ARTS & LETTERS

Music's Prophet

"Nearer to God" by Paul Johnson, in *National Review* (June 10, 1991), 150 East 35th St., New York, N.Y. 10016.

Percy Bysshe Shelley in 1821 called poets "the unacknowledged legislators of the world." But Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) had already staked out a similar claim on behalf of a genuinely lowly group: musicians. In fact, it was Beethoven, according to journalist-historian Johnson, who "first established and popularized the notion of the artist as universal genius, as a moral figure in his own right—indeed, as a kind of intermediary between God and Man."

Musicians in the late 18th century were minor church functionaries or servants of the aristocracy. Music was seen as an aesthetically inferior art because its appeal, intense but brief, was confined to the senses. Unlike poetry, philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) said, music did not "leave anything over for reflections."

Such attitudes changed after about 1800, Johnson writes, when "music was seen as increasingly significant because it heightened self-awareness, now regarded as desirable .... Emotion ... created forms of knowledge as serious as reason, and music, as a key to it, became more serious, too." Music was used to enhance the higher arts; poetry was made into songs, operas, and even symphonies.

Beethoven altered the form and content of music. Eighteenth-century opera was, for the most part, about sexual intrigue; Beethoven's *Fidelio* (1805) "shift[ed] the ground fundamentally to the brotherhood of man and the glory of fidelity." His Fifth Symphony in C Minor, composed two years later, "operates at the highest level of human intellect and emotion," Johnson observes. Music, the composer insisted, "is a greater revelation than the whole of wisdom and philosophy."

A Roman Catholic, Beethoven was not consciously trying to turn music into a secular religion. Nevertheless, says Johnson, for increasing numbers of people, "the new kind of transcendent music Beethoven wrote, and the new importance he gave to music in the intellectual and moral cosmos, did constitute a secular substitute for religion; there was a new faith, and Beethoven was its prophet."

The Performing Teacher

"The Great-Teacher Myth" by Robert B. Heilman, in *The American Scholar* (Summer 1991), 1811 Q St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

The 1989 film *Dead Poets Society*, about the style and influence of a charismatic teacher at a boys' preparatory school, was popular with audiences and praised by many critics. The *New Yorker* deemed the movie "a classic." What is strange, observes Heilman, a professor emeritus of English at the University of Washington at Seattle, is that the character whom audiences are supposed to look upon as the ideal teacher, John Keating (Robin Williams), never does any real *teaching.*

"What we see is moonlight larks and forest frolics—midsummer nights' dream fantasies taken for actualities, instead of that steady book work, aided by sensible explication, that might lead to some education." Keating, the professor says, "is not a teacher at all but a performer," one who has cast himself in a single, lifetime role—"the gutsy, charismatic, infallible, one-in-a-million guide against the system." Any system needs serious critics, Heilman adds, "but Keating is only a guy with a mike in a midnight show."

Dead Poets Society, he says, missed what the 1969 film *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, also about a star teacher, did not. In that movie, based on a Muriel Spark novel, "we see the full character: the self-worship and power-love of the spectacular teacher who manages to seem superior to