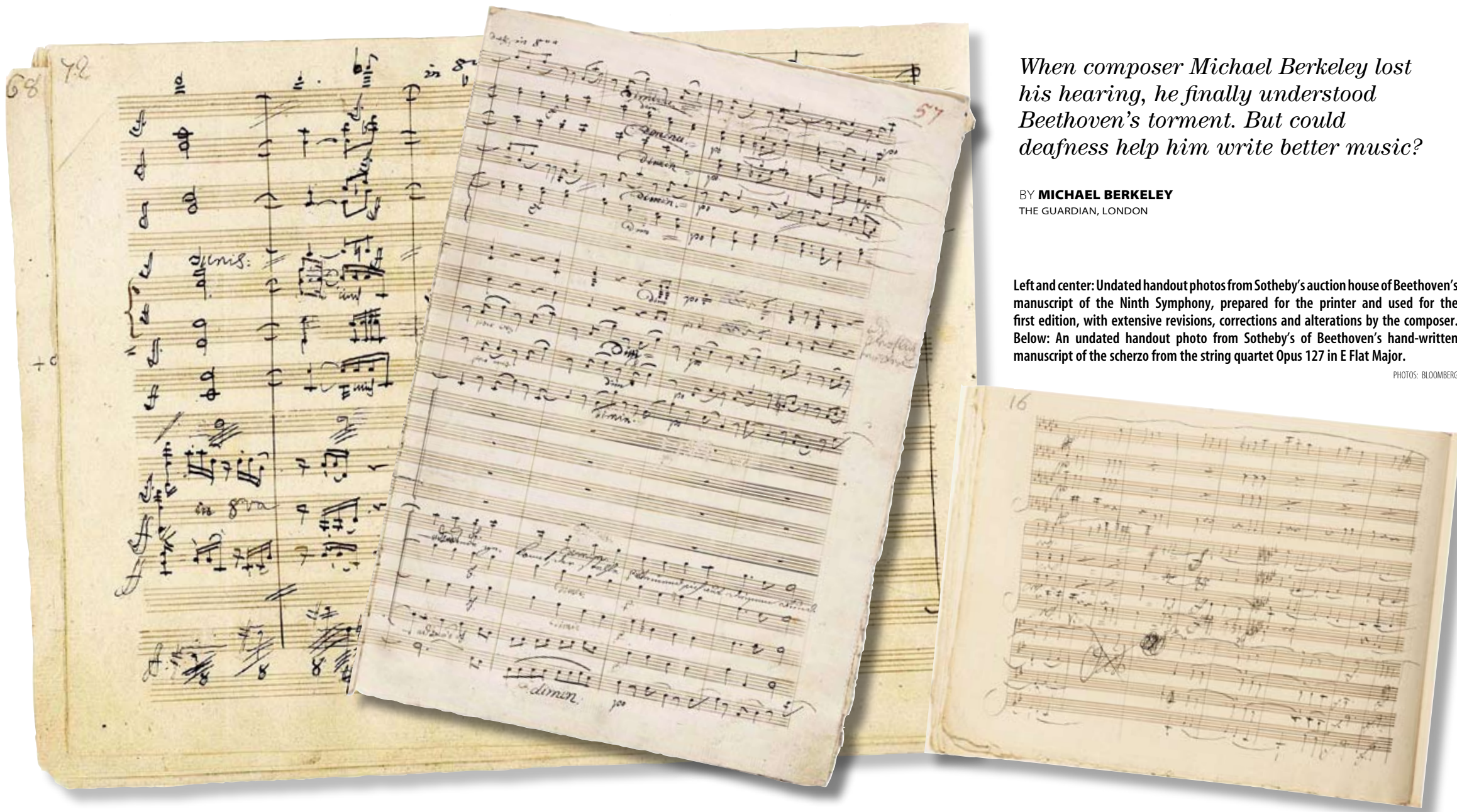


## FEATURES

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*When composer Michael Berkeley lost his hearing, he finally understood Beethoven's torment. But could deafness help him write better music?*

BY MICHAEL BERKELEY  
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Left and center: Undated handout photos from Sotheby's auction house of Beethoven's manuscript of the Ninth Symphony, prepared for the printer and used for the first edition, with extensive revisions, corrections and alterations by the composer. Below: An undated handout photo from Sotheby's of Beethoven's hand-written manuscript of the scherzo from the string quartet Opus 127 in E Flat Major.

PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG

## DEAFNESS AND COMPOSING

The increasing deafness that Beethoven suffered during the closing years of his life gives the masterpieces that he wrote in that period, like the late String Quartets, a mystical aura, especially for the layman — for whom the art of composing is in itself akin to an act of magic.

To a composer, however, the fact that Beethoven was able to “write in his head”, and get the music straight from there on to paper, is actually not so surprising. Anyone who has been through rigorous training in composition will have been encouraged — not to say directed — to write music away from the piano in order to realize pure sound on paper, free from the meandering route that improvising fingers travel.

This is not to decry the use of an instrument. Stravinsky liked a neutral sound to come back at him when he was composing. Just about any old piano would do: In fact, he put a blanket inside the upright he worked on in Paris. One look at his early scores reveals the telltale imprint of harmony heard through the fingers of two hands. Indeed, his groundbreaking masterpiece, *The Rite of Spring*, is episodic rather than argued: That is, it does not have the organic growth you tend to find in music conceived and sculpted purely in the mind, as exemplified by Beethoven.

Beethoven and Stravinsky were considered aurally cacophonous in their day. At the premiere of the *Rite of Spring* in Paris in 1913, the crowd booed while Nijinsky, in the wings, frantically called out the beats so that Dhiagilev's dancers could follow the music. Paradoxically, both composers share a profound understanding of confusion, in its best and most exhilarating musical sense: Initially causing discomfort through calculated dissonance. With hearing loss, however, the distortion created is arbitrary and destructive, rather than provocative.

It is easy to imagine that the enforced inner world where Beethoven found himself endowed him with an additional sense of vision — that being locked into his own aural bubble concentrated his ideas to an almost combustible degree of potency. We can never know for sure, just as we can never know the true cause of his loss of

hearing (rather than a clear diagnosis, his autopsy revealed various elements of damage, including a narrowing of the Eustachian tube). But what I now appreciate all too clearly, for similar but hopefully temporary reasons, is the pounding frustration of not being able to try something out on the piano, of not being able to go near a concert because of the terrible cacophony that would assail me — because I, too, have developed a hearing problem.

Beethoven was reluctant to speak of his loss of hearing, but in the heart-rending Heiligenstadt Testament that he wrote to his brothers, which was only found after his death, he bared his deaf soul and described the frustration not only of musical isolation but, perhaps more vitally, social isolation: “Oh, how could I possibly admit an infirmity in the one sense, which ought to be more perfect in me than others, a sense which I once possessed to near perfection, a perfection such as few in my profession enjoy or ever have enjoyed. Oh, I cannot do it; therefore forgive me when you see me draw back, when I would have gladly mingled with you.”

The growing silence Beethoven experienced is hard for those who can hear to imagine: no change of atmosphere as you move from room to room, no rustle of paper, a dead world of aural nothingness. Yet it was in this state that he composed the loud and triumphant Ninth Symphony. At its premiere in Vienna in 1824, Beethoven could hear neither the music nor the applause, and wept openly.

I had often wondered what it must be like for a composer to find music inaudible and even unbearable. I have now looked, for the last few weeks, into that abyss. A respiratory infection led one night to the sounds of an orgy of diabolical plumbing in my right ear. Sudden pain was accompanied by frenetic gurgling, bubbling and popping that never seemed to give that final gratifying lurch into free, equalized air. Next morning, I could hear nothing on that side. This would have been merely an inconvenience were it not for the fact that I already have severe hearing loss in my left ear, thanks to a mastoid operation in childhood, compounded by exposure to ridiculously loud rock music as a young keyboard player.

