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# Of Ear Trumpets and a Resonance Plate: Early Hearing Aids and Beethoven's Hearing Perception

GEORGE THOMAS EALY

He improvised for me during an hour, after he had mounted his ear-trumpet and placed it on the resonance-plate.

—Friedrich Wieck (1826)<sup>1</sup>

Although Beethoven's hearing loss is arguably the most celebrated case of deafness in history, virtually no attention has been given to the composer's use of technology for hearing improvement.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, his letters and related contemporary documents reveal descriptions of hearing perception that have never been seriously analyzed. This article examines Beethoven's hearing loss to determine how long he could hear speech and music and his use of

early hearing adjuncts. The first section examines Beethoven's hearing until he began to use ear trumpets around 1812. The second section investigates his perception of speech using ear trumpets. Finally, the third section examines his perception of music using both ear trumpets and other hearing aids.

Symptoms of a hearing impairment apparently began sometime between 1796 and 1798. Beethoven's despair is revealed in letters to Karl Amenda and Franz Gerhard Wegeler in 1801 and culminated in the Heiligenstadt Testament of 1802. Despite the distress expressed in these documents, his hearing evidently remained fairly intact for a number of years. Carl Czerny stated that Beethoven could hear speech and music normally until 1812. Other contemporaries noted that Beethoven's hearing would remain normal for many months early in the course of his affliction. Several remarks in Beethoven's early letters indicate that he heard conversations and music. The composer conducted the Third Symphony in 1804 and appeared as soloist in the Fourth Piano Concerto in 1807 and 1808. His last public performance

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<sup>1</sup>Friedrich Wieck, cited in *Beethoven: Impressions by His Contemporaries* (hereafter *Beethoven Impressions*), ed. O. G. Sonneck (New York, 1967), p. 208.

<sup>2</sup>Friederike Grigat, librarian, Beethoven-Archiv (Bonn) by letter to the author. Grigat confirmed that to his knowledge no article on Beethoven's use of hearing aids has been published. He also confirmed the existence of the resonance plate but noted that it has not survived.

(except as an accompanist) occurred in May 1814 with the "Archduke" Trio.

After 1812 he began to use ear trumpets designed by Johann Mälzel. In all, Mälzel produced four ear trumpets of different sizes and shapes for Beethoven's use in hearing speech and music. Although conversation books appear in 1818, documentation indicates that the composer's hearing permitted the understanding of speech as late as 1825. Evidence also suggests that Beethoven was able to hear at the keyboard until at least 1826 with the aid of a sound conductor (referred to as a resonance plate) designed by the pianoforte firm of Conrad Graf. The Beethoven-Archiv (Bonn) confirmed its existence and manufacture by Graf but noted that neither the resonance plate nor any representation of it has survived.

The concept that Beethoven was unable to hear in his later years is contradicted by documentary analysis; he adapted to his impairment using early technology after 1812 in order to hear both speech and music. Therefore, Beethoven's late works were not composed in total deafness, as commonly believed, but in a state of limited hearing.

#### BEETHOVEN'S HEARING PERCEPTION BEFORE 1812

Beethoven began noticing symptoms of hearing loss in his late twenties; exactly when this occurred cannot be determined from his writings. The first letter in which deafness is mentioned was written on 29 June 1801 to his friend Wegeler, a Bonn physician.<sup>3</sup> This letter indicates that the composer's hearing had become weaker over the last three years and establishes 1798 as the year of onset. The Heiligenstadt Testament, written in October 1802, however, indicates that an incurable complaint (hearing loss) had been plaguing Beethoven for six years.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that the hearing loss began in 1796. The basis for this discrepancy is unclear;

<sup>3</sup>Emily Anderson, *The Letters of Beethoven, Collected, Translated and Edited with an Introduction, Appendixes, Notes and Indexes* (New York, 1961), I, 58–59 (letter no. 51 to Franz Gerhard Wegeler, 29 June 1801).

<sup>4</sup>Anderson, *Letters*, III, 1351, app. A, Heiligenstadt Testament, 6 and 10 October 1802.

it may reflect Beethoven's uncertainty about when his hearing actually began to fail.

Beethoven described his hearing loss in letters to Amenda and Wegeler. Writing to Amenda in July 1801, Beethoven stated: "Let me tell you that my most prized possession, *my hearing*, has greatly deteriorated. When you were still with me, I already felt the symptoms; but I said nothing about them. Now they have become very much worse." This letter reflects Beethoven's distress at his condition; yet, it also contains his observation that "when I am playing and composing, my affliction still hampers me least; it affects me most when I am in company."<sup>5</sup> Unknowingly, Beethoven in 1801 seems to have forecast the effect of his hearing impairment on his art.

The most detailed descriptions of his hearing loss occur in two letters to Wegeler from 1801. Because Wegeler was both an old friend and a medical doctor, Beethoven appears to be seeking another opinion regarding his treatments and was consequently very specific in symptom descriptions. Several physicians are mentioned in these letters as well as different treatments ranging from ear infusions of almond oil to cold and warm baths. The symptoms described in the first Wegeler letter indicate a sensorineural type of hearing loss:

In order to give you some idea of this strange deafness, let me tell you that in the theatre I have to place myself quite close to the orchestra in order to understand what the actor is saying, and that at a distance I cannot hear the high notes of instruments or voices. . . . Sometimes too I can scarcely hear a person who speaks softly; I can hear sounds, it is true, but cannot make out the words. But if anyone shouts, I can't bear it.<sup>6</sup>

In his second letter to Wegeler of 16 November 1801, Beethoven wrote that he also experienced

<sup>5</sup>Anderson, *Letters*, I, 63 and 65 (letter no. 53 to Karl Amenda, 1 July 1801).

