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## Beethoven, Suffering & Faith | Mia Chung

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## **The Veritas Forum**

Beethoven's presence and music still looms in our modern imagination, but we rarely think about the man behind the music. Mia Chung, a world-renowned pianist at the Curtis Institute, says that, in order to appreciate Beethoven's genius, we must examine his relationship with suffering and faith. In this performance-presentation from Veritas at the University of Michigan, Chung explores the richness of Beethoven's inner life.

## Transcript

Beethoven, in his essence, portrays universal struggle, alright? A human need for redemptive peace that is brought to the fore by nothing less than hardship and suffering. What kind of music, if any, would Beethoven enjoy if he were alive today? The internet has several theories with genre spanning from dubstep to heavy metal, but perhaps more importantly, as Mia Chung, a world-renowned pianist at the Curtis Institute, points out, if Beethoven were alive today, he probably wouldn't have gone deaf. While we may be tempted to lament this tragedy of history, Mia argues that it's precisely Beethoven's grappling with hearing loss and the ensuing suffering that fostered the depth and brilliance of his later music.

In this performance-presentation from Veritaas at the University of Michigan, Mia explores the richness of Beethoven's inner life. [applause] Thank you, Christopher. Well, that's a very generous introduction.

If you ask my kids, if I live up to that description, they enthusiastically say no. So anyways, it's a great pleasure to be here to share with you my love for Beethoven's music, my love for the history in which the time in which he lived, the way in which he lived his life, and the essay that his life is about the meaning of suffering, and what it means to be human, and to transcend suffering. As you all know, Beethoven's music is probably some of the most well-known and beloved music in the classical repertoire.

If I play... You all know everyone's playing. Right? Right? That's the fate motive, right? This is someone who's knocking at the door, like death is sort of on your heels. There's

so many works like this that we think we recognize and we instantly are attracted to.

And why is this? You must ask yourselves. The reason is because Beethoven knows something about the human soul. He knows how to communicate to us in an extremely dramatic and effective way.

And I'm hoping to demonstrate why he is so effective tonight. Now, how many of you have a musical background? I just want to make sure because... Don't be shy now. Okay.

So forgive me if I go on wax on about some details musically. For those that don't have a musical background, I can't help myself sometimes. But I do believe I'll be as clear as I can be about the structure of his music to present a compelling case for how he works faith into his musical essays.

Even though his language is abstract. It's possible because of relationships of harmony. So, Beethoven in his essence portrays universal struggle.

A human need for redemptive peace that is brought to the fore by nothing less than hardship and suffering. Okay. So this is what it's all about.

And I'm going to start this essay with a little bit of a timeline to give you a background for his success and his life's journey. And why suffering was such a difficult concept for him. So he was born in December 16th in 1770 in Bonn, Germany, which at the time was part of the Holy Roman Empire.

When he was 22 years old, he moved to the city of Vienna. And he moved to Vienna because it was the cultural center at that time. Now remember, Haydn and Mozart were forerunners of Beethoven's.

Okay. They were composers that he admired, respected greatly. And it was very much expected that Beethoven would take on Mozart's mantle as the next great classical composer.

Okay. To sweep through Vienna. In 1796, just four years later, Beethoven realizes that he's losing his hearing.

Okay. Four years later. Now, he's already experiencing success in Vienna.

He's a captive audience. People love him. And they recognize him.

And all of a sudden, the very faculty that he counts on the most is now in jeopardy. It's at about this time that he seeks out the counsel of a Dr. Schmidt, a physician, to help him with what he expects to be a severe malady. And Dr. Schmidt says, "Hey, look.

You need to get out of Vienna and you need to seek the peace and quiet of Heilgenstadt, which is this countryside rural area outside of Vienna. I want you to get a small peasant

home. Situate yourself there.

Sort of calm down. Don't be anxious. But maybe in the quietude of nature, you will somehow be restored." So he does that.

And he gets a small peasant home in Heilgenstadt. And he recognizes that he loves nature. Somehow he knows he's communing with God's creation.

Right? In this natural setting. Away from the urban bustle and noise. It's at this time as well that he pens something called the Heilgenstadt Testament.

