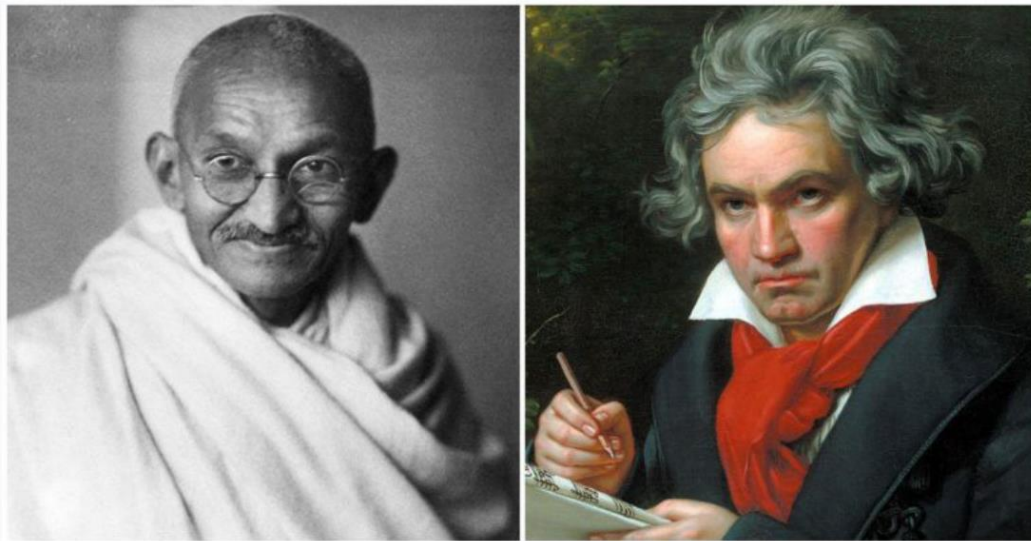


## When the Music of Beethoven Mingled with the Music of Gandhi's Spinning Wheel

-Sudheendra Kulkarni



This year marks the 250th birth anniversary of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827), one of the greatest exponents of western classical music. It also marks the conclusion of the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. However, beyond this insignificant calendrical coincidence, was there any connection between the two? How could there have been? Gandhi, after all, was an ascetic who eulogised and practiced brahmacharya (narrowly understood as a life of celibacy). Beethoven, on the other hand, famously said: "Music, verily, is the mediator between intellectual and sensuous life."

Yet, Beethoven figures in one of the most fascinating episodes in Gandhi's life. This connection was personified by the Mahatma's devoted British-born associate and adopted daughter, Mirabehn, formerly Madeleine Slade (1892-1982). Her poignant life begins with the transformational influence of Beethoven's music, enters an even more transformational period when she comes to India to live in Gandhi's ashram, and ends in Beethoven's spiritual presence, near his grave in the woods of Austria.

### **'European Mahatma'**

Incidentally, the person who brought Beethoven into Mirabehn's life – Nobel-winning French writer and European pacifist Romain Rolland (1866-1944) – also introduced Beethoven's music to the Mahatma. The meeting between Gandhi and Rolland, which took place at the latter's picturesque villa in the Alps near Geneva in December 1931, provided the setting for the mystical connection between the "music of the spinning wheel" and the "music of Beethoven". Rolland, one of the finest representatives of Western art and culture, regarded Beethoven as a "European Mahatma". He was also instrumental in sending Mirabehn to serve the Indian Mahatma.

No other contemporary foreigner strove with as much conviction and persistence to disseminate the message of Gandhi's mission in the West as Rolland did. An ardent friend of India, Rolland had written Gandhi's biography in 1924, titled *Mahatma Gandhi: The Man Who Became One With the Universal Being*. The book was largely instrumental in taking Gandhi's philosophy of truth and nonviolence to Europe, which had been ravaged by one world war and was hurtling towards a deadlier one. This is how Rolland described his subject:

