

BOOK REVIEW

In ‘Mr. Beethoven’ imagining what if the legendary composer had spent time in Boston

By **Michael Patrick Brady** Globe Correspondent, Updated October 21, 2021, 4:56 p.m.



In 1833, J.J. Whatson, a mariner, and Peter Wortley, a shoemaker, arrived in Boston on a ship named Florida. Why they came is anybody's guess, and apart from the passenger list held by the National Archives they left no other mark on history. We know nothing of them, their journey, or what transpired on the ship as it crossed the Atlantic. One thing is for sure, however: Ludwig van Beethoven wasn't there.

But he could have been. Just a decade earlier, Samuel Richardson, founding member of Boston's Handel and Haydn Society, made an overture to Beethoven through a connection in Vienna. The Society wished to commission the great composer to produce a biblical oratorio that would premiere in Boston. Busy finishing his Ninth Symphony, Beethoven never responded — such is his stature that this snub is considered a notable piece of Society lore. Had he accepted, however, it's conceivable that Beethoven might have crossed the ocean, perhaps on the Florida, and settled in at Boylston Hall to see his latest composition performed for the very first time.

For Paul Griffiths, novelist, librettist, and one-time music critic for both *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*, this counterfactual premise is too good to pass up. In his latest book, “[Mr. Beethoven](#),” he imagines the composer sharing a cabin with Whatson and Wortley, disembarking at Lewis Wharf, and beginning the long, arduous work of crafting an oratorio based on the Book of Job, all while hobnobbing with the upper crust of 19th-century Boston. The result is a novel of great wit and empathy, one that provides a deep insight into the composition of both classical music and historical literature through playful, inventive prose.

Griffiths, an admirer of the constrained writing techniques of Georges Perec, has set some ground rules for himself. For one, all of Beethoven's dialogue in the book is taken verbatim, from the composer's published letters. Everything he says in the book is something he said in life, placed in a new context. Furthermore, Griffiths is committed to drawing back the curtain on his process, openly discussing his research methods and the relative plausibility of his narrative choices within the text. “Not so long ago,” he writes of the Florida, “the task of finding what could have been this particular ship ... would have presented, well, quite some difficulty. ... Now the whole thing can be done at home at no cost, thanks to the Familysearch website supported by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”

He is keen to experiment with form, as well. Occasionally, he will think better of a choice he has made and reset the scene, doubling back to allow it to play out differently and take the narrative in a different, more suitable direction. In one chapter, he expresses the tone of two characters having an argument through dynamic markings commonly found in

musical notation (e.g., *fff*, triple forte, or very, very loud). While these tactics could easily have come off as cheap gimmicks, they succeed because underneath the cleverness Griffiths has constructed an emotionally resonant story about the nature of artistic collaboration and communication.

Beethoven's relationships with Mrs. Hill, a musically minded widow who helps refine the leaden libretto with which he's been saddled, and Thankful, a young woman from Martha's Vineyard who acts as the deaf composer's sign language interpreter, are rich with emotion and sentiment. And with Thankful, you get to watch Griffiths construct the character in real time. "It has to be a girl, for a girl they would think more patient, more reliable," he writes. "Coming from Martha's Vineyard, she is probably going to have to be the daughter of a family whose wherewithal comes from farming or fishing."

Few historical figures are as well documented as Ludwig van Beethoven, and Griffiths makes ample use of the available primary sources, biographies, and musical analyses to create both his character and a fictional oratorio that fits in with the composer's oeuvre. "While the first stanza of Elihu's solo has the freshness of a folk song," he writes of the performance, "other parts, even of this number, are densely worked, being at once harmoniously adventurous and layered with history." Frankly, that's an apt description of the book itself.

But by marshalling factual information to create an entirely plausible false reality, Griffiths shows that on some level, all history is just a story we cobble together by interpreting the available facts in the way that seems plausible to us. As perspectives and tastes change in the present, so does our view of history, and though we may have more to go on when reconstructing Beethoven than we do for Watson and Wortley, in the end it's still largely conjecture. Sometimes even the facts turn out to be fictions — in the 1970s, it was discovered that Anton Schindler, Beethoven's first biographer, had peppered his work with forgeries to make himself seem like a close confidant of the composer. These falsehoods misled historians and critics for more than a century.


By combining deep scholarship with a broad-minded, philosophical viewpoint, Griffiths has written a thought-provoking novel about possibility that pushes us to think hard about what we know and how we know it. He invites readers to join him in confronting the challenges of reimagining the past, and the spirit of spontaneity he offers is irresistible.

MR. BEETHOVEN

By Paul Griffiths

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