

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 mu-

sic, 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

About This Mona Lisa

Fed up with "the red rant of unearned praise," novelist Stanley Elkin fires away in *Art & Antiques* (Summer 1991) at some "overrated masterpieces," from *Hamlet* to *Citizen Kane*. But when he comes to Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, the curmudgeonly critic almost succumbs to her famously mysterious smile.

See her there in her cat-who-ate-the-canaries, her smug repose and babushka of hair like a face on a buck. A study in browns, in muds and all the purplish earthens of her jaundiced, low-level, f-stop light. See her, see her there, this, well, girl of a certain age, with a faint streak of bone structure blowing off her skin like a plume of jet trail all she has for brow. See her, see the leftward glancing of her color-coordinated eyes inside the puffy, horizontal parentheses of her lashless lids. See the long, low-slung nose dropped inches below the painterly rules of thumb. Now see her famous statelies, her upright, comfortable aplomb, her left forearm along the arm of a chair, her fat right hand covering it, as clubby and at ease as one foot crossed over another . . .

In and closer in to the central occasion of

her odd, asexual face, in where the mystery lives, the secret agenda, in toward her giacondas, her giaconundrums, the hidden mystery of her guarded gingivitis smile! Because I'm changing my mind here, a little I am, and thinking maybe it's Nat King Cole's version I'm not that crazy about, his viscous syrups I'm thinking of, confusing the box-step cliché and sentimentals with the fact of her face. Because what levers our attention is that nose and those lips, and a truth about art is the company it keeps with the slightly askew, the fly in that woodpile of symmetry, mere balance in painting, equilibrium, a stunt of the "beautiful." What commissions the eye is face . . . It's the face that draws the eye in the *Mona Lisa*, but I was only kidding about the mystery of that smile. There is no mystery. No one ever had to solve a face, and the notion of this face's enigmatics has always been a kind of anthropomorphism, only paint's pathetic fallacy, facial phrenology, a horoscopes by bone structure, an astrology of the eye, the palmistry of character, wrong-headed, literary, the racism of beauty, unreliable finally as any other pseudoscience, as if to say, oh, as if to say, "Read my lips."

Next slide . . .

a whole cadre of routine-bound dull souls . . . In contrast with the myopia of *Dead Poets Society*, it had insight into the singular nexus between certain leadership gifts and the ego that cannot settle for a steady engagement in the common enterprise but must star in public displays of extraordinary powers over the young."

The Keating-Brodie type has its counter-

parts in real life, and these self-loving performers, always playing the malcontent, do serve a function, in Heilman's view. They provide an outlet for students' melodramatic "discontents, suspicions, and negative judgments." In short, while the Keatingesque Great Teacher may seldom, if ever, be a good teacher, he does make a fine institutional safety valve.

Propagandistic License

John Singleton Copley's *The Death of Major Peirson* (1784) was a masterpiece and possibly the finest British historical painting of the 18th century. Yet, like the engraving of the Boston Massacre that strongly influenced it, Copley's painting played fast and loose with certain historical facts.

"Genius and Glory: John Singleton Copley's *The Death of Major Peirson*" by Richard H. Saunders, in *The American Art Journal* (Vol. XXII, No. 3, 1990), 40 W. 57th St., 5th fl., New York, N.Y. 10019.

Copley (1738-1815), who had been a successful portrait painter in colonial Boston, was by 1781 well established as a painter in London. That January, French forces invaded the Channel island of Jersey and obtained its surrender; British forces, led by Major Francis Peirson, ignored the surrender order of the island's