"Soft dark eyes, a small frail man, with a thin face and rather large protruding eyes, his head covered with a little white cap, his body clothed in coarse white cloth, barefooted. He lives on rice and fruit, and drinks only water. He sleeps on the floor – sleeps very little, and works incessantly. His body does not seem to count at all. There is nothing striking about him – except his whole expression of 'infinite patience and infinite love'. W.W. Pearson, who met him in South Africa, instinctively thought of St. Francis of Assisi. There is an almost childlike simplicity about him. His manner is gentle and courteous even when dealing with adversaries, and he is of immaculate sincerity. He is modest and unassuming, to the point of sometimes seeming almost timid, hesitant, in making an assertion. Yet you feel his indomitable spirit. He makes no compromises and never tries to hide a mistake. Nor is he afraid to admit having been in the wrong. Diplomacy is unknown to him; he shuns oratorical effect or, rather, never thinks about it; and he shrinks unconsciously from the great popular demonstrations organised in his honour. Literally 'ill with the multitude that adores him,' he distrusts majorities and fears 'mobocracy' and the unbridled passions of the populace. He feels at ease only in a minority, and is happiest when, in meditative solitude, he can listen to the 'still small voice' within.

"This is the man who has stirred three hundred million people to revolt, who has shaken the foundations of the British empire, and who has introduced into human politics the strongest religious impetus of the last two thousand years."

Rolland's admiration for Gandhi bordered on *bhakti* (devotion). He wrote that Gandhi "awakens the sleeping Christ among the people of Europe... (He) himself almost seems Christ reborn". Rolland regarded him as the "last barrier still holding out against immense accumulated flood of violence". On behalf of the "intellectuals, scientists, writers and artists" of Europe, he sent a "fervent tribute of love and veneration to Gandhi our master and brother, who in his heart and in his action realises our ideal of the humanity to come".

Gandhi too held Rolland in great respect and called him a *rishi* (seer).

## Ramakrishna and Vivekananda

Remarkably, without ever having visited India, Rolland wrote two other great books: one on the teachings of Ramakrishna Paramahansa and the other on Swami Vivekananda. "If there is one place on the face of the earth where all the dreams of living men have found a home from the very earliest days when man began the dream of existence, it is India," he wrote in *Life of Ramakrishna*. About Vivekananda, he wrote: "His words are great music, phrases in the style of Beethoven, stirring rhythms like the march of Handel choruses. I cannot touch these sayings of his ...without receiving a thrill through my body like an electric shock". He described Ramakrishna and Vivekananda as "Mozart and Beethoven", together forming "the splendid symmetry of the universal soul". An important reason behind Rolland's empathy with the Indian philosophy was his belief that it did not pit science and faith against each other and was tolerant of even atheism.

"Religious faith in the case of the Hindus," he wrote, "has never been allowed to run counter to scientific laws, moreover the former is never made a condition for the knowledge they teach, but they are always scrupulously careful to take into consideration the possibility that by reason both the agnostic and atheist may attain truth in their own way. Such tolerance may be surprising to religious believers in the West, but it is an integral part of Vedantic belief."

Why did Rolland feel such a strong inner urge to write about Gandhi, Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda? He revealed his purpose in his address *To My Western Readers*:

"I have dedicated my whole life to the reconciliation of mankind. I have striven to bring it about among the peoples of Europe. For the last ten years I have been attempting the same task for the West and the East. I also desire to reconcile, if it is possible, the two antithetical forms of spirit for which the West and the East are wrongly supposed to stand – reason and faith – or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, the diverse forms of reason and of faith; for the West and the East share them both almost equally although few suspect it.

"In our days an absurd separation has been made between these two halves of the soul, and it is presumed that they are incompatible. The only incompatibility lies in the narrowness of view, which those who erroneously claim to be their representatives, share in common."

Rolland's correspondence with Gandhi and his close associates, his letters about Gandhi to eminent people around the world (including Albert Einstein), and the prefaces and articles on Gandhi that he wrote for several publications fill a book of nearly 600 pages. This book (published by the Publications Division) is an invaluable part of the huge corpus of Gandhian literature. Reading it is an invitation to experience the spiritual resonance between two great men of the last century — one an Indian saint-warrior whose heart throbbed for the whole

world; and the other a European internationalist and lifelong peace activist who had come to believe that the world could be saved only by the wisdom of India, as personified by its modern-day saints like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and Gandhi.

