

# Beethoven's Best

By Brian McClinton

Beethoven: The Music and the Life • Lewis Lockwood • Norton • 2003 • £28

MY FIRST BATCH of classical records, purchased as an impecunious student in 1960s Dublin, included Beethoven's 6th and 9th symphonies, the former in a cheap Philips issue with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham and the latter in a single Decca disc with the Suisse Romande Orchestra under its founder-conductor Ernest Ansermet. I played the 9th over and over again, but at first the 6th didn't quite strike a chord. Oh, I knew it was a great, much-loved piece of music, but Beecham's recording didn't quite 'speak' to me in the way Ansermet's 9th did. Then I spotted the Swiss conductor's 6th in a shop in Grafton Street. I can still recall the day I first heard Ansermet's *Pastoral* and the moment when I became hooked on Beethoven for all time.

For here with crystalline clarity, every phrase flowing effortlessly into every other, was this masterly musical landscape laid out joyously before my ears. Suddenly I realised that Beethoven's incredible genius had woven a majestic tapestry of sounds which, while providing acute sensuous pleasure, reached to the heavens, spiritual without being overly religious. I saw for the first time that this was music on a higher plain than any composer before or since. Beethoven was the pinnacle and the *Pastoral*, if not necessarily his greatest work, was nevertheless an easily accessible representation of it, from that wonderfully exhilarating first movement, the awakening of happy feelings on arriving in the country, to the final apotheosis of the shepherd's song after the thunderstorm.

I have musical obsessions. Recently, it has been Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. I must have heard about 20 recorded versions of Ravel's orchestration in the last three months.



But I always come back to Beethoven - to the amazing rhythms of the 7th ('the apotheosis of the dance' in Wagner's apt phrase); to the powerful discords of the *Eroica*; to the civilised delights of the *Archduke Trio*; to the sublime emotions of the violin concerto; and to the dark profundities of the late string quartets.

There are many books on Beethoven which are well worth reading. John Suchet's fictionalised biography *The Last Master* (Warner Books, in 3 volumes) brings the composer convincingly to life. But for the music we really have to look elsewhere. Maynard Solomon's *Beethoven*, first published in 1977, has recently (1998) been revised and updated. Its aim is 'to illuminate the composer's psychological development, to deal with his personal relationships in their evolution, and to demonstrate significant connections between his life and his works'. Solomon divides the book into four parts - Bonn, Vienna, The Heroic Period and The Final Phase - and ends each part with a chapter entitled 'The Music'. His treatment, though untechnical, is insightful and full of wisdom.

The latest addition to the canon is *Beethoven: The Music and the Life* by Lewis Lockwood, a Harvard Professor and eminent Beethoven scholar. Significantly the title places the music first because there is nothing much new to say about the life and the author wants to concentrate on helping us to understand the mind of the genius and his development as a composer. He regards Mozart and Bach as Beethoven's primary musical influences. As a young composer, Beethoven set out to learn from Mozart without becoming an imitator. Then he breaks away and finds his own voice in what Lockwood terms Beethoven's second maturity. As he continued to compose, his work becomes more influenced by the counterpoint of Bach. This influence becomes increasingly apparent in the close-textured and fugal works of Beethoven's third maturity.

One of Lockwood's main concerns is to demonstrate that Beethoven had an acute mind. He quotes a remark from his friend and pupil Carl Czerny: "It is certain that in many of his finest works Beethoven was inspired by visions and images drawn either from reading or created by his own excited imagination, and that we should obtain the real key to his compositions and to their performance only through the thorough knowledge of these circumstances".

Through close and often technical discussion of works such as the *Eroica*, Lockwood shows that Beethoven's genius reflects both his powerful artistic personality and the strong aesthetic, philosophical and political currents of his age. This comprehensive and cogent work reminds us that Beethoven's music in all its inexhaustible richness is the best because it is the beautiful exemplar of a noble aspiration. It is indeed a major defence against the darkness.