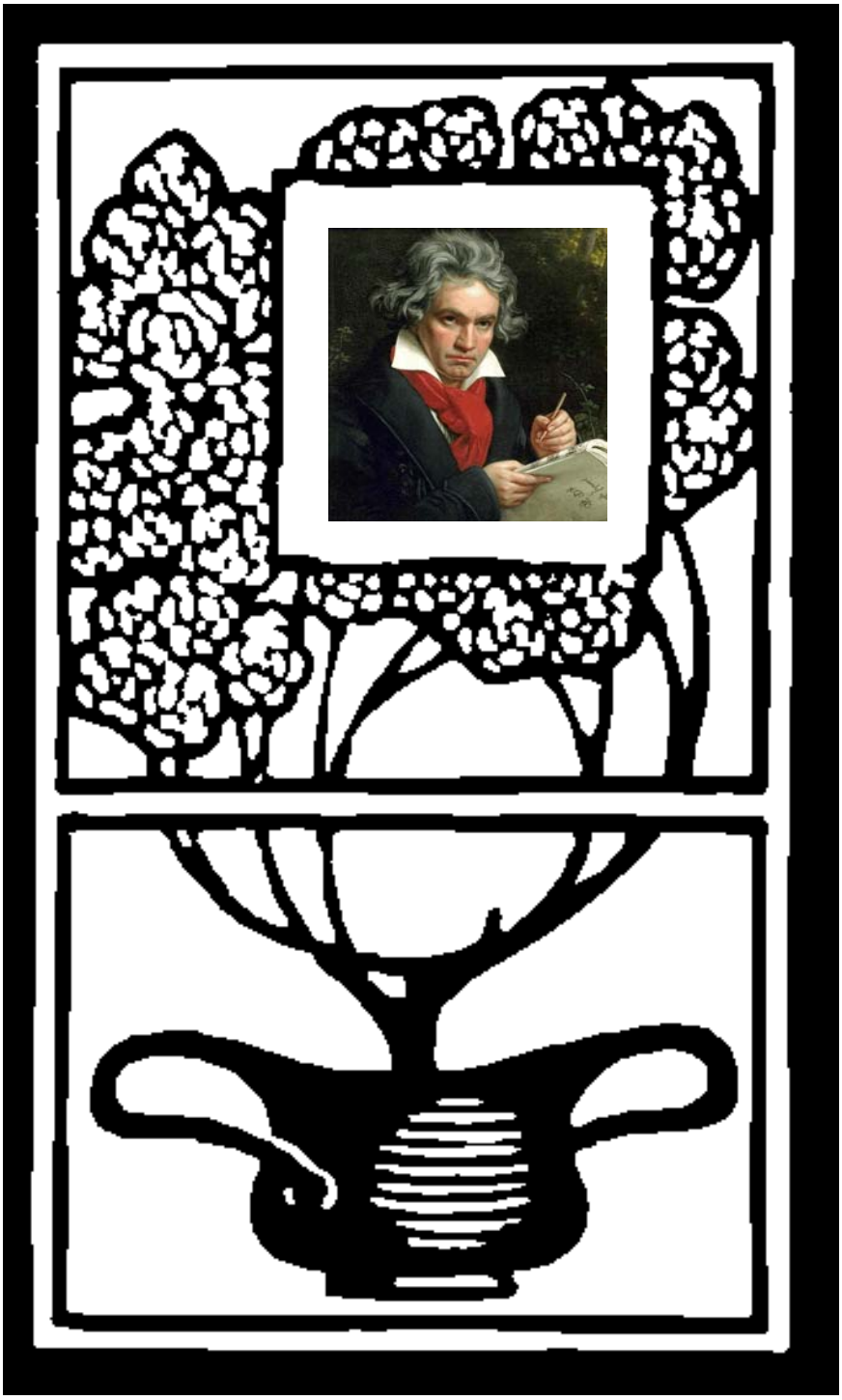

Can Art Express Spiritual Consciousness and Spiritual Development?