### **Beethoven's music**

The meeting between the Mahatma and Rolland was facilitated by Mirabeau. Gandhi, returning from the Second Round Table Conference in London, visited Geneva and spent five days as a guest of Rolland at the latter's villa in Villeneuve, Switzerland. (After his return from a 20-year-stay in South Africa in 1915, Gandhi went abroad only twice – to Sri Lanka in 1927 and to England and continental Europe in 1931.) The villa, which overlooked Lake Geneva, a valley by the Rhone river and glaciers of the Alps, was a haven of serenity. There, in between his morning and evening prayers, the singing of bhajans and chanting of hymns, his daily routine of spinning the charkha, and his speaking assignments in and around Geneva, Gandhi would sit with Rolland every day for two to three hours of intense conversation that covered both timeless issues in philosophy and the contemporary happenings in Europe and the world.

Rolland's detailed diary notes on the dialogue have given a riveting description of Gandhi's activities in Europe. Specifically, they have immortalised a precious moment of synchronicity in the lives of four individuals that destiny itself brought together – Gandhi, Rolland, Mirabeau and Beethoven. It is a moment fragrant with the truth that men and women, even when separated by time, space, culture and customs, are ordained by a divine design to collaborate in the service of a deeper need of humanity.

After the prayers on the last evening of his Swiss sojourn, Gandhi asked Rolland to play Beethoven for him. "I played him the Andante from the Fifth Symphony, and, on Gandhi's request, returned to the piano and played Gluck's Elysian Fields from *Orfeo*, the first orchestral piece and the flute melody," writes Rolland. "He is very affected to the religious chants of his country, which resemble the most beautiful of our Gregorian melodies, and he has worked to assemble them. We also exchanged our ideas on art, a notion which he does not separate from his conception of truth, nor from that of joy, which he thinks truth should bring... But it goes without saying that for his heroic nature joy does not come without effort, not even life itself without hardship. The seeker after truth hath a heart tender as the lotus, and hard as granite."

Since Gandhi never showed much interest in Western classical music, we can ask ourselves the question: Why did he expressly ask Rolland to play him Beethoven? There are several disparate but mystically convergent reasons for this. In 1903, Rolland had written a psychological biography of Beethoven, which remains one of the most widely read books on the life and music of the great composer. From Rolland's diary we know that both Pyarelal and Mahadev Desai, Gandhi's trusted and erudite secretaries who had accompanied him on the visit, were "profoundly imbued with the cult of Beethoven. (They can hardly have heard

much of him other than on the gramophone, but they know him by my books.)” Pyarelal had also read Rolland’s ten-volume novel *Jean-Christophe*, which won him the Nobel Prize in 1915. Its protagonist is a character inspired by the life of Beethoven. He, like Gandhi, is a heroic figure, a fighter for social justice, and a courageous and uncompromising seeker of truth. Rolland writes in his diary:

“I am deeply struck by the deep love of art among these young disciples of Gandhi; this makes all the more impressive their renunciation of all the enjoyment which art might bring them.”

### **‘Another Christ’**

But there is another, more important, reason behind Gandhi’s request to Rolland to play Beethoven for him. That reason was Mirabehn. She was Madeleine Slade, daughter of a British admiral, before she came to India to join Gandhi’s ashram at Sabarmati in 1925.

Strange though it may seem, Beethoven had played a pivotal role in bringing Madeleine Slade to Gandhi. She fell in love with Beethoven’s music when, at the age of 15, she first heard a composition by him, sonata Opus 31 no. 2. She writes in her autobiography, *The Spirit’s Pilgrimage*, that her whole being was stirred by it; she played it over and over again. It was something beyond music that she had discovered, something which lingered in her. She felt as if she was in communion with the spirit of Beethoven. But she also felt deep anguish at not being able to meet the great musician in person. In these moments, she threw herself down on her knees in the seclusion of her room and prayed to God: “Why have I been born over a century too late? Why hast thou given me realisation of him and yet put all these years in between?” She went on a pilgrimage to Beethoven’s birthplace in Germany and to his grave near Vienna in Austria. She organised Beethoven concerts in England. She also learnt French so that she could read about Beethoven’s life in Romain Rolland’s *Jean-Christophe*. The book inspired her so much that she sought, in 1923, a meeting with the author.