Following one of these infections, the Eustachian tube becomes inflamed and blocked. Furthermore, fluid in the middle ear prevents those tiny little bones, like the stirrup, from vibrating and thus conveying sound. Doctors tend to be confident that, within a few months, the middle ear clears, and hearing returns; and, where Beethoven had a primitive ear trumpet, audiologists can now offer sophisticated hearing aids.

Clearly, Beethoven had a more hopeless affliction — possibly nerve damage and certainly roaring tinnitus — but his reported descriptions of distortion and frequency loss now sound horribly familiar to me. Beethoven could, and did, read other composers' work, and it would have come as vividly off the page for him as does reading a novel for others. It is possible, too, that his late, great music is exactly what he would have produced regardless of the state of his hearing.

But music is about experiencing the live and the tactile: the hit of bow against string, of being able to compare interpretations. Playing in public became completely impossible for Beethoven following his disastrous, and deeply distressing, performance of his Fifth Piano Concerto, *The Emperor*, in 1811. Did his piano sound, as mine does, out of tune, as though it had been prepared by John Cage to defy all previous perceptions of what a piano should sound like? Were a whole set of frequencies removed? If he were to play one of his sonatas, would one hand sound as though it were playing in a different key to the other? And did one ear hear sound a major third higher than the other? Did a simple scale suddenly leap in the middle so that natural order was convoluted and distorted?

Then we come to that apparent contradiction in terms, hyperacusis, where loud and therefore audible noises, like drums, instead of being welcome are truly painful. I had to leave the Royal Albert Hall halfway through a Prom because the strings sounded like dry percussion, the high woodwind screamed, and brass and tympani boomed painfully. “Good thing you are not writing the review,” said a critic friend as I fled. Such aural horrors would prompt turbulence and despair in most musicians — and the lonely

Beethoven, no stranger to either emotion, contemplated suicide. “How sad is my lot, I must avoid all things that are dear to me,” he wrote.

At the moment, I cling to the view that my condition will improve. There has been an increase in volume, particularly with speech, but not so much in the hearing of music — which continues to sound ugly and disparate. Catching a piano piece on the radio the other day I asked: “What on earth is this? It sounds like Ligeti crossed with Nancarrow.” It turned out to be Schumann. Were I to be facing a lifetime of this, I would be in despair. It would mean that I could never again hear great music, let alone my own works. In terms of composition, it has meant that I have concentrated on simple things I know I can hear accurately: an elegy for unaccompanied cello, for instance, and an anthem for Liverpool Cathedral. It's not so much the act of composition that is nullified, but the fact that one's confidence is fractured by not being able to try out what it is you hear in your head. On the other hand, I wrote a large chunk of my Clarinet Concerto, an expressionistic piece I particularly like, in a hotel room in Minnesota some years ago, so I know it can be done. In fact, it's probably good for the technique: to be forced absolutely and utterly into your own private and insular acoustic.

The loss of proper, external musical sensation does heighten my sense of what Beethoven arrived at in those late String Quartets, living entirely for an inner world and creating within it an edifice in which you tend to wrestle away the superficial and the unnecessary. Ideas are stripped down to their essence and the intensity of your involvement becomes ever more personal and passionate. The drama is turned inward, almost alarmingly so.

Contemplating afresh Beethoven's sheer willpower and sublime creativity as his hearing deserted him, and listening again to the defiant *Grosse Fuge* and the haunting *Cavatina* from the Opus 130 Quartet that he himself did not live to witness in its final form, I find myself reconsidering Beethoven's extraordinary achievement. It brings tears to the eyes — eyes which, for Beethoven, became his ears.

[ LANGUAGE ]

## The joys of appropriate names

Perhaps some of you were less than ecstatic when you heard that Bob Diamond, the man who likes to kill a dull Sunday evening by coating himself in melted gold and rolling around in the \$100 million (US\$154 million) he keeps in his oak-lined bank vault while laughing richly, is to become the chief executive of Barclays. It's a pain for Diamond, of course, having to build another bank vault and all, but some other people have also found the thought of the man who even Peter “mate of Russian oligarchs” Mandelson once described as “the unacceptable face of banking,” who made a gigantic pile of money out of a sector of the banking industry that was at least partly to blame for the near-collapse of the financial system in 2008, being given a job as one of the top head honchos in Britain's banking world

a little, well, difficult to digest.