Case Study: Ludwig van Beethoven

By Daniel A. Seeger

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This year our Adult First Day School class is addressing the topic of *Quakerism, Spirituality and the Arts.*

This is not an art appreciation course as such. It is not a comprehensive survey of artistic styles or techniques, nor a coherent history of the evolution of the various arts and of the relations among them. We are focusing on the relationship between art and spiritual awareness, or art and religion, and we are selecting the examples of this relationship somewhat at random in response to the interests of members of our meeting and their calendar availability.

Today we are going to consider how the work of the well-known composer Ludwig van Beethoven illuminates our topic. In order to see the situation clearly, I believe it will be useful to remind ourselves for a minute of the assumptions about art which we made in the opening lecture this year.

In that lesson we made note of the great difficulty thinkers have had through the ages in actually defining what art is. But we did conclude that it was possible to state something about art which is useful for our own purposes in this course.

(Refer to chart in Appendix A).

We observed first that, for us, art is a form of communication. We acknowledged that some artists might perhaps be more interested in resolving an inner dilemma of their own through the creative process, without regard for whether or not there is an audience. In fact, an artist may keep plugging away in solitude even if there is no public response at all. But for our purposes we regard art is a form of communication and sharing.

We also recognized that the communication which art carries out is of a very special and specific kind. Music, for example, cannot in and of itself communicate scientific ideas or religious precepts. It can convey a quality of spirit which may be elicited by the contemplation of scientific or religious ideas. We may seek rationally to analyze why a work of art affects us, but we are apt to destroy the effect in the process of doing so. What we call art usually suffers by being translated into mere words. This is true even of the verbal arts. The recapitulation in ordinary, every-day language of a play by Shakespeare, even though no detail might be omitted, would not have the effect upon us that the play has in the form in which Shakespeare fashioned it. So, we concluded that the communication which art carries out operates through centers of awareness which are intuitive and often subconscious, and which also have something to do with the emotions.

It is probably further possible to state that the communication which art carries out is capable of eliciting states of awareness which, while they may be subtle, are also extremely specific. As Friends we are naturally very keenly aware of the

limitations of words, of their character as crude generalizations. Art does transcend words in communicating states of mind, spirit and awareness with more specificity than words can ever muster. Again, while this is easily apparent with respect to music and the plastic arts, it applies as well to the spoken arts, where the impact upon us of the way words are chosen and arranged transcends their mere literal content. We may say that both *Candide* by Voltaire and *As You Like It* by Shakespeare are witty, but the word "witty" in its poverty does nothing to convey the very special character of the wit of which each of these disparate works give evidence.

Another way to formulate this is to state that art is not superfluous exactly because it conveys something which cannot be conveyed in any other way. This is why talking about art or adequately describing it is often so very difficult. So, in discussing Beethoven's music and the state of spirit it illuminates, we must be aware of the inexactness and poverty of the words we have available to use.

Finally, for our purposes, art communicates with us and has an effect upon us which is in some way regarded as transformative and as of positive value. A profound esthetic experience changes us, and changes us in a way we deem to be good. Our sensitivity to and awareness of existence is heightened. If a work of art horrifies us, the horror must be seen as beneficial in some way.

We observed that when we add up all the elements of this working definition of art – it affects us by addressing and enlivening centers of awareness and emotion in ways which we perceive as transformative and as having positive value – the definition, oddly, might as well be applied to spiritual practices. After all, spiritual practices operate at a deep intuitive and subconscious level, and are meant to elevate consciousness and awareness. In the field of art, this communication and the resulting transformative effect occurs through the artist's manipulation of materials or sounds. In spirituality, rituals, devotional exercises, and prayer are the strategies employed, but with music and art often entering into spiritual practice as well.