<sup>6</sup>Anderson, *Letters*, I, 60 (letter no. 51). The cause of Beethoven's deafness has not been satisfactorily resolved. Paget's disease is considered a leading candidate as well as cochlear otosclerosis. For further information, see V. S. Naiken, "Did Beethoven Have Paget's Disease of Bone?" *Annals of Internal Medicine* 74 (1971), 995–99; and K. M. Stevens and W. G. Hemenway, "Beethoven's Deafness," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 213 (1970), 434–37.

tinnitus but stated that this symptom was improving.<sup>7</sup> The second letter to Wegeler also reveals Beethoven's interest in early nineteenth-century technology. He wrote to his friend about the case of a deaf and dumb child, who, according to a medical doctor, had recovered its hearing after being treated by galvanism. Luigi Galvani in 1791 observed that nervous action in a muscle could be induced by an electrical charge; this observation led to the development of electrostatic generators used in the treatment of many diseases in the early nineteenth century. Beethoven apparently was considering galvanism as a possible therapy and was asking Wegeler for his advice. Wegeler must have counseled the composer to abandon this treatment as no further reference to galvanism occurs in his correspondence.

In October 1802 Beethoven famously recorded his inner feelings regarding his failing hearing. The Heiligenstadt Testament, discovered posthumously by Anton Schindler, the composer's amanuensis, reveals his despair: "From year to year my hopes of being cured have gradually been shattered and finally I have been forced to accept the prospect of a *permanent infirmity*. . . . I could not bring myself to say to people: 'Speak up, shout, for I am deaf.' . . . I must live like an outcast."<sup>8</sup> Thayer, however, observed that early biographies (reproducing Beethoven's writings concerning his deafness) gave "currency to a very exaggerated idea of the progress of his infirmity."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, for several years after the letters to Wegeler and Amenda and the Heiligenstadt Testament,

<sup>7</sup>Anderson, *Letters*, I, 66 (letter no. 54 to Wegeler, 16 November 1801). In his second letter to Wegeler of 16 November 1801, Beethoven discussed various treatments prescribed by his physicians. Apparently Wegeler (also a medical doctor) had also participated in Beethoven's treatment recommending herbal applications to the composer's abdomen. See Waldemar Schweisheimer, "Beethoven's Physicians," *Musical Quarterly* 31 (1945), 289–98.

<sup>8</sup>Anderson, *Letters*, III, 1351–52, app. A, Heiligenstadt Testament. See Alessandra Comini, *The Changing Image of Beethoven: A Study in Mythmaking* (New York, 1987), pp. 76–77. Comini notes that the Heiligenstadt Testament, published less than seven months after the composer's death, contributed more than any other document to the romanticized image of Beethoven as a deaf composer.

<sup>9</sup>Alexander W. Thayer, *Thayer's Life of Beethoven*, rev. and ed. Elliot Forbes (Princeton, 1964), p. 373 (hereafter Thayer-Forbes).

Beethoven's hearing loss appears to have been minimal. Czerny noted that Beethoven heard music and speech "perfectly well until nearly 1812."<sup>10</sup> His remark probably explains the almost total lack of reference to hearing loss in any of Beethoven's correspondence between 1801 and 1810. Czerny's statement is also supported by other documents.

Remarks in a letter by Beethoven to Ferdinand Ries in 1804 establish that the composer could understand conversation. Beethoven described a disagreement between himself and Stephan von Breuning regarding the timing of giving notice (apparently to vacate their lodging):

You yourself are aware that I reproached you . . . for being responsible for the notice having been given too late. . . . Well then, at table my brother began to talk about it and said he thought that B(reuning) was to blame in the matter. I promptly denied this and said that *you* were to blame. . . . But on hearing my remark B(reuning) in a rage jumped up and declared he would like to send for the caretaker. . . . I too jumped up, knocked over my chair and walked off.<sup>11</sup>

Beethoven obviously heard the table talk as evidenced by his actions.

In another letter from 1804 to his friend, Countess Josephine von Deym, Beethoven indicated an ability to hear: "I fancy, dear J(osephine), that yesterday I did not pay proper attention to what you were saying. *Did you not say* that I was to dine with you?—If you *really said it*, then I will come."<sup>12</sup> Although it is possible that Beethoven's apologetic lack of attention was a ruse to prevent social embarrassment, the context of his writing implies that he heard Countess Deym's invitation but was uncertain of her sincerity. Beethoven seemed certain that he heard her suggestion for dining together and underscored, "*Did you not say.*" His emphasis on, "*If you really said it,*" sug-

<sup>10</sup>Thayer-Forbes, p. 373. Thayer believed that Czerny was optimistic in his assessment of Beethoven's hearing. Czerny, however, is supported by other documentary sources and by the knowledge that the composer did not begin using hearing aids until after 1812.

<sup>11</sup>Anderson, *Letters*, I, 112 (letter no. 93 to Ferdinand Ries, 20 July 1804).

<sup>12</sup>Anderson, *Letters*, I, 121–22 (letter no. 102 to the Countess Josephine Deym, 10 November 1804).

gests, however, that he did not believe her invitation to be heartfelt.

Beethoven conducted the Third Symphony in 1804. Ries, present at the first rehearsal, recorded the following, which also indicates the adequacy of Beethoven's hearing:

In the first Allegro occurs a mischievous whim (*böse Laune*) of Beethoven's for the first horn; in the second part, several measures before the theme recurs in its entirety, Beethoven has the horn suggest it at a place where the two violins are still holding a second chord. To one unfamiliar with the score this must always sound as if the horn player had made a miscount and entered at the wrong place. At the first rehearsal of the symphony, which was horrible, but at which the horn player made his entry correctly, I stood beside Beethoven, and, thinking that a blunder had been made I said: "Can't the damned hornist count?—it sounds infamously false!" I think I came pretty close to receiving a box on the ear. Beethoven did not forgive the slip for a long time.<sup>13</sup>

Beethoven obviously heard both Ries's comment and the hornist's correct entry.