She met Rolland in Villeneuve, where he lived with his sister, also named Madeleine (the two Madeleines would later forge a deep friendship). Rolland writes in his diary that “her [Madeleine Slade’s] mind was prey to a violent and passionate disturbance, and she could not find a way out”. In this meeting he mentioned India in the context of a small book he had just written on the life of Gandhi. When she looked blank, he asked her, “You have never heard of him?” Madeleine replied in the negative. “He is another Christ,” he told her, adding, “The only living person worthy of the sort of veneration you have felt for Beethoven is Mahatma Gandhi.” These words went deep, but she stored them away and went on a voyage to Alexandria in Egypt. Back from Alexandria, she went to Paris, bought Rolland’s book from a bookshop and finished reading it on the same day. Then she realised what that something which had lingered in her after her first tryst with Beethoven’s music was. It was a call to go to Gandhi.

This is how she describes her first meeting with the Mahatma when she arrived at Sabarmati Ashram in November 1925.

"I entered [the room]. A slight, brown figure rose up and came towards me. I was conscious of nothing but a sense of light. I fell on my knees. Hands gently raised me up, and a voice said, 'You shall be my daughter'."

Gandhi gave her the name Mirabehn, after Mirabai, the great devotee of Lord Krishna. Mirabai's association with mystical poetry and music probably played a role in Gandhi choosing this name for his new disciple, who sacrificed all to serve her master as an ascetic. Though Mira was a Hindu-sounding name, he made no attempt to convert her to Hinduism. A severe critic of proselytisation, he wanted her to become a model Christian. She, however, dived deep into the study of the Vedas, Upanishads and the Hindu epics. She tells us in her autobiography that the effect they had on her was "profound".

"For here I discovered various things that seemed to be part of my inmost self, part of something I had known long before and lost. Here there was no nightmare of the unanswerable, but instead a vast illumination of the unknown making its contemplation not a horror, but an infinite inspiration. While reading the Upanishads and a few extracts from the Vedas, I heard the same notes as in the music of Beethoven."

Rolland, who was the cause for Madeleine Slade to go to Gandhi, called her "a Holy Woman to this new Savior". However, he had been himself craving deeply for many years to receive Gandhi in Villeneuve and to let him experience Beethoven's sublime music. In a letter to Mirabehn on April 25, 1927 (that is, four years before Gandhi came to meet Rolland), he wrote: "If Gandhi knew him [Beethoven], he would recognise in him our European Mahatma, our strongest mediator between the life of the senses and eternal life. And he would bless this music which perhaps, for us, is the highest form of prayer, a permanent communion with the Divinity."

Earlier, too, in his letter to Mahadev Desai on February 24, 1924, Rolland had described Beethoven as "our European Mahatma" who "sings in his Ode to Joy: Let us – millions of human beings – embrace each other".

We must understand here why music, and art in general, served as the path for the best men and women of Europe to seek answers to the deepest questions posed by the troubled times they lived in. Organised religion had done little to stem the tide of violence and war in Europe. The church's stand on colonial exploitation and violence was, at best, neutral and, at worst, collusive. The Pope, in fact, refused to grant an audience to Gandhi when he visited the Vatican in 1931. Europe was clearly passing through a painful spiritual crisis. The crisis caused sensitive souls such as Romain Rolland and Madeleine Slade to turn to art, literature and music to satisfy their quest. Tolstoy, who had a profound influence on Gandhi, is quoted in Rolland's biography of the great Russian writer as saying, "Art must suppress violence, and



only art can do so...All that tends to unify mankind belongs to the good and beautiful. All that tends to disunite is evil and ugly."

Rolland found solace in music because, he said, "Nothing better than music shows me what I am and what we will be, what will be the future of our humanity." In his novel *Jean-Christophe*, its Beethoven-like protagonist says, "There is only one soul for all mankind; and though each one of the millions of beings seems to be different from the others like the worlds that revolve in the sky, it is the same flash of love that blazes simultaneously in the hearts which are separated by centuries."

### **Mirabehn's journey**

Thus, Madeleine Slade, whose agonised soul had been pining for Beethoven with the lament "Why have I been born over a century too late?", found her Beethoven in Gandhi. During the 23 years that she lived in his presence, she rarely heard Beethoven's music. But she, who had taken to the religion of khadi and charka with utmost devotion and commitment, did experience the Mahatma's blissful and divine "music of spinning wheel" each day.

After Gandhi's assassination on January 30, 1948, Mirabehn wrote: "For me there were only two, God and Bapu. And now they have become one."

