

Prayer of the Month • March 2018

O God,
give me strength to be victorious over myself,
for nothing can chain me to this life.
O guide my spirit,
O raise me from these dark depths,
that my soul, transported through your wisdom,
may fearlessly struggle upward in fiery flight.
For you alone understand and can inspire me.



Ludwig van Beethoven, 1770–1827

What a prodigious talent had Beethoven, a musical genius, and what a cruel fate he endured, of growing deafness. He wrote this prayer when he realised that his deafness was incurable. It is a prayer of struggle but also of hope. Deafness is invisible, unobservable, except indirectly, such as when a head fails to turn on hearing their name called or a loud noise erupt. But Beethoven didn't give up. He continued to compose, despite bouts of chronic abdominal pain, a custody battle for his nephew Karl, and his need to rely on conversation books because of his increasing deafness. During this period he composed the late string quartets, the *Missa Solemnis*, the *Diabelli Variations*, and the *Ninth Symphony*. Of the late string quartets, one musician commented that 'we know there is something there, but we do not know what it is.' The composer Louis Spohr called them 'indecipherable, uncorrected horrors'. However, opinion changed considerably, after their first bewildered reception, and they became an inspiration to later composers, including Richard Wagner and Béla Bartók. Beethoven's health was failing; he was bedridden for about a month in April 1825. As he recovered from what he thought might be a fatal illness, he wrote the slow movement (*Molto Adagio*) of his *A# minor quartet* ('Holy song of thanks to the divinity, from one made well'). He was struck again with illness in December 1826, and remained bedridden from then on. The last work he completed was the substitute final movement to replace the difficult and lengthy *Grosse Fugue* in the *B-flat major string quartet*. He died on 26 March 1827. There were an estimated 20,000 Viennese at his funeral procession three days later.

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