We further observed that, perceiving this somewhat close overlap between the operation of art and the work of spirituality, some religious communities disparage art, deeming it a deceptive and misleading rival, while others seek to co-opt art as a collaborator in the task of elevating consciousness and inspiring enthusiasm for spiritual truth.

When Ken Henke offered us his insightful series of lectures on Johann Sebastian Bach, he illustrated how Bach's Lutheran piety was expressed through his music, and how every note of even his most secular pieces somehow radiated the com poser's sensitivity to the glory of God.

Beethoven was a Roman Catholic, but as far as we can tell his was a sort of nominal Catholicism. By his own written admission he never went to church and was suspicious of priests. When he spoke and when he wrote letters he seemed as comfortable with references to Greek and Roman mythology as to Christianity. He kept a Vedic quotation framed on his desk. He did compose one major work, his *Missa Solemnis*, which is based on the Roman Catholic mass. But I am not going to try to build a case for Beethoven's spirituality on this one composition. Although *Missa Solemnis* was composed in accordance with the standard Catholic mass it offers no more compelling evidence of Catholic conviction than does a composition he wrote called *The Creatures of Prometheus* suggest that he believed in the Greek pantheon.

In fact, I am going to contrast Beethoven with Bach by exploring a question of significance far beyond music as such. The question is whether or not art can be profoundly spiritual, and can even be a vehicle for spiritual growth, without it having any particular theological content or any explicit, or even indirect, reference to a specific religious tradition. Can art alone, stripped of references to religious concepts, devoid of God-talk, Jesus-talk, Buddha talk, or religious content of any kind, nevertheless testify to the same exalted quality of spiritual awareness that we often associate with mystical religion?

But before getting into the music, if we are to understand Beethoven's spirituality we need to know some facts about his life.

He was born in 1770, a few years before the American Declaration of Independence, and he died at the relatively young age of 57 years in 1827.

(Refer graph in Appendix B).

He lived at a time of great historical and cultural significance. The scientific age, which we might think of as having begun with Galileo in 1600, was well established. Charles Darwin, after all, was born in 1809, eighteen years before Beethoven died.

Beethoven also lived in a time of great political transition. His life span was approximately congruent with Napoleon's, and he worked during the same period that Voltaire was having a profound influence on Jefferson and on the enlightened monarch Frederick the Great. We learned from Kern Henke that Bach's life and livelihood were very much encompassed by the nobility and the church. Beethoven made his way as secularism and democracy were advancing, and his living was profoundly affected by this, as we shall see later.

His political convictions, too, reflected the times. For example, he dedicated his magnificent Third Symphony, now known as the Eroica Symphony, to Napoleon

when he thought Napoleon intended to restore the egalitarian and democratic ideals of the French Revolution. But when it became clear that Napoleon was about to set himself up as an emperor and dictator, Beethoven scratched out the dedication on the manuscript which such force that he made a hole in the paper.

In the realm of music, Beethoven is a transitional figure between the classical period, characterized by Mozart and Haydn, and the romantic period, characterized by such people as Brahms and Chopin. Although it would be very interesting to do so, time will not perm it us to explore this morning just what the differences between these musical eras involves in terms of the structure, style and sound of the compositions which were produced.

But what it is useful to observe is that in most cases someone designated as a "transitional" figure winds up of interest mainly to academicians – a kind of curiosity displaying how one mode of creativity had lost its power and how a new one was being vaguely suggested but had not yet been realized to its full potential. What is astonishing about Beethoven is that while he is clearly a transitional figure forming a bridge from one musical era to another, his music is of such power and depth that it seems to dominate and eclipse both the preceding and following periods and styles. Brahms, for example, who is considered one of the first fully-blown romanticists, refused even to think of writing a symphony for many long years out of a belief that nothing of worth in the symphonic realm could be realized after Beethoven's nine great achievements in that form. Fortunately, Brahms eventually overcame this reticence and produced four excellent symphonic works before he died.