Another indication that Beethoven's hearing was adequate comes from a review of the *Eroica* Symphony, conducted by Beethoven on 7 April 1805. A correspondent for the *Freytmüthige* noted: "The public and Herr van Beethoven, who conducted, were not satisfied with each other on this evening; the public thought the symphony too heavy, too long, and himself too discourteous, because he did not nod his head in recognition of the applause which came from a portion of the audience. On the contrary, Beethoven found that the applause was not strong enough."<sup>14</sup> Beethoven's failure to bow his head suggests that he may not have heard the audience's reaction. Only part of the audience, however, reacted favorably with applause. This may account for his assessment of the applause being inadequate. The reviewer for the *Freytmüthige* did not comment adversely on Beethoven's conducting ability, which suggests that he was able to hear.

Beethoven's hearing was still adequate in 1807 and 1808 for him to appear as soloist in the G-Major Piano Concerto. On 22 December

1808, an all-Beethoven concert was given at the Theater an der Wien, at which Beethoven conducted the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies and was soloist in the Fourth Piano Concerto and Choral Fantasia. Writing about this concert to his publishers, Breitkopf and Härtel, Beethoven commented on his interrupting a passage of the Choral Fantasia: "The musicians, in particular, were enraged that, when from sheer carelessness a mistake had been made in the simplest and most straightforward passage in the world, I suddenly made them stop playing and called out in a loud voice: 'Once more'."<sup>15</sup> Beethoven's observation that the musicians had committed an error is supported by other contemporary reports. The *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* noted:

The wind-instruments varied the theme which Beethoven had previously played on the pianoforte. The turn came to the oboes. The clarinets, if I am not mistaken, make a mistake in the count and enter at once. A curious mixture of tones results. Beethoven jumps up, tries to silence the clarinets, but does not succeed until he has called out quite loudly and rather ill-temperedly: "Stop, stop! that will not do! Again—again."<sup>16</sup>

Czerny also recorded that in the Choral Fantasia "he called out at the mistake: 'Wrong, badly played, wrong again!'"<sup>17</sup> Clearly, Beethoven was able to hear the orchestra's mistake. In another letter to Breitkopf and Härtel from 1809, Beethoven again indicates that he was able to hear: "Tomorrow you will receive a notice about some small corrections which I made during the performance of the symphonies—When I gave these works to you, I had not yet heard either of them performed—and one should not want to be so like a god as not to have correct something here and there in one's created works."<sup>18</sup> Correcting mistakes during a performance again indicates that Beethoven's hearing was adequate.

<sup>15</sup>Anderson, *Letters*, I, 212 (letter no. 192 to Breitkopf and Härtel, 7 January 1809).

<sup>16</sup>Thayer-Forbes, p. 449.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Anderson, *Letters*, I, 217 (letter no. 199 to Breitkopf and Härtel, 4 March 1809). The symphonies referred to are ops. 67 and 68.

<sup>13</sup>Thayer-Forbes, p. 350.

<sup>14</sup>Thayer-Forbes, p. 376.

Beethoven's hearing appears to have fluctuated for varying periods of time. This concept is supported by the writings of two contemporaries, Ries and Andreas Wawruch. Ries noted that "Beethoven's hearing began to suffer . . . but the trouble disappeared for a time."<sup>19</sup> Wawruch was Beethoven's physician during his terminal illness of 1827; he described his patient's hearing loss as fluctuating: "His hearing began to fail and, for all he would often enjoy untroubled intervals lasting for months at a time."<sup>20</sup> Wawruch kept detailed records for his time and apparently explored the composer's hearing loss as part of a medical history. Thus, his information must have come from the composer.

Near the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century, Beethoven's hearing apparently became worse. In the Petter sketchbook dated 1809–11, Beethoven entered a note, "Cotton in my ears at the pianoforte frees my hearing from the unpleasant buzzing."<sup>21</sup> This note may explain why the composer covered his head with pillows during the shelling of Vienna in 1809. In May 1810 Beethoven again corresponded with his old friend Wegeler and described his hearing impairment as a "fiend" which had "settled in my ears," adding that his life was "poisoned for ever."<sup>22</sup> By 1812 conversation with the composer required shouting. Louis Spohr noted that conversing with Beethoven in 1812 was unpleasant because of the necessity for loud speech. Spohr also reported that Beethoven was unaware of his own speech's volume resulting in embarrassing situations.<sup>23</sup> Czerny also noted to Otto Jahn that between 1812 and 1816 conversation with Beethoven gradually became

more difficult and required shouting.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, during the years following 1812 Beethoven began to use ear trumpets for hearing improvement.

#### SPEECH PERCEPTION AND THE USE OF EAR TRUMPETS

During 1812 Beethoven became acquainted with the noted inventor Mälzel, whose inventions included the metronome and several self-playing musical devices. Mälzel became interested in Beethoven's hearing loss and over a several year period constructed four ear trumpets for the composer's use (plate 1). Two of the ear trumpets have attached headbands, undoubtedly to allow free use of the hands at the keyboard.

Interestingly, Beethoven disparaged Mälzel's ear trumpets in a letter of 1814. Writing to Carl von Adlersburg, his legal advisor, Beethoven stated: "Herr M(aelzel) promised me certain hearing aids. . . . At last his mechanical aids were completed, but they were not of any real use to me—In return . . . Herr M(aelzel) considered that . . . I ought to have made him *the sole owner* of the [disputed score]."<sup>25</sup> The disputed score was *Wellington's Victory*, which Mälzel had suggested to Beethoven as a subject for his new invention, the panharmonicon (a device that combined instruments of a military band with a bellows). Mälzel was credited with a substantial role in the composition of this work. Believing he was owner of the score, he produced the work at two orchestral concerts without sharing any proceeds with Beethoven. After learning of these concerts, Beethoven contemplated litigation against Mälzel. Thus, the remarks to von Adlersburg deprecating the effectiveness of Mälzel's ear trumpets were made against this background.