And it's a letter to his brothers that he wanted them to read after his death because he was nearly suicidal, recognizing that he was losing his hearing. And in the Heilgenstadt Testament, he says, "Look. I'm suffering.

And I don't know what to say. Someone comes to me and says, "Do you hear that flute in the distance?" And he says, "I can't hear it. I recognize that I cannot hear this flute that they're calling upon." Or someone says, "Do you hear the shepherd calling a sheep?" And he says, "I can't hear that." So imagine the level of anxiety and panic for this guy that's expected to be the next Mozart of Vienna.

He feels tremendous responsibility and expectation upon his shoulders but knows that he may very well fail those expectations. Okay. Fast forward a little bit after 1802, which is when he penned the Heilgenstadt Testament.

Okay? Six years after he recognized he was going down. And... [laughter] No worries. He enters a phase, the middle phase of his creative output, okay, which is filled with some of the most famous works of his output.

The fifth symphony that I pay, the opening of that, comes from this period, okay? And what happens is, in the wake of tragic recognition that he was losing this faculty that he required, he decided or somehow experienced a kind of new transcendent level of human energy. He saw himself as a heroic figure. And so he wrote the Eroica symphony, Opus 55, I don't know, 1803, 1804 around that time.

And that symphony was really an essay about how he, the protagonist, would triumph over adversity, okay? It's about this time that he also wrote pieces like this. And what you see is bustling energy and kinetic expression, right? He can't help himself. Epusianata, sonata.

Guys are familiar with it. Now, that's not kinetic per se at that moment, but later on it is...

[music] Is that that whole tirade that he expresses in that sonata, it's all about shaking his fist at the heavens, right? If fate is knocking at his door, he's saying, "Heck no, alright? I'm going to survive and I'm going to triumph." So that's the middle phase. Now, the sonata I want to talk about first in the context of this personal history is the pathatique sonata in C minor, okay? Now, the pathatique sonata was composed 1798-99.

So this is before the Heiligenstadt Testament. And it's in C minor, which has a certain connotation or meaning, tragedy. Okay, C minor, tubetto, it means tragedy.

E flat major, heroism, which is the key of the Eroca symphony. Okay, that's an E flat, and that's why he sees himself as the hero. So to consider the key of C minor is to know that you are now in the tapestry experience of human tragedy, of epic proportions.

Now, this is the other thing I want to bear upon your thinking. Beethoven is a structuralist, which means that he uses keys to take us through kind of abstract narrative. So if C minor is the tragic key, what he's going to do is he's going to create a polar opposite to that, which is the key of A flat.

And A flat to Beethoven is the key of peace and tranquility, alright? So let's enter this into your musical vocabulary, the idea of polar opposites being paired, so that because of the contrast, you experience a kind of narrative. Does that make sense to you? It's not storytelling. It's not programmatic in the sense that, oh, now here comes a protagonist, he's walking down the street, he needs his antagonist, the battle.

It's not that kind of explicit narrative. But you do see how contrast will take you through a certain emotional journey as we move from C minor to A flat nature, okay? So here's the C minor opening. [piano music] Okay, now you experience the kinetic, right? So the opening is like this build up of potential energy, and then you hear the rubber band snap, and you hear the kinetic energy, okay? So in the context of this C minor, there's a moment where he visits A flat major.

I don't know if you've heard it, it goes like this. [piano music] Did you get it? And then... [piano music] Okay, so you guys get the tragic nature of that C minor. When we get to the second movement, and this is what I mean, casting large scale narrative across the movement, this is revolutionary folks.

Mozart and Haydn didn't think in these terms, but Beethoven did, okay? He was always an experimentalist, pushing the envelope of classical structure to hold more emotionally. Greater drama, greater emotion, greater power, okay? So here comes the second movement, and this is an A flat, and this is the contrast. Again, the polar opposite to the tragic, right? Peace.

[piano music] [piano music] I don't know if anyone's familiar with Carl Haas's program on piano. Yeah, that's how it opens, right? He goes, uh... Good evening, everyone. Right? That sounds good.