The rough outlines of Beethoven's life are well known. He was, perhaps, one of the earliest examples of the artist as *l'enfant terrible*. Bach was a genial person, as Ken explained, and maintaining an air of propriety at court probably came naturally to him. The court musician in Bach's days perhaps occupied a place in the social hierarchy akin to that of the hairdresser and the chef. Beethoven, in contrast, was given to tantrums and was known to storm out of the salon, slamming the door in the face of the Archduke and the various attending lords and ladies. But instead of banishing or beheading Beethoven for this behavior, the *glitterati* of the time learned simply to shrug the episodes off and invite the composer back the following week.

Beethoven's father, his first music teacher, was a tyrannical alcoholic. His mother, a pious, gentle and amiable woman to whom Beethoven was deeply attached, died when he was sixteen, leaving with him the responsibility of raising two younger brothers due to his father's incapacity from alcoholism.

He nevertheless established for himself a reputation as a piano virtuoso and also began to compose music. He settled into a career pattern which he would follow for the rest of his life. Rather than working for the church or at a court, as

most composers before him had done, he supported himself as a kind of independent entrepreneur, charging fees for giving concerts, selling the rights of publication for his compositions, giving music lessons, and soliciting stipends or single monetary gifts from members of the aristocracy. This was probably a natural development, given the broader social and political changes which were underway. It nevertheless left Beethoven in a constant, painful, and anxious scramble for funds, and apparently always at the threshold of poverty.

On top of all these troubles, Beethoven had an ill-fated love life. It seemed that he tended to fall in love with women who were either too noble and aristocratic for him, given his own social station, or else too married. Some of these attractions are fairly well documented and we know who the ladies in question are. But the identity of the greatest love of his life, to whom he wrote a lengthy and passionate love letter, remains a mystery. He addresses her only as "Immortal Beloved," a phrase which became the title of a recent film about Beethoven's life. Much feverish scholarship has gone into attempts to identify this lady, but the mystery has not been convincingly solved.

Every biography of Beethoven mentions a series of court battles he waged for the custody of his nephew. One of his brothers died leaving a wife and nine-year old boy. Deeming the mother to be unfit to raise the child, Beethoven began legal proceedings to gain sole custody of his nephew, a legal battle which brought out the very worst in his character. Beethoven stopped at nothing to blacken the names of both the mother and the boy. He misrepresented himself as a nobleman in order to get special treatment at the court. While demanding sole custody of his nephew, he also demanded that his sister-in-law pay all his living and educational expenses out of her very inadequate widow's resources. Beethoven had not shown very much interest in his nephew before his brother's death, and the poor boy was totally bewildered by his tyrannical and obsessive uncle and wanted, naturally enough, to be with his mother. Eventually the nephew tried to commit suicide, injuring but not killing himself. As he lay wounded he asked to be taken to his mother, and thus was the issue finally settled through the young man's desperate action. While it is impossible to excuse Beethoven's behavior in this matter, it was, nevertheless, a cause of great anguish and suffering for him as well as for his sister-in-law and nephew. Often when people behave in a way which is stressful to others the behavior is prompted by some inner anguish of their own.

Finally, in any review of Beethoven's life regarding matters that would affect his spiritual state we must include the subject of his health and his deafness. Beethoven was in poor health all of his adult life, and the exact reason for this remains a mystery. There are about as many theories regarding his maladies as there are about the identity of his "Immortal Beloved." Some scholars believe he suffered from chronic lead poisoning, although there is no apparent reason why this should have been so. Others suggest that he was bi-polar, or that he

had syphilis. In any event, he suffered a range of symptoms, including frequent and severe gastro--intestinal pain. But a key symptom was a constantly growing deafness. His hearing loss began very early, when he was in his mid-twenties, and progressed until he was totally deaf by his mid-forties.