Indeed, in 1815 Beethoven contradicted his remarks from the prior year in an entry from his *Tagebuch*: "Next to the —, the Mälzel ear trumpet is the strongest. One should have different ones in the room for music, speech, and

<sup>19</sup>Ries, cited in *Beethoven Remembered: The Biographical Notes of Franz Wegeler and Ferdinand Ries*, intro. Eva Badura-Skoda, trans. Frederick Noonan (Arlington, Va., 1987), p. 86.

<sup>20</sup>Andreas Wawruch, cited in *Beethoven: Impressions*, p. 221.

<sup>21</sup>Thayer-Forbes, pp. 473–74. Max Unger established that the first nine sheets of the Petter Sketchbook date to 1809 and that the following sixty-five sheets date to 1811. As the reference to cotton preventing tinnitus appears on the first two pages, dating can be assigned to 1809.

<sup>22</sup>Anderson, *Letters*, I, 270 (letter no. 256 to Wegeler, 2 May 1810).

<sup>23</sup>Louis Spohr, cited in *Beethoven: Impressions*, pp. 94–95. See also Thayer-Forbes, p. 547.

<sup>24</sup>Thayer-Forbes, p. 690.

<sup>25</sup>Anderson, *Letters*, I, 461 (letter no. 485 to Dr. Carl Edler von Adlersburg, July 1814). See Thayer-Forbes, pp. 579–80 and app. G, pp. 1094–99, for further information on the Mälzel controversy.

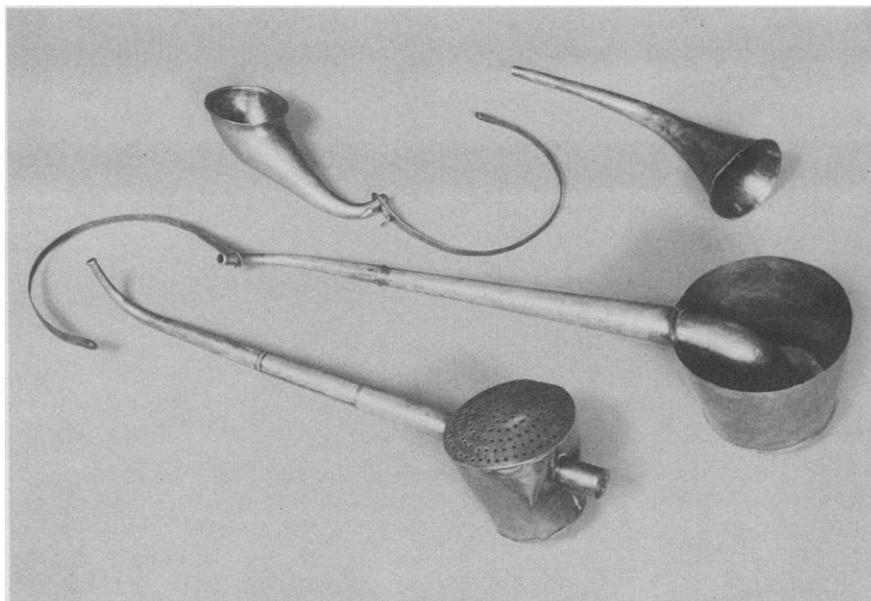


Plate 1: Beethoven's ear trumpets. The largest ear trumpet was probably used with the resonance plate.  
Reproduced by permission of the Beethoven-Haus, Bonn.

also for halls of various sizes."<sup>26</sup> Clearly, the composer found the ear trumpets useful for sound amplification. The omission in the entry was presumably another ear trumpet by an unrecorded manufacturer.

Another indication that Beethoven found Mälzel's ear trumpets useful occurs in a note from January 1814 to his longtime friend Nikolaus Zmeskall. The composer implored: "There is to be a consultation at Baron Pasqualati's at noon today. The M(aelzel) affair is being settled quite peaceably. . . . So, if you can, please come—Bring back with you the *hearing machines*."<sup>27</sup> A diary entry of 1814 also reveals Beethoven's hope for improved hearing with an ear trumpet: "An ear trumpet could be such that stars of the opening [amplify] the entrance of the sound and the sound would be transmitted around the ear and in this way

could be heard towards all openings."<sup>28</sup> Stars appear on the opening of one of Mälzel's ear trumpets.

After 1815 a considerable number of references to understanding speech occurs in both Beethoven's letters and his contemporaries' writings. Although ear trumpets are not always mentioned, the numerous references to shouting suggest their use. In 1816 Dr. Karl von Bursy visited Beethoven, and entries from his diary provide an insight into the composer's hearing perception: "He asked me to speak loudly to him because now he was again having particular difficulty in hearing. . . . He misunderstood me very often and, when I spoke, had to pay the greatest attention in order to understand me."<sup>29</sup> Beethoven's statement of "again having difficulty hearing" suggests that his hearing level was not consistent. Contemporary descriptions by Ries and Wawruch indicate that the composer's hearing fluctuated, being better in some intervals than others. Fanny Giannatasio noted in her diary in 1818

<sup>26</sup>Maynard Solomon, in *Beethoven Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), "Beethoven's Tagebuch," entry no. 52, p. 260.

<sup>27</sup>Anderson, *Letters*, I, 443 (letter no. 459 to Nikolaus Zmeskall von Domanovecz, 11 January 1814). Beethoven and his friends frequently referred to an ear trumpet as a "machine."

<sup>28</sup>Solomon, "Beethoven's Tagebuch," entry no. 27 (1814), p. 255.

<sup>29</sup>Thayer-Forbes, p. 644.

that Beethoven's hearing "was especially bad this day [and] we wrote everything down."<sup>30</sup> Qualifying his hearing as "especially bad this day" also suggests fluctuation.

