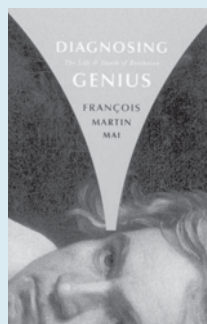


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DIAGNOSING GENIUS: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF BEETHOVEN

By Francois Martine Mai
(McGill-Queens University Press,
270 pp, £15.99)



Professor Mai has added yet another very interesting volume to the already extensive literature on Ludwig van Beethoven. However, his title is misleading. Readers who have been led to expect a discussion of the characteristics by which genius may be recognised will be disappointed. His subtitle is much nearer the mark; a little over half the book is devoted to an account of Beethoven's life and times.

But this adds little to what is already well known. The essence of the book is in Professor Mai's discussion of the ailments suffered by Beethoven during his lifetime and his inquest into the cause of Beethoven's death.

Professor Mai makes excellent use of the best secondary sources. He also finds relevant information in letters written by Beethoven and letters to him written by his friends. The *Conversation Books*, the writing pads that Beethoven's friends and visitors used to communicate with him after his deafness became complete, all survive and these too have been examined for clues. The Heiligenstadt Testament, the document in which Beethoven reflected on his life while suffering a period of severe depression, is quoted in full.

The reader is also provided with the available medical testimony.

This has been extracted from physicians' reports, from autopsy reports and from the toxicological analysis of a lock of Beethoven's hair carried out in 1996.

Having considered all the evidence, Professor Mai does not seek to impose a definitive judgement. Nevertheless, he steers the reader towards the conclusion that Beethoven suffered irritable bowel syndrome for most of his life; that his deafness was due to otosclerosis, that he died of liver failure; that this resulted from many years of alcohol dependence; that the wine he drank was adulterated with lead, causing lead poisoning late in his life. However, all the evidence is fairly and clearly presented and the reader may reach his own conclusion.

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