Obviously, for a musician, this is an especially bitter calamity, and one of the handwritten documents from him which survives indicates that he contemplated suicide because of the deafness. Yet other writings express determination to live and to triumph over the malady. At any rate, deafness did not stop him from composing, but the other activities upon which he depended for his livelihood – teaching, conducting and performing – became increasingly difficult and eventually totally impossible, compounding his financial difficulties.

So as we turn to Beethoven's music we need to be aware that it grows out of the consciousness of one who led a deeply troubled, stressful existence.

Beethoven's music is usually divided into three periods based upon its formal musical characteristics. The same division proves useful when discussing his music as spiritual expression.

(See table in Appendix D).

I have offered a list of works divided by periods. But different people will formulate the list differently, and put different pieces in different categories. These periods are more clear regarding their centers than their boundaries, where one merges into the other.

Beethoven's early music follows logically and naturally upon the work of his great predecessors Mozart and Haydn. Beethoven greatly admired Mozart, studied all his music very thoroughly, and journeyed to Vienna expressly to meet Mozart and take lessons from him, although it is unclear whether the meeting ever took place, since Beethoven was summoned home after only two weeks because of the terminal illness of his mother.

Like the music of the older composer he so much admired, Beethoven's works of this early period are characterized by a mixture of clarity, wit, and musical invention mobilized to express certain qualities of spirit elicited by the experiences of life. The mood may be joyful and bright, like a clear summer's day, or lyrically expressive of love and romance, or funereal and melancholic. But, as was mentioned earlier, words are totally inadequate to capture these qualities. That is why the music itself is needed. What distinguishes great music from lesser music is that the responses expressed in lesser music seem tawdry or banal, again with excuses for the poverty of language, while in greater music these qualities seem lofty and expansive. I will play two pieces which I believe display the affinity between Mozart's work, representing "classical" period of

music, and Beethoven's early work, before the transition to romanticism had begun.

(Play the First Movement, Allegro molto, of Mozart's *Symphony Number 40 in G Minor,* K 550).

(Play the last movement of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Piano Sonata Number 17 in D Minor,* Opus 31, Number 2. – The Tempest).

In Beethoven's middle period, his work seems less like a series of independent snapshots expressing different qualities of spirit which different and separate experiences in life might elicit, and more like a recurring theme considered from many different angles. Again, words fail us and can only be crude indicators. But as Beethoven faced various difficulties and stresses, especially including his own increasing deafness, his music seems to express the inevitability of destiny and the triumph of the human spirit over it. Beethoven of the middle period seems to regard suffering as an innate part of life, a universal theme of existence. But his reaction to this has nothing of the pessimism of philosophers. Rather, his music seems to express an attitude that victory may be achieved through heroism in spite of suffering. Again, words fail us here. This is only an approximation. Nevertheless, in this middle period Beethoven seems to strike a chord of universality that almost everyone can identify with, and it is the music of this middle period that most people refer to when they speak of "Beethoven."

(Play the opening movement of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Piano Concerto Number Five in E Flat Major,* Opus 73 – The Emperor).

I think you can appreciate that however personal the life circumstances which gave rise to this musical expressiveness, it captures the spirit of the modern age.

(Return again to the historical chart, Appendix B).

It was an age entranced with the scientific march of progress, an age which had discovered new worlds to explore and exploit, an age of promise and hope in terms of the collapse of age-old systems of oppression and the promise of democracy, freedom, equality and human dignity. So it was an age of optimism, of triumph, of confidence in humanity's potential. Beethoven's ability to draw upon his very personal experience to express something so universal with such artfulness undoubtedly accounts for his enormous cultural popularity both during his lifetime and ever since.

Yet, we can also appreciate the disaster that this perspective might have meant in everyday human terms. If one's approach is that every obstacle, human or otherwise, that frustrates you calls forth a glorious assertion of indomitable human spirit, one could become a person that is rather trying to have around.

Western culture in general might be suffering from what might be called a "middle Beethoven" complex as its institutions and practices roll over exploited people and assault the very earth itself, the foundation of all human existence.