A letter of December 1817 clearly indicates that Beethoven's hearing was improved by use of an ear trumpet. Writing to Nanette Streicher, he noted: "Things now seem to be greatly improving. I am sending the *ear-trumpet* as well. Please let me have it back tomorrow, for with its help I have gained a considerable amount of information."<sup>31</sup> Apparently, Beethoven had borrowed an ear trumpet from the Streichers and wanted to be certain he could have it back on the following day.

The pianist and composer Johann Pixis recorded in his reminiscences that Steiner's publishing shop kept a silver ear trumpet for Beethoven's use. In November 1817 Pixis encountered Beethoven at Steiner's and recorded: "At that point Beethoven entered the store with his usual dark look. I seized the silver horn which was placed here for him, held it to his ear and asked him: 'Were you at the concert yesterday?'"<sup>32</sup> Steiner and Co. was a favorite meeting spot for composers, theatrical writers, musicians, and the press. It is interesting that Steiner's had an ear trumpet reserved for Beethoven's use. Being absentminded, he was likely to leave home without a hearing aid.

August von Kloeber, the portraitist, visited Beethoven at Mödling in 1818 to sketch the composer and his nephew, Karl, for an oil painting. Kloeber found that communication with Beethoven was impossible unless he used writing or spoke into an ear trumpet. Kloeber also observed Beethoven giving his nephew lessons on the Broadwood pianoforte. Despite Kloeber's difficulty in conversing with the composer,

<sup>30</sup>Thayer-Forbes, p. 705. See also pp. 645–46 for a description of Beethoven's hearing in 1816 by Fanny Giannatasio. Fluctuations in Beethoven's hearing level may explain some inconsistent reports regarding communication with the composer in his last years. Some contemporaries mention use of ear trumpets, whereas others noted that Beethoven could understand speech without their aid. Occasionally, a contemporary would find reports of his hearing loss exaggerated. In contrast, many found the only effective means of communication to be writing.

<sup>31</sup>Anderson, *Letters*, II, 726 (letter no. 844 to Nanette Streicher, December 1817).

<sup>32</sup>Thayer-Forbes, pp. 690–91.

Beethoven was able to detect mistakes in the boy's playing and required him to repeat passages.<sup>33</sup>

Passages in a letter from Beethoven to Nanette Streicher, dated 18 June 1818, indicate that Beethoven was able to converse with his nephew, Karl: "Peppi, who often listened to what Karl and I were talking about, seemed to be tempted to confess the truth. . . . When I was driving out here with her and K(arl), I was talking to K(arl) in the carriage about this, although I did not yet know all; and when I expressed my fear lest we should not be safe even at Mödling, she exclaimed that '*I had only to rely on her*'."<sup>34</sup> Peppi was one of Beethoven's servants whom he suspected of treachery because she had allowed Karl to meet with his mother during the battle over custody. The fact that Peppi overheard the composer's conversation with his nephew indicates that the conversation was conducted by using speech and not writing. Talking in a carriage also suggests adequate hearing when considering the associated background sounds of carriage wheels and horse hoofs.

During 1818 Beethoven began to rely on writing for communication. This practice resulted in the conversation books, of which about 400 existed at his death in 1827. Elliot Forbes noted that this number was not large enough to represent all of Beethoven's conversations between 1818 and 1827. Frequently the conversation books were used by conversants to avoid shouting in public. As such they represent isolated conversations with little temporal continuity. Months sometimes elapsed without a recorded conversation.<sup>35</sup> Schindler stated that Beethoven

<sup>33</sup>Thayer-Forbes, p. 703. Beethoven closely watched the hands of his pupils for evidence of mistakes. This probably explains the inconsistency noted by Kloeber. See Thayer-Forbes, p. 664, for a description by Carl Hirsch.

<sup>34</sup>Anderson, *Letters*, II, 768–69 (letter no. 904 to Nanette Streicher, 18 June 1818). It is possible that Beethoven's reference to talking with his nephew, Karl, was in fact "talk-writing"; however, the context of the letter suggests actual spoken conversations.

<sup>35</sup>Thayer-Forbes, pp. 730–32. Schindler, by his own admission, destroyed a large number of the conversation books that he deemed to be of no importance. In 1845 the 138 surviving books were transferred to the Royal Library in Berlin. (Volumes 1–9 are available from Breitkopf and Härtel, Buch-und Musikverlag, Postfach 1707, D-6200 Wiesbaden 1.)

preferred oral communication among close friends, noting that the composer continued to use an ear trumpet "for a considerable time, especially in his interviews with the Archduke Rudolph and others, when it would have been too tedious to keep up a conversation in writing."<sup>36</sup> Caution must be exercised, however, when using Schindler as a source; recent scholarship has established that Schindler did not become a member of Beethoven's close circle of friends until 1822 and forged numerous documents in an effort to establish an earlier association.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, his writings regarding Beethoven must be corroborated by other contemporary sources to ensure accuracy. Although Schindler did not specify how long Beethoven was able to understand speech using an ear trumpet, other contemporary reports indicate that he could understand speech until 1825.

A remarkable editorial note by Ignaz Moscheles to his English translation of Schindler's *Life of Beethoven* (1841) establishes that Beethoven's hearing allowed speech perception as late as 1823. Carl Maria von Weber had visited Beethoven in 1823 and was able to converse with him. Heinrich Rellstab, planning a similar visit, recorded in his *Memoirs* instructions that Weber had given him regarding communication with Beethoven. In his editorial note, Moscheles cited Rellstab's *Memoirs*; thus, the following remarks do not represent Schindler's writing: "Beethoven does not like epistolary communication, and thinks it quite irksome to read, as to write letters, but you may bring him all sorts of . . . messages from me verbally. . . . He had known me for several years, so that I could at once enter into conversation with him."<sup>38</sup> Weber's instructions

to Rellstab indicate that Beethoven in 1823 could converse orally with those he had known for some length of time.

