

Love and Ludwig Van

Ottawa composer
puts letters to
'Immortal Beloved'
to music

CHARLES ENMAN

Almost exactly two centuries ago — on July 6 and 7, 1812 — Ludwig van Beethoven, perhaps history's greatest composer, lay ill in bed. However, even in illness his creativity overflowed as he wrote three ardour-filled love letters to a woman whom history knows only as his "immortal beloved."

On July 27, Chamberfest attendees will be able to hear a song cycle based on those famous love letters. This will be the premiere performance of the work *Letters to the Immortal Beloved*, composed by Carleton University music professor James Wright. Appropriately, the performers are of stellar calibre — mezzo-soprano Julie Nesrallah and the two-time Juno Award winners, the Gryphon Trio.

"I have always found the 'immortal beloved' love letters fascinating," Wright says. "Apart from the passion and poetry of Beethoven's writing, there is the additional interest in our not being entirely sure who the 'immortal beloved' really was."

His own investigations suggest that the woman was the Countess Josephine von Brunsvik, probably the candidate most favoured by musical scholars. The countess was a Hungarian aristocrat to whom Beethoven at one point gave piano lessons. He was smitten with her from the beginning and — since they are believed to have exchanged a number of passionate letters — the ardour was likely mutual.

Wright believes that the composer and the countess may even have had a brief liaison that produced a "love child." He explains that the countess left her second husband, the Baron Christoph von Stackelberg, exactly one month before Beethoven wrote the famous three letters. And exactly nine months after the letters were written, the countess gave birth to a daughter who not only greatly resembled Beethoven but grew up to be a fine musician and piano teacher.

There was no hope of marriage. Beethoven did not have the social or economic capital to marry into an aristocratic family, and the countess eventually reconciled with von Stackelberg, though their marriage remained stormy.

All this said, over time roughly a dozen other women have also been proposed as candidates for the immortal beloved.

As a composer, Wright's real interest is in the letters. When writing songs, he always looks "to the poetic text to show me the way forward in terms of mood, character, musical imagery and word painting." And here, the inspirational vein was deep and gratifying: "As texts, their musicality, rhythmic nuance, sonorous quality and evocative imagery were a joy to work with."

Certainly, Beethoven's heart seemed seared by the pain of separation. He wrote in the second letter: "My angel, my all, my very self. Why this deep sorrow when necessity speaks? Can our love endure except through sacrifices? Can you change the fact that you are not wholly mine, and I not wholly thine?"

Wright wrote the song cycle while in residence at the Eanff Centre for the Arts in January and February of this year. Every note was written with the current performers in mind — Nesrallah, who he says "knows how to lift a text off the score page and convey it to the audience better than any vocalist I have ever seen," and the Gryphon Trio, who are "among the finest classical music performers Canada has produced."

Nesrallah finds his compositional aim



Ludwig van Beethoven, the legendary German composer, lived from 1770 to 1827. Instructions for playing his last piano sonata, Opus 111, have long perplexed performers and musicologists.



CHRIS KING

James Wright says he has 'always found the 'immortal beloved' letters fascinating.'



JULIE OLIVER, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

James Wright had Julie Nesrallah in mind when he wrote *Letters to the Immortal Beloved*.

Letters to the Immortal Beloved

James Wright composer
What: Performed by Julie Nesrallah and the Gryphon Trio

When: Friday, July 27, 7 p.m.
Where: Dominion-Chalmers Church
Information: Chamberfest 2012, www.OttawaChamberfest.com

sure. "While I was learning James' music, it was immediately obvious that his goal was to make the sweet spot of the mezzo-soprano voice shine through."

She finds a special allure in the eloquence and intensity of the letters. "The words are pure gold. My angel, my all, my self..." What woman on Earth would not be completely enthralled to receive a note that began like that?

The pianist of the Gryphon Trio, Jamie Parker, cautions that no one should anticipate hearing Beethoven's style in the music. "No artist should imitate anyone, and imitating Beethoven is the short road to failure," he says.

But he adds that he and his partners — violinist Annalee Patipatanakoon and cellist Roman Borys — have found a clarity of line in the music that makes for easy support of the vocalist.

All of the musicians, he says, including Nesrallah, expect a special feeling in the air the night of the concert.

"To think back a couple of centuries to the pain of this enormously gifted human being searching, like all of us, for perfect love — the situation is so universal and human."

"And then there's the element of mystery. So many years later, we're still not quite sure who the immortal beloved was — and it's a question that still digs and still tantalizes."

Letters to the Immortal Beloved will be performed July 27 at Dominion-Chalmers United Church. Also on the program will be Bedrich Smetana's Piano Trio in G minor Op. 15 and Antonin Dvorak's Piano Trio No. 3 in F minor Op. 65. The concert begins at 7 p.m. At 5:30 p.m., Wright will give a talk at the church on the story of the "immortal beloved" as it has changed over the centuries.