In modern times people in the First World spend a lot of time and energy avoiding tragedy, and many achieve some remarkable success in doing so until they reach their deathbed. Beethoven's difficulties were continuous, and as his deafness progressed and as eventually his ability to hear disappeared altogether, rendering him helpless with respect to the particular human capacity around which his existence so largely revolved, he got a glimmering of the inevitability, not only of suffering, but of finitude and of endings. He realized that the attitude and experience he so magnificently expressed in his mature middle period was not going to be for him a permanent possession.

So in his last period what we loosely term its victorious quality, its noble spaciousness and confidence, was to disappear from his music. His deafness isolated him more and more, and he came to realize that his essential loneliness was permanent, terrible and complete. Destiny was no longer a powerful enemy that with sufficient courage we can defy, but rather a force too complete to evoke any thought of resistance. Yet paradoxically, out of this great darkness emerges Beethoven's most exalted music, music much different in kind than anyone else has produced either before or since, music which explores whole new regions of human awareness.

The last compositions completed before his death in which this new vision emerges are all string quartets, not symphonies or concerti. They also abandon the formal structure of classical symphonic works – known as the sonata allegro form, with its pattern of subject, counter-subject, development and recapitulation. They do continue in the pattern of offering a succession of movements, but rather than representing stages in a journey, or a variation of moods, each existing independently in its own right, these movements represent separate experiences which take on a single meaning derived from their relationship to a central, dominating insight. Each quartet seems to encompass the full range of possible human experience bound together into a unified whole, a oneness. This can only be perceived by listening to one of these quartets in its entirety, which we do not have time to do here. But I am going to play a brief excerpt from a light-hearted movement before concluding with a summary movement to give you an idea of the range of emotion included in these works. Now when listening to what follows, remember that this was composed by a person ill, alone, ill-housed, and on his death bed.

(Play the Fifth Movement, Presto, of the *String Quartet Number 15 in C Sharp Minor, Opus 131*).

Now, I said that the various movements in these quartets, while expressing the

full range of human emotions, nevertheless seem to take on single meaning derived from a central experience or insight – they radiate, as it were, from a single state of consciousness, awareness or spirit. This is characteristic of all mystic visions, of that special kind of awareness in which the myriad of things, events, and experiences seem to merge into a unified whole, and where the distinction between the individual ego and the whole of existence seems to melt away.

We will now listen to one of the movements in which this central unified vision seems to be summarized. It has been called an expression of the reconciliation of freedom and necessity, of assertion and submission, a vision in which ideas such as fate, resistance, submission, and heroism no longer seem opposed, but are understood as innate to each other and necessary to each other.

The Beethoven who wrote this music was close to death, poor, ill, wretchedly housed, and utterly alone, If these quartets stood by themselves, we might regard them as superhuman utterances from an oracle who was hardly a human person at all. The composer Hector Berlioz found in these quartets an expression of thanksgiving so awesome that it was also terrifying. Yet, because we know the rest of Beethoven's life and work we appreciate that the vision which emerges here comes from one like ourselves, one who has known and suffered through a broad range of human experience and has reached, finally, a serenity which passes beyond beauty, a serenity which is unearthly, passionless, perfect and complete.

(Play the First Movement, Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo, of the *String Quartet Number 15 in C Sharp Minor,* Opus 131).

Daniel A. Seeger
January 20, 2008

Acknowledgments: Facts and dates about Beethoven's life were checked through *Wikipedia*. Information about Beethoven's compositions (opus numbers, dates, exact titles) was checked through the website www.lvbeethoven.com. The argument about the spiritual significance of the composer's music is derived from J.W.N. Sullivan's excellent book *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development* (New York: Vintage Books, reprinted in 1960 – originally published in 1927). The portrait of Beethoven used on the front cover was painted in 1820 by Joseph Karl Stieler.

APPENDIX A

Slide reproduced from September 23, 2007 Adult First Day School Session: "What Is Art?"