A similar finding was reported by Edward Schulz in 1823 regarding a conversation with Beethoven that included Tobias Haslinger:

I feared that he would not be able to understand one word of what I said; in this . . . I was much deceived, for he made out very well all that I addressed to him slowly and in a loud tone. From his answers it was clear, that not a particle of what Mr. H[aslinger] uttered had been lost, though neither the latter, nor myself, used a machine. From this you will justly conclude, that the accounts respecting his deafness lately spread in London, are much exaggerated.<sup>39</sup>

Louis Schlösser, in his "Personal Reminiscences of Beethoven," described his visits with Beethoven in 1823, which also indicate a limited ability to hear. Unfortunately, Schlösser is not a reliable source as his work contains many inaccuracies and misrepresentations. His description of Beethoven's hearing, however, is consistent with other contemporary reports. Schlösser recounted entering Beethoven's apartment and noted a large table with writing books and a yellow metallic ear trumpet. He managed to gain Beethoven's attention (whose back was turned) by stamping his feet. Schlösser continued, noting that Beethoven "had seized his ear-trumpet, so I explained to him the unbounded veneration accorded his genial works." Interestingly, Schlösser observed that speaking into the ear trumpet "agitated (Beethoven's) nerves too greatly"; thus, the remainder of the conversation was conducted by Schlösser's writing.<sup>40</sup>

Beethoven indicated in a letter of 1822 to the cellist Bernhard Romberg that the earaches he experienced during the winter caused pain on the hearing of instrumental sounds. He noted that "*even your playing would only cause me pain today.*"<sup>41</sup> It is possible that Beethoven's nerve agitation described by Schlösser repre-

<sup>36</sup>Anton Schindler, *The Life of Beethoven*, ed. and trans. Ignaz Moscheles (Mattapah, Mass., 1966), I, 148–49.

<sup>37</sup>Rita Steblin, "The Newly Discovered Hochenecker Portrait of Beethoven (1819): 'Das ähnlichste Bildnis Beethovens,'" *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 45 (1992), 472. See also Dagmar Beck and Grita Herre, "Einige Zweifel an der Überlieferung der Konversationshefte," in *Bericht über den Internationalen Beethoven-Kongress 20. bis 23. März 1977 in Berlin*, ed. Harry Goldschmidt, Karl-Heinz Köhler, and Konrad Niemann (Leipzig, 1978), pp. 257–74; and William S. Newman, "Yet Another Major Beethoven Forgery by Schindler?" *Journal of Musicology* (1984), 397–422.

<sup>38</sup>Schindler, *Life*, I, 165.

<sup>39</sup>Edward Schulz, cited in *Beethoven: Impressions*, p. 150.

<sup>40</sup>Louis Schlösser, cited in *Beethoven: Impressions*, p. 138. Solomon urges caution in using Schlösser as a source ("Beethoven's Creative Process," in *Beethoven Essays*, pp. 132–34).

<sup>41</sup>Anderson, *Letters*, II, 941 (letter no. 1016 to Bernhard Romberg, 12 February 1822).

sented pain. Thus, written communications may have served as a pain-avoidance strategy. As late as 1825, Beethoven engaged in spoken conversations with close friends. Gerhard von Breuning in *Auf dem Schwarzspanierhause* remembered Beethoven and his father conversing without the need for writing:

In August, 1825, while taking an afternoon walk with my parents, I was fortunate enough to make Beethoven's acquaintance. . . . He spoke almost uninterruptedly . . . hardly waiting for an answer to his query why my father had not visited him for so long a time, etc. . . . My father, though he said less when he did speak, spoke in a manner noticeably loud and distinct and with lively gesticulations.<sup>42</sup>

After 1825 there are no references to Beethoven understanding spoken conversation; therefore, it must be assumed that his hearing had deteriorated to a point when he could no longer hear speech.

#### MUSIC PERCEPTION AFTER 1812: OF EAR TRUMPETS AND A RESONANCE PLATE

Czerny related to Jahn that Beethoven was able to hear music and speech with normal comprehension until 1812. Czerny's selection of 1812 as a pivotal year for Beethoven's hearing is supported by many sources. Describing a private performance in 1812, Ludwig Nohl noted that "Beethoven played it in a wondrously beautiful way; the passages rolled along so clear and fine that one couldn't believe at all that he was transposing." Yet one year later, Spohr noted that Beethoven appeared unable to "hear the *piano* of his music" when he conducted the Seventh Symphony. In 1814 Spohr also had the opportunity of hearing Beethoven play during a rehearsal of the "Archduke" Trio, op. 97, in the composer's rooms. He noted that Beethoven was unable to appreciate the dynamics of his playing: "In *forte* passages the poor deaf man pounded on the keys till the strings jangled, and in *piano* he played so softly that whole groups of tones were omitted." Moscheles, who was present at the public performance of op. 97

on 11 April 1814, was less severe in his criticism of Beethoven's playing: "His playing . . . satisfied me less, being wanting in clarity and precision; but I observed many traces of the *grand* style of playing which I had long recognized in his compositions."<sup>43</sup> Beethoven's final public appearance as a performer occurred a few weeks later.

By 1814 the composer was using ear trumpets designed by Mälzel and noted in 1815 that he needed different ear trumpets for hearing music at home and in concert halls. Several extracts from Beethoven's letters indicate that he was able to hear performed music as late as 1822. Beethoven apologized to Czerny in a letter from 1816 for interrupting him during a performance of op. 16, noting: "I burst out with that remark yesterday and I was very sorry after I had done so. But you must forgive a composer who would rather have heard his work performed exactly as it was written, however beautifully you played it in other respects." Clearly, Beethoven was able to hear Czerny at the piano. One year later he apologized to Baroness Dorothea Ertmann for not being present at Czerny's weekly musical party: "That I could not hear you play at Cz[erny]'s recently was due to an indisposition which at last seems to be yielding."