Anyway, so do you see how that's the polar opposite of the tragic C minor? Okay, now, guess what he does? He has to round it back to the tragic C minor, the third movement comes up, and he returns to C minor. This is a really fascinating movement, because we have to bring to come to terms with the fact that he's cast sort of this dialectic, right, between C minor and A flat major. What is he going to do with A flat major in the context of this movement in C minor? And it goes like this.

This is how it sounds. [piano music] Okay, so that's the Rondo theme, all right? In the middle of this movement, all of a sudden, this is what he interjects. Okay? It goes like this.

[piano music] Okay. You hear these fourths? That's actually a reference to the thematic material of the second movement. [piano music] The second movement scheme is also built on fourths.

So he's actually referencing the second movement in the middle of this C minor sonata. So what does this mean in terms of an abstract narrative? What does the A flat reference imply? It implies that in the midst of tragedy, okay, he's still sort of grasping for some sense of peace or tranquility, all right? That's the abstract narrative that comes to mind for me. Okay, and then he goes on and the theme, the original Rondo theme comes back.

[piano music] Okay, we all recognize that. Now, when he gets to the very end, this is when he does something extraordinary, okay? He's going to close out this conversation between tragedy and peace. And this is how he does it.

All right, we play the closing Rondo theme here. [piano music] [piano music] Oh, wait, wait a minute. We're supposed to be at the end of this piece, right? So we should have done this.

[piano music] Thank you very much, right? That's not what he does. Look what he does. He moved to a harmonic area, which is the Neapolitan for the musicians in here, that will facilitate a return of A flat.

Okay, so unexpected. You have to understand, when people in that era heard this, they would be like, "Oh, my goodness, did you hear what he did?" It was so shocking, right? And innovative. So this is what he does.

[piano music] And A flat comes back. [piano music] It has the ethos of the second movement here. [piano music] And then with a little twist.

[piano music] Slams the door, right, on that hope of peace and tranquility. Do you get it? You get the abstract narrative? Okay. We're going to go to a second narrative, but one that's much more explicit in terms of his spiritual references. Okay? Let's take a deep breath. Corporate deep breath. All right, now, this late work that I'm going to talk about is in the key of A flat major.

No surprise. A flat major, again, the key of peace and tranquility. The entire piece is cast, however, in this key.

So the narrative is going to be brought forth through musical symbols, not necessarily through harmonic territories. Does that make sense to you? And I'm going to tell you what those symbols are in just a second, okay? But let me give you a little bit of backdrop first. So by the time that this next sonata, which is his Opus 110, okay, the first one was the Pathetic Sonata from 1798, the Opus 110 Sonata is from much later.

It's from 1821. He dies in 1827, so this is six years before he dies. No, that he is living in a world of complete silence.

Complete silence. And also no, that he's become a social outcast. So because of his deafness, he no longer wants to see people or be with people.

He's not interested in politicking or being with these aristocrats who were his patrons. He really just wants to write, and write for the connoisseur. So this music of the late period is really known as very esoteric expressions.

It's hard to understand. Even for musicians, we struggle to understand it. And the reason we struggle is because it's of such a profoundly spiritual nature, a sort of level of spiritual existence that you or I will rarely ever experience because we were not in his shoes.

And we imagine being a composer who was completely deaf, who has no input, no sensory input at all. And all he's left with are the thoughts of his own mind. He can hear pitches.

He still recognizes pitch. He knows it. He can feel vibrations.

He was known to put his head on the piano when he composed so he could feel the vibrations, particularly of bass notes, and so on and so forth. But for the most part, he's living in a world of silence. So he becomes socially isolated.

It's about the same time in 1819 that he plums deep into the concept of writing a mass, the solemn mass. It's called. And it has the typical movements, the kirie, Gloria, Crato, Sanktus, Agnuste, of any Catholic mass.

I know that Beethoven was a Catholic by birth. He wasn't really a practicing Catholic, and one of his concerns was sort of the ritualistic nature of the faith. It's what sort of kept him at bay.

