

Mar 14 FILM / Once Upon a Time in Film Scoring / Immortal Beloved / Sean Woodard

Film (/2017-posts/category/Film)

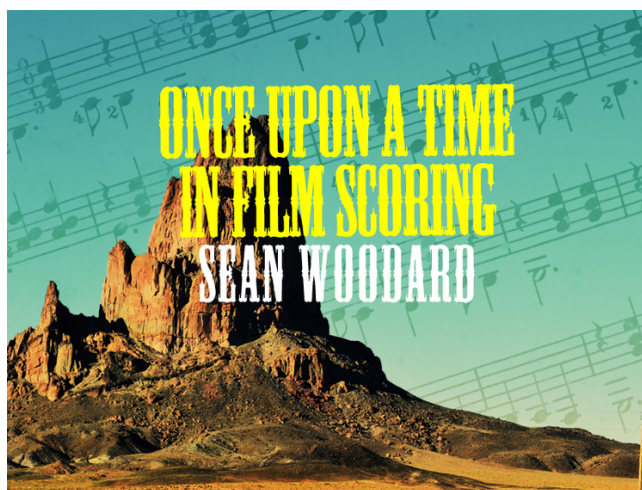


Image © Nathan Alan Schwartz

Immortal Beloved (1994)





Image © Columbia Pictures

Entering college as a freshman double major in Writing and Music, I held a great appreciation for Bernard Rose's Ludwig van Beethoven biopic *Immortal Beloved* (1994). I appreciated the way in which the narrative unfolded in a *Citizen Kane*-esque manner; Gary Oldman's Oscar-worthy performance as the titular composer; and the role Beethoven's music played in the soundtrack.

After recently re-watching the film, I have become more aware of its shortcomings. The flashback narrative hides some holes in the script and the central mystery has begun to lose its luster. As Beethoven's secretary Anton Schindler (Jeroen Krabbé, *The Fugitive*) searches for the identity of the immortal beloved to whom Beethoven has written a love letter—discovered among the composer's personal effects following his death—the film's hypothesis as to the identity of the addressee may be interpreted by some people as preposterous. While I still prefer *Immortal Beloved* to Milos Forman's *Amadeus* (1984), numerous music scholars have criticized both films for their historical inaccuracies. Given the limited number of romantic affairs Beethoven allegedly had in his lifetime, the identity of the film's immortal beloved inadvertently heightens the portrayal of the musical composer as a misogynist. Yet, in the context of the narrative—including the death of his brother Kaspar (Christopher Fulford), the hostile legal battle between him and Johanna Reiss (Johanna ter Steege) over the custody of his nephew Karl (Marco Hofschneider and Matthew North), and the derision he receives from his contemporaries—it somewhat makes sense within this speculative framework. If anything, the mystery of the woman's identity can be seen as a *MacGuffin* to Rose's deconstruction of the legend built around Beethoven's genius and exploration of the psyche of a flawed, but inspired man.

Despite its shortcomings, the film is noteworthy, particularly for its soundtrack and Gary Oldman's dedicated performance as the composer. In preparation for the role, Oldman practiced piano six hours a day in a rented hotel room for a period of six weeks, immersing himself in the Beethoven's music. During filming, Oldman performed Beethoven's piano pieces live, although the final soundtrack consisted of recordings by the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Sir Georg Solti, and the Julliard String Quartet. Select 35mm prints included an 8-channel Sony Dynamic Digital Sound (SDDS) mix.



“What Bernard Rose has accomplished in ‘Immortal Beloved’ is a film that imagines the mental state of Beethoven with a series of images as vivid and convincing as a dream. . . . He has created a fantasy about Beethoven that evokes the same disturbing, ecstatic passion we hear in his music.”

At one point in the film, Anton Schindler recalls his first meeting with Beethoven. The composer inquires his opinion of a performance of Violin Sonata No. 9, Op. 47 (commonly known as the “Kreutzer Sonata.”). When Schindler tries to silence him, Beethoven mentions that he cannot hear them play, but believes the musicians are probably “making a hash of it.” He further states that music is a “dreadful thing,” and asks Schindler what he thinks is the purpose of music. Schindler responds, “It—it exalts the soul.”

But Beethoven counters:

“Utter nonsense. If you hear a marching band, is your soul exalted? No, you march. If you hear a waltz, you dance. If you hear a mass, you take communion. It is the power of music to carry one directly into the mental state of the composer. The listener has no choice. It is like hypnotism.”