In 1817 he wrote the pianist Marie Pachler-Koschak: "We will make a great deal more music. Surely you will play for me the sonatas in F major and C minor, won't you? I have not yet found anyone who performs my compositions as well as you do." In 1819 Beethoven wrote to his distinguished pupil, Archduke Rudolph, that "in a few days I hope to hear Y. I. H. yourself perform the masterpiece you have sent me." And in the spring of 1820, Beethoven again wrote to the Archduke, "I advise you to save up your spiritual children until then, because it would be better if I were first to hear them performed by yourself."<sup>44</sup> As noted ear-

<sup>42</sup>Gerhard von Breuning, in *Beethoven: Impressions*, pp. 197–98.

<sup>43</sup>Thayer-Forbes, pp. 526, 565, 577–78, 578.

<sup>44</sup>Anderson, *Letters*, II, 560 (letter no. 610 to Carl Czerny, 12 February 1816), p. 671 (letter no. 764 to Baroness Dorothea Ertmann, 23 February 1817), p. 708 (letter no. 815 to Frau Marie Pachler-Koschak, 1817), p. 789 (letter no. 933 to Archduke Rudolph, 1 January 1819), pp. 886–87 (letter no. 1016 to Archduke Rudolph, 3 April 1820).

lier, Beethoven apologized in a letter of 1822 to the cellist Romberg for being unable to attend his concert because music caused him ear pain. These extracts indicate that Beethoven was able to hear performed music as late as 1822. Schindler noted that Beethoven was able to converse with the Archduke while using an ear trumpet; it seems likely that he also used an ear trumpet to hear his playing.

Czerny stated that Beethoven was able to hear himself play with the aid of machines (ear trumpets) until 1816.<sup>45</sup> But other sources indicate that the composer continued to hear at the keyboard until 1826. In 1817 Beethoven wrote Countess Erdody that his hearing was declining, noting that "my hearing has become worse." During the same year, he requested the pianoforte maker Andreas Streicher to prepare an instrument with increased volume: "Be so kind as to adjust one of your pianos for me to suit my impaired hearing. It should be as loud as possible. That is absolutely necessary."<sup>46</sup> Despite his increasing hearing impairment, Beethoven was still able to improvise in 1817 in an impressive manner. Friedrich Schneider, an organist, heard the composer at the keyboard and noted "his improvisation being the most marvellous thing [Schneider] had ever listened to."<sup>47</sup> He did not indicate whether Beethoven used an ear trumpet, but it would seem probable as two of Mälzel's ear trumpets have headbands allowing manual freedom for playing.

An uncorroborated report also indicates that Beethoven used a drumstick (*baguette de bois*) as a hearing aid. Supposedly, Beethoven held one end of the drumstick between his teeth and touched its distal end to his piano. A wooden drumstick conducts vibrations to the teeth which in turn conduct vibrations to the bones of hearing in the middle ear. Unfortunately, only one source (J. A. A. Rattel, a French physician) exists for the drumstick's use. Rattel, however, was not a contemporary of the composer and could not have observed its use. For

this reason, his report of the *baguette de bois* is considered unreliable.<sup>48</sup>

Yet another hearing aid used by Beethoven and reported by several contemporaries has virtually escaped notice. Graf produced for Beethoven a conducting device that was used to amplify sounds from the piano. Schindler mentioned this aid in his biography noting that "the imperial court piano-forte-maker, Conrad Graf, made for Beethoven a sound conductor, which, being placed on the pianoforte, helped to convey the tone more distinctly to his ear."<sup>49</sup> The existence of this device (also referred to as the resonance plate) was acknowledged by Friederike Grigat, librarian of the Beethoven-Archiv (Bonn), who noted: "The resonance plate was a kind of prompt box for Beethoven's last piano both made by Conrad Graf. Neither the prompt box nor a picture of it survived."<sup>50</sup> Schindler also described the sound conductor as a "resonance-carrier . . . placed on the piano . . . to carry the tones to the ear with greater ease." Schindler, however, discounted the resonance carrier's effectiveness stating, "in the case of individual tones it attained its object, but harmonic playing completely overwhelmed the ear, because the air vibrations, restricted to the least possible space, could not help but produce a deafening effect."<sup>51</sup> This observation seems to have been made from Schindler's own experience with the resonance carrier; the "deafening effect" may have resulted from the jumble of notes in chords. It is difficult to imagine how Beethoven would have found "a deafening effect," but if Schindler's assessment of the amplification properties of the sound conductor were correct, then Beethoven's hearing must have been nearly equal to his. Despite Schindler's intention of discounting the sound conductor's effectiveness, he does affirm its ability to amplify sound.

Yet, another contemporary reported that Beethoven seemed unable to hear sounds from

<sup>45</sup>Thayer-Forbes, p. 690.

<sup>46</sup>Anderson, *Letters*, II, 683 (letter no. 783 to Countess Anna Marie Erdödy, 19 June 1817), p. 686 (letter no. 785 to Nanette Streicher, 7 July 1817).

<sup>47</sup>Thayer-Forbes, p. 739.

<sup>48</sup>Brian F. McCabe, "Beethoven's Deafness," *Annals of Otolaryngology, Rhinology and Laryngology* 67 (1958), 201-02.

<sup>49</sup>Schindler, *Life*, II, 175.

<sup>50</sup>Friederike Grigat, librarian, Beethoven-Archiv (Bonn) by letter to author.