He was definitely an enlightenment composer. He was in love with this idea of an emerging democracy, was championing Napoleon Bonaparte at one point in his life, and

then severely disappointed by his Bonaparte's own ambitions to become the sort of autocratic ruler. And he dedicated the Eryochus Symphony to Bonaparte, by the way.

And when he found out what kind of a tyrant he was, and that he had these aspirations to dominate in the same way that these corrupted kings had, he scratched the dedication out. You can still see sort of the damage to the manuscript paper of that score of the Eryochus Symphony. So what happens then is he turns to writing this mass, and now what happens is he enters a new phase.

This is not about transcending in his youth becoming a hero, overcoming his malady by writing great music that no one expected would come from him. He was in a hurry at that point to show people what he could do. In this late phase, it's about him trying to understand his existence come to terms with what it means to be a genius who lives in silence.

So he plums deep spiritually. As he looks at the mass, he's also studying Handel's Messiah. I want you to listen to the text of the Krato.

This is the creed, the belief, the fundamental creed of Christians. I believe in one God, the Father, Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth, and of all things visible and invisible. I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all time, God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten not made.

And then he talks about, and Jesus was made incarnate by the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary and was made man and was also crucified for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried. And on the third day he rose according to the scriptures and ascended into Heaven.

He sits at the right hand of the Father and shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead. His reign shall have no end. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who's worshiped and glorified with the Father and the Son who spoke to the prophets.

Then it says, "I believe in the one Holy Coplet Church, a Catholic and an apostolic church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead." This is the text to the central movement of the Mississylomist. Now, notched other way in your heads.

Now we're going to look at 110. Because what happened was in 1821, after studying this text and writing the Mass, he took a break because he was feeling awful. He was suffering from typhus and infection.

He also was jaundiced at the time. And he says, "Okay, I've got to stop writing." That was the beginning of the year. Fall of 1821 comes around and he starts to feel better.

And he says, "Okay, I'm going to devote my energies to three pianosonadas, Opus 109, Opus 110, Opus 111. I'm going to be talking about Opus 110, the one that's situated in the key of a flat nature. Now, let's look at the construction of this sonata.

I love analyzing these pieces because it's just so fantastic. It's like being a sleuth. You know, I'm detective trying to figure out how Beethoven wrote this, how he made it.

This is the opening theme of the first movement in the flat major.

[music] [music] [music] [music] [music] [music]

[music]

[music] There's something symbolic about the interval of a fourth for him, and I'm going to connect this to the Misa Salemis in just a second, okay? It has some sort of redemptive tranquil transcendent meaning to him. So the first theme, the one I just played for you, is built on the interval of the fourth, okay? Now, here's the second theme in this first movement that I want you to think of.

[music] It's sort of the scalar rising idea that rises a sixth. That's the span of six, okay? The interval of a sixth. All right, so you've got the rising, what interval? Fourths, and you have the rising sixth, but scalar, right? Okay, keep that in your brains.

When we get to the second movement, again, remember the polarity? If that's peace, tranquility, very expressive and songful, he's going to shatter that expectation with something absolutely its opposite, and it's the profane, okay? So the second movement is going to be jaunty and ridiculously jagged and crude, okay? Gone is the elegance, and then we get this.

[music] Okay, what are these ideas?

[music] That's actually a descending sixth. Remember the second theme in the first movement? Okay, it's now descending.

And actually, that comes from a profane tune, "Wizard Cotskotsunguheap." Our cat had kittens. "Wizard Cotskotsunguheap." Okay, what the heck? This is supposed to be this lofty sort of expression of the most sophisticated nature. What does he do? He draws

upon sort of common everyday vernacular tunes off the streets, right? This is so Beethoven.

The other theme, he draws a porno says,

[music] Now, I want you to remember the rhythm of these intervals, okay? It follows the syllabic rhythm of the text.

[music] But look what it's also outlining.

[music] What are those? Forks! All right.

You catch my drift? He's using the same constructive devices, intervalically, to tell this narrative, okay? So he's gone from the beautifully expressive and sublimely beautiful, peaceful, tranquil expression to the profanity of the second movement. And then what do you think is going to happen in the third movement? He's going to reach for the stars, okay? It becomes the spiritual center of this piece. Beethoven in his late phase loves to prepare the first two movements in order to really drop the clom in the last movement.

