethoven recreateshimself in a new guise, self-sufficient and heroic. TheTestament thus is likened to a funeral work. The composer setshimself up as the tragic hero — “my heart and soul have beenfull of the tender feeling of good will, and I was ever inclinedto accomplish great things” — withdrawn from the company ofmen, tortured by his growing deafness, tempted with thoughts ofsuicide, overcoming despair by the pure strength of faith in hisown music, searching for “but one day of pure joy.” In amusical perspective, the “Eroica” Symphony established amilestone in Beethoven’s development and in music history. Hismanipulation of sonata form to embrace the powerful emotions ofheroic struggle and tragedy went beyond Mozart or Haydn’s high-Classic style. Beethoven’s new path reflected the turbulence ofthe developing politics of the day (especially the NapoleonicWars), ignited perhaps by the hopelessness he felt in himself. He took music beyond the Vienese style which ignored theunsettling currents of Beethoven’s terror, anxiety, and death. Indeed he placed tragedy at the center of his heroic style,symbolizing death, despair, and loss — paralleling his ownsense of loss, pain and strife. But in addition, like his owntriumph over suffering, there is hope, triumph and joy asexpressed in the finale of the “Eroica.” The Heiligenstadt Testament is a prophecy of the greatnessto come of Ludwig van Beethoven. At a time in his life where hehad exhausted the musical possibilities of the Vienese high-Classic tradition and where his growing deafness foreshadowed adiminishing career, Beethoven seemed to have come to halt in1802. His Heiligenstadt Testament of that year revealed a soulset to despair and futility. At the same time however, despitethe looming impossibility of recovery, his ambition to fullyrealize his musical talent set him to establish a new milestonein musical history — the creation of the heroic style. Symbolizing struggle, the resistance of morality to suffering,and the triumph over despair, we can see how the heroism ofBeethoven’s music reflected his own struggles with fate and hisown triumphs.