<sup>51</sup>Schindler, cited in *Beethoven: Impressions*, p. 170.

the sound conductor if he were not at the keyboard. Gerhard von Breuning described the following scene in 1826:

I found him at his work-table. . . . For a short time I remained quiet, then I moved over to the piano . . . the one by Graff (with the attached resonance-gatherer) and, not convinced of Beethoven's tone-deafness, began to strum softly on the keys. Meanwhile I looked over at him again and again, to see whether this disturbed him. But when I saw that he was quite unconscious of it I played more loudly; then, purposefully, very loudly. . . . He did not hear me at all, and kept on writing with entire unconcern.<sup>52</sup>

During Beethoven's last years, young Gerhard von Breuning was a frequent companion and had many opportunities to observe the composer's behavior. It is remarkable that the boy would have been suspicious of Beethoven's faulty hearing; however, he did report that his father (Stephen von Breuning) and Beethoven spoke without using a conversation book at their first meeting. And Beethoven became interested in Gerhard's musical education, listening critically to his playing, and recommending Clementi's method over Czerny's. It seems likely that these, together with other unrecorded observations, stimulated the boy's suspicions. In light of other reports, his failed attempt to disturb Beethoven suggests that the sound conductor was useful only when the composer was seated at his piano. This idea is supported by the observations of Dr. Samuel Spiker and Friedrich Wieck, both of whom saw Beethoven using the Graf resonance plate. Spiker visited Beethoven in 1826 and commented on Beethoven's use of the sound conductor when playing: "Opening on it was Beethoven's living-room . . . in the middle of which stood a grand fortepiano by the admirable artist Konrad Graf. . . . A peculiar mechanism fastened to his grand piano, a kind of resonance-holder, beneath which he sat when he played, and which was meant to catch up and concentrate the

sound about him."<sup>53</sup> Spiker noted that Beethoven sat beneath the sound conductor when he played.

Wieck, father of Clara Wieck Schumann, also visited Beethoven in 1826, heard Beethoven improvise, and commented favorably on his playing: "Then he improvised for me during an hour, after he had mounted his ear-trumpet and placed it on the resonance-plate on which already stood the pretty well battered, large grand piano, with its very powerful, rough tone. . . . He played in a flowing, genial manner, for the most part orchestrally . . . weaving in the clearest and most charming melodies."<sup>54</sup> Wieck was the only observer to report Beethoven's use of an ear trumpet in conjunction with the resonance plate or sound conductor. As he was also a pianist, Wieck was without doubt in a position to appreciate the quality of Beethoven's late pianistic abilities. His description of Beethoven's ability to produce the "clearest and most charming melodies" strongly suggests that the composer was able to hear his playing with the aid of the resonance plate.

Wieck's description indicates that Beethoven's piano rested on the resonance plate, which was probably metallic, and that the composer mounted his ear trumpet and then placed it on the plate. Although his observations were recorded years after the event described, Wieck's detailed observations suggest a clear memory of events. If the plate were located under the piano, as he indicated, some type of connection would have been required for Beethoven's ear trumpet. The largest of Mälzel's ear trumpets, twenty-three inches (fifty-nine centimeters) in length, has a cylindrical-shaped opening, which may have attached to a coupling from the plate.

Unfortunately, neither the resonance plate nor any drawing of it has survived, so that its shape and dimensions will remain the subjects of speculation. It seems very unlikely, however, that Beethoven would not have taken the trouble to mount an ear trumpet (using an attached headband) and then attach it to the resonance plate unless he derived a benefit from its use. Wieck's description of Beethoven's play-

<sup>52</sup>Gerhard von Breuning, cited in *Beethoven: Impressions*, p. 202. Ludwig Rellstab in 1825 expressed a similar suspicion and attempted to gain Beethoven's attention by striking the piano while his back was turned. See Thayer-Forbes, p. 948, for a description.

<sup>53</sup>Spiker, cited in *Beethoven: Impressions*, pp. 210–11.

<sup>54</sup>Wieck, cited in *Beethoven: Impressions*, p. 208.

ing implies that he did. It is also probable that Beethoven used the resonance plate as an aid in composition. This conclusion can be inferred from two sources. The first is contained in a letter from Beethoven to Archduke Rudolph concerning composition. Beethoven advised his pupil to keep a small table beside the pianoforte for recording ideas: "When sitting at the pianoforte you should jot down your ideas in the form of sketches. For this purpose you should have a small table beside the pianoforte. In this way not only is one's imagination stimulated but one learns to pin down immediately the most remote ideas."<sup>55</sup> Jotting down ideas in the form of sketches while at the keyboard implies the ability to hear what has been played. Of course, Beethoven may have been recalling an earlier time in his life when, with better hearing, he would have utilized this practice for composing.

This was not the case, however. The composer's recommendation was made in 1823. Three years later, Spiker noted the arrangement of Beethoven's study: "It was very inter-

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<sup>55</sup>Anderson, *Letters*, III, 1056 (letter no. 1203 to Archduke Rudolph, 1 July 1823).

esting to see his musical sketch-book. . . . It was full of individual measures of music, suggested figures, etc. Several large books of this kind . . . lay on a desk beside his pianoforte."<sup>56</sup> The pianoforte mentioned was the one equipped with Graf's resonance plate intended to concentrate sound around Beethoven's head.

Innovative adaptations characterized Beethoven's response to his hearing impairment. Using early technology for the amplification of sound, he was apparently able to hear throughout his adult life. The commonly held belief that Beethoven was functionally deaf should be dismissed in light of the evidence presented here. Thus, his late works were not composed in complete deafness but in a state of limited hearing. Beethoven should not be remembered as the great composer who was deaf by 1801 but as the great composer who overcame his impairment by using the technology of his time. Indeed, he predicted the effect of his hearing loss on his art in his letter to Amenda of 1801: "When I am playing and composing, my affliction still hampers me least, it affects me most when I am in company." 

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<sup>56</sup>Spiker, cited in *Beethoven: Impressions*, p. 211.