And the last movement is the most extensive movement of three, okay? And this is what happens. At the end of the second movement, this profane movement ends like this. Oh, oh, it ends and segues right away into the third movement.

So know that. I'm just, I'm not going to stop talking, all right? So we're just going to start talking and we're just going to play, all right? Here's the end of the second movement and it goes right into the third. Third movement.

Third movement. Third movement. [piano music] Now, what I just played for you, you suddenly-- How would you describe this? It's sort of a religious nature, right? It's serious.

Really serious. Profound? Oh, better? Oh, up, up, up. Okay.

Sorry. Thanks, Dave. How's that? Better? Okay.

So, what we have here marked is "Wretched Tatif." And "Wretched Tatif" is straight out of the handbook of sacred writing. So, when you was writing "Mrs. solemnness," there's three sorts of textures you should know about.

"Wretched Tatif," which is about musical textures that simulate spoken text. Okay? So the rhythms of the pitches themselves will be very syllabic. And then there's "Aria." And "Aria" means song, where you lament, you sing, you pour out emotion.

And then the third is fugue. And fugue is the strictest form of musical imitation. It's almost like a puzzle.

And the fugue really separated the men from the boys or the women from the girls compositionally, because it was such a rigorous form of composition, right? So you have a theme in one voice that is imitated by another voice that's imitated by another voice in staggered entrances, and it has to all work together, okay, in this weave of voices. Now, the fugue is symbolic of God's universal and moral order. And it's very cerebral.

It follows the "Aria," which is very emotional. Okay? So you see these different faculties of human expression, right? He's actually implying something through all of this. And I'm going to take a second now to tell you a little bit about the "Mrs.

solemnness," where the "Wretched Tatif," the "Aria" and the fugue are in full glory. All right? These are the tools of the sacred writing. The fact is, these three tools become very front and center in all of the instrumental works that follow the "Mrs.

solemnness." It's no shock. Somehow it seems that him dwelling on the apostles' creed, okay, the creed and all the texts of the Mass, it was gestating, okay? And I believe this man came to faith, all right? Because what he does is he carries over that language, which was exclusively that of sacred, choral music. It spills over into his instrumental writing.

His last three piano sonatas, his string quartets, his late string quartets, all of this demonstrate the same techniques, "Wretched Tatif," "Aria," fugue, all over the place. He cannot stop. So even the instrumental music themselves, all right, are sort of pointing back to the "Mrs.

solemnness." So the "Mrs. solemnness" was a hugely important moment in his life, all

right? Now, let's talk about what these tools are saying in the context of the third movement of this piece. So we have the "Wretched Tatif," which goes like this.

[music] You see how it sort of sounds like I'm speaking with music, right? Okay. The rhythms imply that it's "Wretched Tatif." At the end of that "Wretched Tatif," we usually hear "woom." Right? Instead, he launches right into an "Aria."

[music] This is a lament.

[music]

[music]

[music]

[music] Okay.

Listen to this "Aria."

[music] You see that descending scalar idea in the span of a sixth. That is identified with the "Aria," okay, in this final movement. And after the "Aria" happens, this lament,

[music] we get a fugue, and the fugue implies rational control, okay? After the lament where he's pouring out his soul, he's like, "Okay, get controlling yourself.

Let's be rational about this, okay?" And this is what he introduces in "A Flat."

[music]

[music] Anybody recognize the intervals?

[music] The rising forks? I'm a slob, you're a slob, flipped up, right? I'm a slob.

[music] It's in the upward direction, okay? The fourths. Alright, wow.

We've had the "Aria," "Wretched Toteef," "Aria," and fugue. Now, where's he gonna go with this, okay? So after the fugue, we think, "Okay, we were done, right? We're done." Okay, this is what it sounds like instead.

[music] He lands on this "E Flat 7" chord.

[music] It would be done. It would be back in "A Flat." And you know what he does instead?

[music] He lands on this German augmented sixth chord, which is spelled long, and then he goes...