Some general principles about art which are useful in MMM Adult First Day School:

1. Art is a form of communication.

2. Art addresses intuitive, subconscious and emotional centers of awareness.

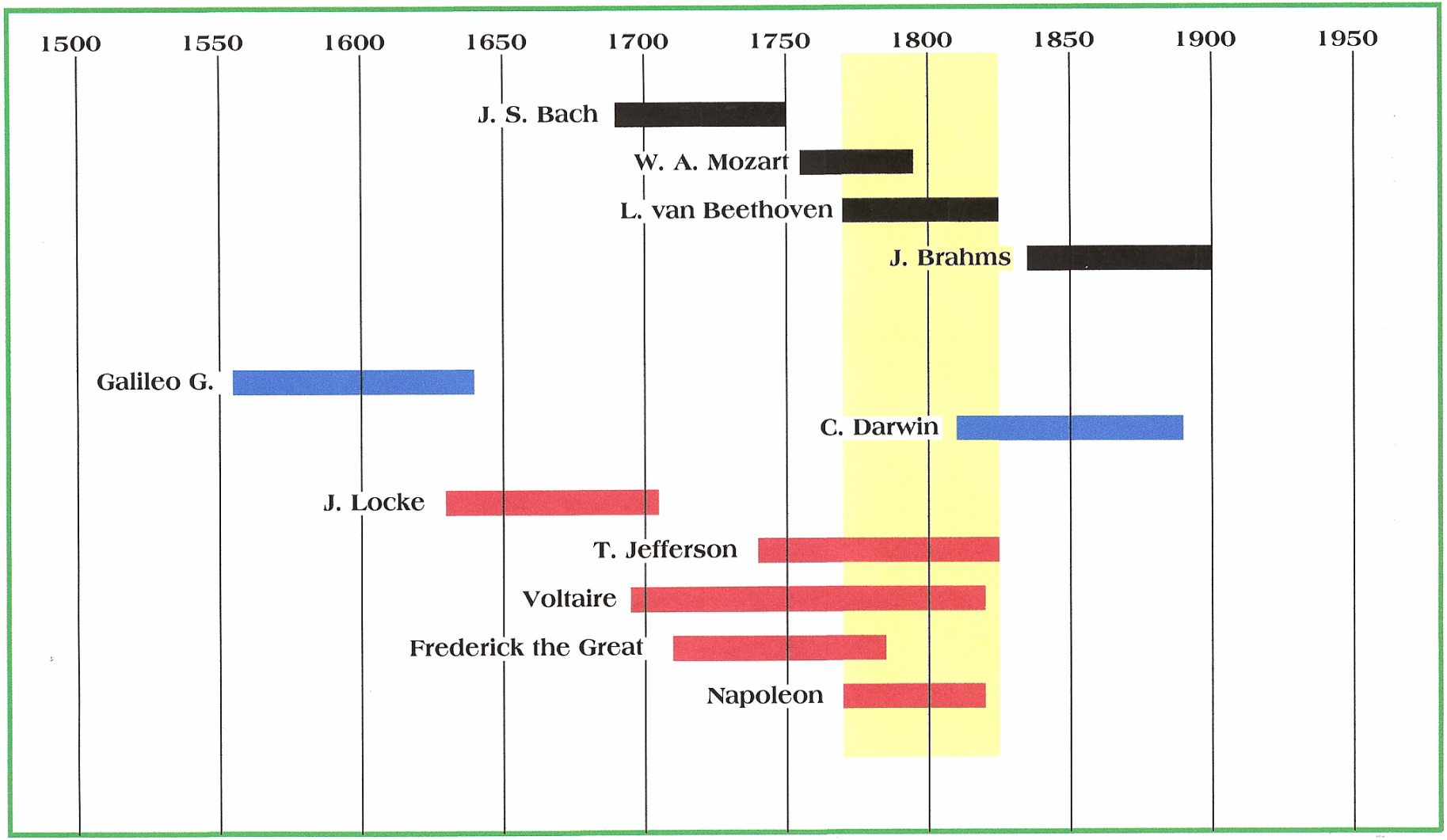
3. Art elicits reactions which are both subtle and highly specific, and which are beyond the power of words to describe.

