



Music Professor James Wright recently teamed up with CBC's Julie Nesrallah to set Beethoven's "Letters to the Immortal Beloved" to music.

SETTING BEAUTIFUL

*Music*

## TO BEETHOVEN'S MYSTERY LOVE LETTERS

As Beethoven lay in his bed in waning health on July 6 and 7<sup>th</sup>, 1812, the great composer authored three passionate love letters to a woman unknown. Discovered in Beethoven's bedside table shortly after his death in 1827, these intimate and now infamous letters addressed to "*meine unsterbliche Geliebte*" – "my immortal beloved" – have been a source of speculation for the past two centuries. These letters have shed light on who Beethoven was as a man, and cast mystery over his personal relationships at the height of his creative powers.

Two hundred years later, Music Professor, James Wright has become the first composer to set the words of Beethoven's love letters to music.

Wright composed a chamber art song cycle, titled *Letters to the Immortal Beloved*, during a period of residency at the Banff Centre for Arts during the winter months of 2012.

He wrote this work specifically to be performed by Carleton Music Alumna and CBC personality, mezzo-soprano Julie Nesrallah, and the Juno Award winning Gryphon Trio. And last July, Nesrallah and the Trio gave the work's premiere performance at the Ottawa International Chamber Music Festival.

Since this performance, Wright's work has received international acclaim. This May a professional recording of his *Briefe an die unsterbliche Geliebte* will be made by the Gryphon Trio and Julie Nesrallah, and will also be released on the Naxos label sometime later in the year.

James Wright and Julie Nesrallah discussed with FASS their shared interest in Beethoven, music, and collaborating with one another.

### **JAMES WRIGHT: PROFESSOR OF MUSIC AND COMPOSER OF LETTERS TO IMMORTAL BELOVED**

#### **What inspired you to score *Immortal Beloved*?**

I have always been fascinated by the ways in which historical composers have tried – often unsuccessfully, sadly – to balance their creative and personal lives. In the end, a single-minded devotion to their art often won out and made domestic happiness almost unimaginable. Beethoven and Brahms are classic examples. Both sought relationships with women who, for a variety of reasons – including age, marital or social status – were essentially unattainable. Yet their passionate devotion to the women they loved, often expressed more in correspondence than in a genuine personal or physical relationship, inspired so many of the great musical masterpieces that they left to posterity.

The three passionate love letters that were found in a box in Beethoven's bedside table after his death in 1827 really captured my imagination. The letters are especially fascinating because we do not know the identity of the intended recipient, a woman Beethoven addresses as "*meine unsterbliche Geliebte*" ("my immortal beloved").

More than a dozen "Immortal Beloved" candidates have been proposed by musicologists. Based on my own reading and research, my guess is that Beethoven's "Immortal Beloved" was the Countess Josephine Deym (née von Brunswick), a beautiful young Hungarian aristocrat who the composer first met in 1799, shortly before her marriage to Count von Deym. After the Count died in 1804, the Countess's relationship with Beethoven intensified over the next several years. Beethoven's

mysterious and passionate “Letters to the Immortal Beloved” were penned in the summer of 1812, almost exactly 200 years ago. Sadly, it seems that the Countess’s social status and parental obligations prevented her from marrying Beethoven, a suitor deemed unsuitable by her family the hovering matriarch, Anna Countess von Brunswick, in particular.

It is even possible that this relationship produced a “love child!” In June of 1812, exactly one month before Beethoven’s “Immortal Beloved” letters were written, Josephine was left by her second husband, the Baron Christoph von Stackelberg, whom she had married in 1810. On April 9, 1813, exactly nine months after Beethoven’s letters were written, Josephine gave birth to a daughter, Minona. It is therefore quite possible that Minona – who resembled Beethoven and would become a fine musician herself – was Beethoven’s illegitimate child. Curiously, her name, spelled backward, is “Anonim, which is Hungarian for “anonymous” - or, perhaps in this case, “the child whose true name cannot be uttered publicly.”