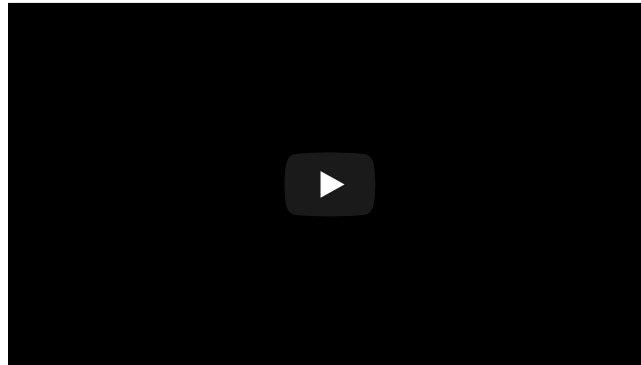
He then explains what went through his mind as he composed the piece.

“A man is trying to reach his lover. His carriage has broken down in the rain. The wheels stuck in the mud. She will only wait so long. This . . . is the sound of his agitation.”

As Beethoven says this, the visuals match his story, the scene acting as a piece in the jigsaw puzzle for Schindler to later put together when searching for Beethoven’s anonymous lover. When the camera cuts back to Schindler and Beethoven’s conversation, the previously beautiful sonata melody then takes on a bittersweet tone to Schindler as he is moved to tears.

My favorite flashback scene occurs earlier in the film. Beethoven is invited by the father of Countess Giulietta Guicciardi (Valeria Golino, *Rain Man*)—one of Beethoven’s music pupils and lovers—to privately test their new *pianoforte*. However, Giulietta and her father observe him in secret. At first, Beethoven bangs out chords in the lower range of the instrument, the bass

reverberating around the room. Then he lays his head down on the piano and begins playing the opening phrases of the Piano Sonata No. 14 in C# minor Op. 47 “*quasi una fantasia*”, Op. 47, No. 2 (otherwise known as the Moonlight Sonata). In life, Beethoven dedicated the piece to Giulietta. In the film scene, he plays without looking at the keys or his hands—as if the music is flowing forth from his being, spontaneously being composed in the moment. However, the magical moment is cut short after Giulietta interrupts him. Offended, Beethoven storms off, yelling: “It is terrible, terrible for you to rob me in this way of my most treasured feelings!” When Giulietta pleads with him to stay, her father holds her back and reveals that Beethoven is deaf.



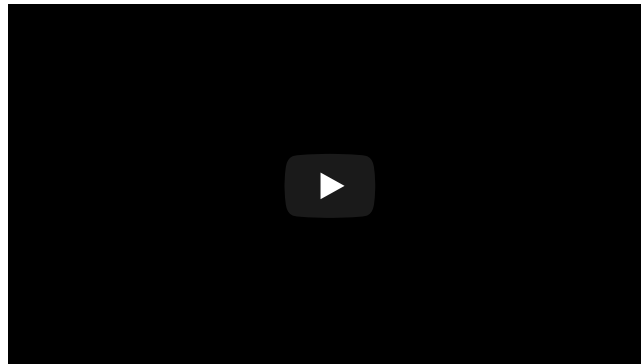
The film’s treatment of Beethoven’s hearing loss arouses a strong emotion response. During a rehearsal of Piano Concerto No. 5 in Eb major, Op. 73 (“Kaiser Concerto”), Beethoven’s condition prevents him from hearing his backing chamber ensemble. He repeatedly asks the musicians to restart the piece. During the scene, background noise becomes deafened with certain sounds possessing an echo quality. The accompanying ringing heard suggests tinnitus may also be afflicting him. As Beethoven’s temper rises, his fellow musicians equally show disinterest and frustration. In turn, the audience ridicules him until Countess Anna Marie Erdödy (Isabella Rossellini, *Blue Velvet*) guides him away.

Over the course of the film, Beethoven’s deafness becomes more prominent. His emotional outbursts, although sometimes fueled by rage, still elicit empathy from the viewer. At one point, Beethoven admits in voice over:

“Those who think me hostile, obstinate or misanthropic, how unjust they are to me . . . for they do not know the secret reason I appear that way. It is not possible for me to say, ‘Speak louder. Shout. I am deaf.’ How can I live if my enemies, who are many, believe I no longer possess the one sense that should be perfect to a higher degree in me than in others?”

Also detailed in the film is Beethoven’s composition of Symphony No. 3 in Eb major, Op. 55 (“Eroica Symphony”), which was originally dedicated to Napoleon Bonaparte. As Bonaparte’s army

conquers Western Europe by force, the viewer witnesses Beethoven's political opinion of the tyrant shift. In a heartbreaking sequence, the emotional fervor of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67 underscores depictions of war and devastation. The sequence concludes with Beethoven furiously scratching out the dedication to Bonaparte from his musical score.