She continued to live in India for another 11 years at her own ashram in the foothills of the Himalayas. Her passion was to save the environment from destruction in the name of mindless development. In agony, she wrote letters to Prime Minister Nehru and other Indian leaders highlighting the apathy and ignorance of the bureaucracy.

Nevertheless, India without her master, and the India that had strayed from the master's path, made Mirabehn deeply lonely. The call of "something" in her that had made her come to Gandhi now urged her to go back to Beethoven. She left India in 1959 to spend the rest of her life in seclusion, solitude and Gandhian simplicity with the spirit of the composer – in a small country cottage on the wooded and calm outskirts of Vienna, where Beethoven had lived and composed many of his masterworks. She was familiar with the place since she had visited it in her youth. The forests that inspired Beethoven to compose his heavenly music also inspired Mirabehn to pen many meditative reflections on human life.

"We inhabit the limitless universe, and we must expand our horizons until they blend into the vastness and the Almighty spirit with which it is pervaded.

"And it is not only contemplation of the celestial expanse surrounding us that awakens that sense. How often, on a summer's day, have I flung myself down on a meadow to look deep into the grass to watch there a world of tiny living creatures, each one perfect in design and colour, and each one busy fulfilling its life's calling when, at such moments, comes over me a vision of Creation's oneness from the tiniest creatures to the mightiest stars in space.

"We are all one family – watched over by the Creator."

How wonderfully this resonates with what Beethoven himself has written about Nature's inspiration on his music. "No one can conceive," he once wrote, "the intense happiness I feel in getting into the country, among the woods, my dear trees, shrubs, hills, and dales. I am convinced that no one loves country life as I do. It is as if every tree and every bush could understand my mute inquiries and respond to them."

Apart from publishing her autobiography in 1960, Mirabeau also wrote a precious book, *Beethoven's Mystical Vision*, which portrayed the composer's life and spiritual voyage in music. The book highlighted for the first time his acquaintance with ancient Hindu scriptures, which "profoundly stirred the mystic nature in his spirit". One of the many long quotations that Beethoven jotted down in his sketchbooks is the teaching of the second chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*, "the most treasured spiritual poem of Hinduism, verses of which were recited daily at four o'clock in the morning prayer of Mahatma Gandhi".

"Blessed is he who has overcome all passion and then with energy performs all the affairs of life without concern for the outcome. Let the motive be in the deed and not in the result... for such unconcern means attention to the spiritual. Do not let your life pass in inactivity. Be active, fulfil your duty... Endeavour, therefore, that your reason may obtain this habit, for such a habit is in life a precious art."

Mirabeau then writes: "The depth of feeling with which Beethoven reacted to eastern wisdom was more than intellectual. It seems to have been the stirring of an echo from earlier spiritual experience, and with this his passionate devotion to Nature was in perfect harmony. The sages who have left us their thoughts in Sanskrit dwelt with their disciples in forest centres, and their wisdom was nourished by continual contact with Nature."

Yehudi Menuhin (1916-99), the celebrated violinist and conductor, in his foreword to Mirabeau's book, writes: "It is fitting that this insight should have been bequeathed to us through the lifelong adoration of a European woman who spent 33 years of her life in India, the land of mysticism and of union with the eternal, with that remarkable human being, Mahatma Gandhi."

The cycle of Mirabeau's life had thus taken a full circle – from Beethoven to Beethoven via Mahatma Gandhi. To recall her own autobiographical lines: "My life had been devoted to the service of two great souls with the loftiest ideals – one expressing himself through the perpetual activity in moral, social and political reform, and the other through the perpetual expression of the spiritual voice that came to him through music. In Beethoven's own words – '...it is only through untiring use of the powers with which he has been endowed that man can reverence the Creator and Preserver of Nature'."



This extraordinary ambassador of understanding and solidarity between the West and the East, this daughter-disciple of the Mahatma who had also devoted her soul to the European Mahatma, died in Vienna on July 20, 1982, at the ripe old age of 90. But what is death for a person who lived for the music of the two Mahatmas and who then merged into the immortal music of which her own transient life on earth was but a small but intensely soulful score?

*(Sudheendra Kulkarni served as an aide to former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and is the founder of the 'Forum for a New South Asia – Powered by India-Pakistan-China Cooperation'. Article courtesy: Scroll.in.)*

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