You can see why this relationship, and Beethoven’s passionate letters of 1812, have been a real source of fascination for me. To my knowledge, no one has ever used Beethoven’s own words as poetic texts for a vocal work, as I have in this chamber song cycle.

### What was the process in completing this project?

I wrote *Briefe an die unsterbliche Geliebte* (*Letters to the Immortal Beloved*) in January and February of 2012, in a Leighton Colony studio for composers in residence at the Banff Centre for the Arts. The name of the studio – the “Valentine” (after its architect, Frederic Valentine) – only added inspiration to the serene beauty of the natural setting in which I wrote this work. Each day in my cottage studio I would look out the window only to find a deer, an elk, a marten or one of the Banff National Park’s beautiful birds looking back. For a composer seeking a creative getaway, it was truly a dream setting!

When writing vocal music, I always look to the poetic text to show me the way forward in terms of compositional issues such as mood, character, form, melodic and phrase shape, musical imagery, word-painting, etc. Beethoven’s letters provided me with passionate and richly textured poetic texts to work with. Their musicality, rhythmic nuance, sonorous quality and evocative imagery of were a joy to work with. I suppose that I should not have been surprised to find that Beethoven’s spoken and written language was somewhat “musical.”

### What did it mean to you to have Julie Nesrallah and The Gryphon Trio performing Letters to the Immortal Beloved at Chamberfest?

I was thrilled with the outstanding premiere performance that was given by Julie Nesrallah and the Gryphon Trio at Chamberfest on July 27, 2012, exactly 200 years after the letters were written. I dedicated this work to Julie and the Trio (violinist Annalee Patipatanakoon, pianist Jamie Parker and cellist Roman Borys), because their inspiration, friendship, example

and consummate musicianship were always in mind during its conception and composition. I have known Julie for a number of years, and we have collaborated in a variety of ways. In addition to being an extraordinarily gifted and dedicated artist, Julie is quite simply a very special person. Her energy, talent and generosity are unequalled in this community. Julie 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 my *Letters to the Immortal Beloved* was written specifically with her voice in mind. Annalee, Roman and Jamie are also among the finest classical music performers Canada has produced. They were hugely supportive of this project from the outset, and they have been incredibly generous with their time. To say that it has been a privilege to collaborate with Julie and the Trio is to understate my appreciation for having the opportunity to work with them on *Briefe an die unsterbliche Geliebte*.

### What do you hope the audience takes away from your Score/the performance?

Julie and I have had some great chats about this. In both the popular and scholarly imagination, the name of Beethoven has become almost synonymous with a romanticized concept of the divinely gifted creative “genius.” Yet while Beethoven may have been a prodigiously gifted human being, and he lived his life with a singular dedication to his art, he wanted above all to love and be loved, just like the rest of us. And just as we often think of Beethoven’s music as having a certain universal appeal that transcends time, place and culture, his letters seem to express universal truths. In their emphasis on the ineffable, unattainable, eternal, and divine nature of the love expressed, Beethoven’s letters might even be seen as a nineteenth-century manifestation of the courtly love-lyric tradition that dates back to the Middle Ages. Like Beethoven’s letters, the early “Minnesingers” sang of a love that was illicit yet morally elevating, passionate yet disciplined, humiliating yet exalting, human and yet transcendent. In the end, of course, I also hope that my music will inspire the hearts and minds of the listeners, just as an abiding love for Josephine inspired Beethoven, and as his letters inspired me.

### Anything you would like to add?

My deepest thanks are due to John Osborne, my Dean, without whose encouragement and support my winter creative residency at the Banff Centre – and therefore the creation of these pieces – would not have been possible. I am delighted that the score of *Letters to the Immortal Beloved* has already been published by Da Capo Music of Manchester, England. The Da Capo score includes preface materials, individual instrumental parts, an article summarizing the background and context for the letters, and the complete letters themselves (both in the German original and in English translation). ▶