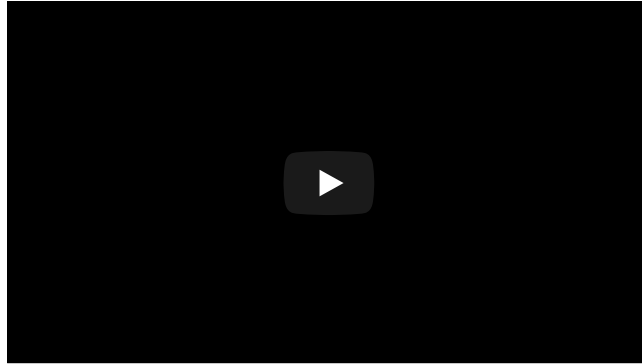


Perhaps the most emotional sequence consists of the Vienna premiere of Beethoven's Symphony in D minor No. 9, Op. 125. Historically, his final symphony marked the first use of a chorus and vocal soloists in a symphonic setting. As the fourth movement begins—of which the choral text consists of Friedrich Schiller's poem "Ode to Joy"—Beethoven, who has been out of the public eye for many years, appears onstage. (In reality, the occasion marked Beethoven's first public appearance after a 12-year period; he conducted the piece himself but, due to his hearing loss, erroneously finished conducting a few bars after the musicians had concluded playing.) Nearly deaf and with a wounded look upon his face, he exudes a sympathetic air. But as the music builds, his expressions turns to one of elation.

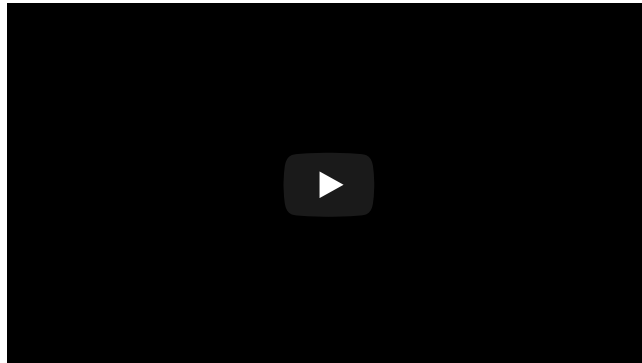
As the music plays, the scene flashes back to an evening in Beethoven's childhood, a sequence that arguably contains one of the most visually arresting uses of cinematography ever set to music. To avoid a beating from his drunken father, the adolescent boy escapes out his bedroom window and runs through the countryside, the visuals synchronized with the tempo and driving motion of the strings' musical phrases. Arriving at a river, he strips off his shirt and wades into the water as the recognizable chorus motif erupts in the soundscape. As he floats on his back, the camera slowly zooms out until his body becomes a small pinpoint in the water's reflection of the stars in the inky blackness of the night sky.

When the flashback ends, the camera frames Beethoven in close up. We hear the muted roar of applause and distinguish movement in the out-of-focus background as the attendees rise out of their seats for a standing ovation. Beethoven does not see or hear this, for his back is turned away from the audience. Only when he is cued by a vocal soloist (contralto Caroline Unger, according to historical reports), does he witness the acclaim and

admiration from everyone in attendance. Reportedly, Beethoven received five standing ovations that evening, an uncommon practice for a person of his status at the time.



As an examination of Beethoven's life, a person would best be served reading a biography of the composer. But for an engaging celebration of his music—carried by a *tour de force* performance by Gary Oldman—Bernard Rose's *Immortal Beloved* is two hours well spent for anyone who enjoys historical biopics and classical music.



Sean Woodard serves as the Film Editor for Drunk Monkeys and as a co-producer of the faith and spirituality-based Ordinary Grace (<http://ordinarygrace.org/>) podcast. Focusing on a wide variety of interests, Sean's fiction, film criticism, and other writings have been featured in Horrorbuzz, NonBinary Review, Los Angeles Review of Books, Cultured Vultures, The Cost of Paper, and Los Angeles Magazine, among other publications. A native of Visalia, CA, he now resides in Orange County.

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Website (<https://www.seanwoodard.com/>)

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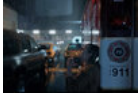
© THERE A BIRD
LEFT SPEAKING ON
YOUR PAPER AND
HAND SANITIZER?



A cartoon illustration of a man in a suit and tie, looking very confused. He is holding a piece of paper in his right hand, and a small bird is perched on it. He is standing in a room with a desk and a chair. There are some papers and a small object on the floor. The man has a large, open mouth and a wide-eyed expression.

(/2017-posts/2020/3/14/comics-mr-butterchips-alex-schumacher-march-2020)





(/2017-posts/100-word-film-reviews-the-invisible-man)



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