

Allein auf Reisen. Allein im Orchester. Allein im Restaurant.
Allein im Exil. Allein auf Kur. Allein auf der Welt.
Vorschau auf Festival, Neujahrskonzert und Singwoche 2023 –
alles in diesem Heft.

Solitude: Blessing or Curse?

In modern society, we are quick to associate solitude with loneliness. Yet solitude also stands for independence and freedom – and has been a great source of inspiration and creativity for artists, not least composers, down the centuries.

BY TOBY ALLEYNE-GEE

One dictionary definition of solitude is “the quality or state of being alone or remote from society: seclusion.” Another describes it as “the state of being or living alone, solitariness.” Although the terms “loneliness” and “solitude” are frequently used interchangeably, there is a world of difference between them. Both may be characterised by solitariness, but that is where the similarities end: whereas loneliness is a negative state – a sense of isolation that can persist even when in other people’s company – solitude is being alone, but without being lonely. It is conducive to reflection, introspection, inner growth and creativity – which, to quote the designer Lou Dorfsman, is “essentially a lonely art. An even lonelier struggle. To some a blessing. To others a curse. It is in reality the ability to reach inside yourself and drag forth from your very soul an idea.”

Oh Solitude, my sweetest choice, a song for soprano or countertenor written by Henry Purcell (1659–1695) in about 1685, certainly conveys the notion that solitude is an enriching and stimulating state. However, the ambivalence is apparent: while the poet values the restorative qualities of being alone, he also “hates” it for depriving him of the company of his beloved. Set in the mournful key of C minor, the melody, ornamented with trills, mordents and turns, gives the voice a great deal of freedom, which cleverly masks the repetitive structure of the piece and draws attention to the solitary vocal line. The text is a translation from the French by the English poetess Katherine Philips (1631/2–1664) of an original poem by Marc-Antoine Girard de Saint-Amant (1594–1661).

Oh Solitude, my sweetest choice,
Places deserted to the night
Remote from tumult and from noise,
How ye my restless thoughts delight.
[...]
For thy sake, I in love am grown
With what thy fancy does pursue.
But when I think upon my own
I hate it for that reason too
Because it needs must hinder me
From seeing and from serving thee.
Oh, Solitude,
Oh, how I Solitude adore.

Cheerful isolation

A century later, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791), although known to be gregarious and fun-loving, also extolled the virtues of solitude: “When I am, as it were, completely myself, entirely alone, and of good cheer – say, travelling in a carriage or walking after a good meal or during the night when I cannot sleep – it is on such occasions that my ideas flow best and most abundantly. Whence and how these ideas come I know not, nor can I force them.”

Although the terms “loneliness” and “solitude” are frequently used interchangeably, there is a world of difference between them.

Mozart’s older friend and mentor, Joseph Haydn (1732–1809), spent the greater part of his career in the employ of the princely Esterházy family as a court musician on their remote estate in Hungary. Yet almost thirty years in this isolated spot did nothing to diminish Haydn’s prolific, highly inventive and humorous output, and he enjoyed international acclaim, travelling later in life to London, where his works dominated the concert scene. On his first trip to London in 1790, Haydn met the young Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) in the latter’s native city of Bonn. Beethoven subsequently became Haydn’s pupil in Vienna until 1794.

Involuntary exile

The image of Beethoven as a curmudgeonly misanthropist persists, despite his many joyous and uplifting compositions. He was indeed a defiant character who loathed both his aristocratic patrons and the Viennese concert-going public. He quarrelled with his friends and disliked his teachers (Haydn in particular). And his failing health, especially the cruel loss of his hearing, isolated him even further. Yet as Jan Swafford points out in *Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph*, it was only in solitude that the troubled composer experienced temporary peace: “Part of his gift was the *raptus*, that ability to withdraw into an inner world that took him beyond everything and everybody around him, and also took him beyond the legion



of afflictions that assailed him. Improvising at the keyboard and otherwise, he found solitude even in company.”

Beethoven’s gradual decline into a silent existence led to the great spiritual crisis of his life. Escaping to Heiligenstadt, a district of Vienna, Beethoven contemplated suicide. In a letter to his brothers, Johann and Caspar, known as the Heiligenstadt Testament, he explained the causes of his despair, how he led a joyless life “almost alone like an exile,” but that he had decided to prolong his “wretched existence” for his art alone. Now ready to compose once more, he left Heiligenstadt in defiance, soon writing, in rapid succession, a plethora of masterpieces, including the Eroica Symphony, the Piano Concerto No. 4, the Violin Concerto and the Op. 59 string quartets. Beethoven gradually adopted a tone of resignation in his interactions with the world from which his deafness isolated him. His only joy, music, was attained at extreme personal cost. Beethoven, then, knew both the blessing of solitude and the curse of loneliness.

Toby Alleyne-Gee is a linguist and musician, freelance writer, editor and translator specialising in the arts. He studied languages in his native London before completing his degree in German, Italian and Art History at the University of Zurich. He writes and translates for museums and galleries, opera houses, orchestral ensembles and music festivals, and has been involved in numerous CD projects as well as producing the English subtitles for more than 140 opera productions in Switzerland and abroad.

Self-imposed seclusion

Gustav Mahler (1860–1911) was also acutely aware of the ambivalence of being alone – at an equally profound level. “I am three times homeless,” he wrote. “A native of Bohemia in Austria, an Austrian among Germans, and a Jew throughout the world.” Embattled throughout his career by anti-Semitic sentiment, he was driven from his post as Director of Vienna’s Hofoper in 1907 as the result of a smear campaign in the press. He nonetheless steadily gained recognition for his monumental symphonies and intensely moving orchestral songs. Being a “part-time” composer who only had time to write during the holidays, Mahler had to take full advantage of the solitude that his successive country retreats afforded him during the summer months. His composing huts have become legendary, and three of them survive. When, in 1900, Mahler built a summer villa at Maiernigg, in a clearing high above Lake Wörthersee in Carinthia, the hut was completed before the house itself. Every summer from 1900 to 1907, the composer would work on his scores there. Having set out his breakfast before he started work, his staff returned to the main house by a separate path, as Mahler didn’t want to see a single human being while he was composing.

His wife Alma therefore knew that she was witnessing a momentous occasion when, in the summer of 1902, he played her the whole of his recently completed Fifth Symphony on a baby grand piano in his little hut up in the clearing. The famous slow movement, the *Adagietto*, reuses much of the thematic material Mahler incorporated in his setting to music of five poems by the German Romantic poet Friedrich Rückert, the so-called *Rückert-Lieder*, written that same summer. The cycle is also on the programme of the 2023 DAVOS FESTIVAL. The third of these, *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen*, portrays a disenchanting artist who believes that he exists on a higher plain reserved for those with a deeper understanding of art. Object of much scorn as a composer during his lifetime, Mahler identified strongly with the poem, saying that it reflected his very being.

An other-worldly sphere

The orchestral song begins with a doleful melody played by a solo cor anglais, which is repeated and extended by the singer during the first stanza, referring to the artist’s isolation in a world that already believes him dead. In the second stanza, at a slightly faster tempo, the artist expresses his indifference to the world’s opinion. The serene third stanza describes the other-worldly sphere in which the artist dwells – “I live alone in my heaven, in my love, in my song” – followed by a valedictory coda. The strains of the violins intermingle with the cor anglais, which has the final word with a mournful *appoggiatura*. Arguably Mahler’s greatest song and one of his most profound works, *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* encapsulates the isolation, loneliness – and solitude, in the best possible sense – of the artist. ✨