4. The transformation of awareness or consciousness which true art elicits is of positive value.

Rembrandt van Rijn: The Philosopher

APPENDIX B

BEETHOVEN'S HISTORICAL CONTEXT



APPENDIX C

Demonstration Numbers:

1. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: *Symphony Number 40 in G Minor*, K. 550. (1788 C.E.). First Movement: Allegro molto. Performed by the Ensemble Orchestral de Paris.

2. Ludwig van Beethoven: *Sonata for Piano Number 17 in D Minor*, Opus 31, Number 2. (1802 C.E.) Third Movement: Allegretto. Performed by Alfred Brendel.

3. Ludwig van Beethoven: *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra Number 5 in E Flat Major*, Opus 73. (1808-1809 C.E.) First Movement: Allegro. Performed by Rudolph Serkin, pianist, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Seiji Ozawa.

4. Ludwig van Beethoven: *String Quartet in C Sharp Minor*, Opus 131. (1825-1826 C.E.) Fifth Movement: Presto. Performed by the Tokyo String Quartet.

5. Ludwig van Beethoven: *String Quartet in C Sharp Minor*, Opus 131. (1825-1826 C.E.) First Movement: Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo. Performed by the Tokyo String Quartet.

Some Major Works by Ludwig van Beethoven

First Period

Piano Sonata Number 8 in C Minor, Opus 13. (Pathetique).
Concerto Number 1 in C Major for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 15
Concerto Number 2 for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 19.
Symphony Number 1 in C Major, Opus 21.
Symphony Number 2 in D Major, Opus 36.
Piano Sonata Number 14 in C Sharp Minor, Opus 27, Number 2. (Moonlight).
Piano Sonata Number 17 in D Minor , Opus 31, Number 2. (Tempest).
Concerto Number 3 in C Minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 37.
Ballet Music and Overture "The Creatures of Prometheus," Opus 43.
Sonata Number 9 for Piano and Violin in A Major, Opus 47. (Kreutzer).
Piano Sonata Number 21 in C Major, Opus 53. (Waldstein).

Middle Period

Symphony Number 3 in E Flat Major, Opus 55 (Eroica).
Concerto Number 4 in G Major for Piano and Orchestra.
Symphony Number 4 in B Flat Major, Opus 60.
Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D Major, Opus 61.
Symphony Number 5 in C Minor, Opus 67
Symphony Number 6 in F Major, Opus 68.
Leonore, Opus 72
Fidelio Overture, Opus 72b
Concerto Number 5 in E Flat Major for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 73. (Emperor).
Piano Sonata Number 26 in E Flat Major, Opus 81. (Les Adieux).
Symphony Number 7 in A Major, Opus 92.
Symphony Number 8 in F Major, Opus 93

(Continued)

Transition Period

Piano Sonata Number 29 in B Flat Major, Opus 106. (Hammerklavier).
The Ruins of Athens, Overture, Opus 114.
Mass in D Major, Opus 123. (Missa Solemnis).
Symphony Number 9 in D Minor, Opus 125. (Choral)

Final Period

String Quartet Number 12 in E Flat Major, Opus 127
String Quartet Number 13 in B Flat Major, Opus 130. Original version with Grosse Fuge as finale.
String Quartet Number 13 in B Flat Major, Opus 130. With alternate ending replacing Grosse Fuge.
String Quartet Number 14 in C Sharp Minor, Opus 131.
String Quartet Number 15 in A Minor, Opus 132.
Grosse Fuge (Great Fugue), Opus 133.
String Quartet Number 16 in F Major.