[music] He syncs the key from "A Flat" to "G," which is a half-step below. It's like it's

syncing again emotionally.

[music] And he goes into "Aria" again.

[music] He syncs what's going on? And you know what he says in the text? [speaking German] He's in German, becoming weak, softer, right? And then in Italian, losing strength. Alright, so it's simply the lower emotionally, from "A Flat" to "G." He's gone down a half-step, okay? Think of your early piano lessons, alright? And he goes back into the "Aria."

[music] The descending sixth, alright? Just when you think you can take it no longer and you say, "How on earth are we going to redeem this situation?" What can we do to bump this back up to the peaceful key of "A Flat" major? You know, how is he going to get us out of this mess? So let me play the transition to the next few.

He gives us another few, okay? So "Aria" few, "Aria" few, alright?

[music] This is the end of the "Aria" and then he gives us "G" minor, goes to "G" major.

[music] Here come the fourths.

[music]

[music] And then once when we think, "Oh my goodness, he's gotten us from "G" major, he's bumping it up to "A Flat" major, and guess what we hear? All of a sudden he says, "Somewhat slower." And this is how he's supposed to play it.

[music] Do you recognize the syllabic rhythm of that?

[music] At this key moment when he's about to resurrect the key of "A Flat" major, right before that happened, he inserts the reference to "I'm a Slob, You're a Slob." Now let's just stop for a second. Let me tell you anecdotally why this quote is important. According to Alexander Thayer, who was his 19th century biographer, Beethoven was once walking down the street and he was peering into a window, kind of looking to see who lived in the house and it was the home of a aristocrat, and a policeman came up to him and said, "Excuse me sir, what are you doing here?" And he said, "I'm Beethoven," as if that would somehow rectify things, right? And the guy says, "Beethoven, you're a Slob." Okay? So he remembered that personal experience, right? It's him in this context.

He's the Slob, okay? But he's being redeemed in this critical moment, right? Remember the reference of the fugue that's divine and universal order. And look how the piece ends. This is pretty stunning.

Now, before I conclude my discussion of this piece, I want you to know, I want to reference something in the context of the Cradle movement of the Missus solemnness, okay? At one of the most exciting moments in this piece, this is what he introduces. JJ What are these intervals? JJ Right, all right? JJ JJ This is the Cradle theme. JJ Those are fourths, okay? In the context of the Cradle, he ties it in.

That's what the fugue theme is made up of. He ties that sort of transcendent divine fugue theme is tied to Imus love, Ureus love, okay? Powerful stuff, this idea that somehow Jesus Christ, right, is the connector between this lowest of the low, what happened to your genius, and himself, the divine, okay? Now, this is what I want to put out there. I am a follower of Jesus Christ, if you haven't caught that already.

But I want to say this. His essays, his musical essays are compelling, right, about the human experience, this idea of triumph and transcending over suffering. But the fact is that you and I, in this day and age in the 21st century, are in many ways less human than Beethoven was.

And this is the reason why. Our lives are so good, you know? It turns out that the very maladies that Beethoven had, if he had lived in this day and age, he wouldn't have gone death. Did you know that? That infection that killed his hearing would not have taken his hearing if he lived now.

It would have been solved with medication. I feel like there's so much about our lives now that prevents us from suffering. And because we do not suffer, we cannot grapple with the true existential questions that we need to grapple with.

If we were to grapple with those questions, then we would know the heights and depths of what it means to be human, right, what it means to suffer, and in the end to know what it means to be insufficient, insufficient. And that's where Jesus Christ comes in. But to me, he's the only connector, the one who redeems us from our human state, elevates us to become like his, God elevates us to become like his son, where we become children of God because of the gift of grace that Jesus gave us by dying on the cross and being resurrected from the dead.

That's my belief. My hope is that somehow for students, for all of us who explore truth, that we might allow ourselves to suffer, to know what that means, because in suffering, we will also know what it means to experience peace. And that transcendent peace truly can only be provided by the one who conquered suffering all the way around, and that was Jesus Christ.

Thanks for being here tonight. Find more content like this on baritas.org and be sure to follow the Baritas Forum on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

[MUSIC]

[MUSIC]