Foolish, pessimistic people! There is nothing but cheer to be derived from this appointment. Seriously, what could possibly be better than the chief executive of one of Britain's biggest banks, a man who once received a bonus of \$21 million, having the name of Diamond? I'll tell you what: for Diamond's former job as chief executive of Barclays Capital to now be partly filled by someone called Rich Ricci. I'm sorry, is this a news story or a tale by Dickens?

Some people teach themselves a foreign language. Others like to travel and learn about new cultures. My area of interest is nominative determinism. Nominative determinism is a term coined by the *New Scientist*, referring to when people's names reflect, perhaps even determine, their job or their interests. Of course, in the *New*

*Scientist* this refers to science-type people, such as a gentleman called Daniel Snowman who has written a book about polar regions. I, however, worship at a much, much broader church, one that spans the noble reaches from Amy Winehouse (it's just pure luck she wasn't called Amy Crackhouse) to Peter Stringfellow (a surname that reflects his favored look for women and, going by certain infamous holiday snaps, himself.) As Diamond amply proves, wealth is often reflected in the name of the person or business, perhaps because they're so rich they buy their own names. Donald Trump could have only ever been a gold-plated, ego-ridden turnip, while Goldman Sachs would have been rejected by Dickens himself as too heavy handed. Paris Hilton always struck me as being named with especial aptness, being both

*The appointment of Bob Diamond as Barclays chief executive is a delight for connoisseurs of fitting names*

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expensive and tacky, with an off-putting sheen of grubbiness.

Then there are the names that dictate one's chosen profession: Arsene Wenger's name surely explains his inexplicable devotion to Arsenal, while the recently captured Jamaican drug lord Christopher Coke is absolutely my drug dealer *du choix*. Usain Bolt trains, I have no doubt, most

diligently, but surely having a name like that is the nomenclature equivalent of injecting oneself with performance-enhancing drugs every day, since birth. At the other end of the scale, Christine Bleakley certainly lives up to her name in terms of the vision she provides of successful women in television. For a woman whose career began with a kiss and tell about a certain footballer and arguably ended when she masturbated a boar on a reality TV show, Rebecca Loos was most fortuitously named. Richard Littlejohn has a similarly expressive name. (I just mean that he possibly has a small bathroom in his house. What else could I have meant?) And finally, the best example of nominative determinism of them all: Bobbit, a name that works for both the action (as performed by wife Lorena) and the result (as demonstrated by husband John).

Bob Diamond, welcome to this premier club.

Of course, the reason I am obsessed with other people's names is because my own is so ridiculous. Ever since I was old enough to have friends who figured out that my name rhymes with many words, such as “badly,” “madly” and, yes, “sadly,” and particularly so in a singsong voice, I have hated my name. I hate that 70 percent of my post is addressed to Mr Hadley Freeman or, worse, Mr Hadley-Freeman; I hate that people often tell me that they expected me to be a man (“I am,” is, I have found, the most satisfying answer); and while I don't mind the many, many mangled nicknames people make of my name, I can't help but feel that “Haddles” is even worse than Hadley. I think my relationship with my name hit its low point

when a gentleman I met at a party introduced me to his friends as “Morgan Stanley.” So shaming. Surely my name at least has the cachet to be confused with Goldman Sachs.

No, I am not named after Spandau Ballet, nor after a suburb of north London. I am named after Ernest Hemingway's first (“And best!” my mother likes to insist, consolingly) wife. And now, someone has written a very lovely book about her, called *The Paris Wife*, by Paula McLain. While I can't say it has given me a newfound love for my name, there is some consolation in reading about Hadley's typical day, which tended to involve being adored by Hemingway, dining with Gertrude Stein and then drinking champagne with Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald. And most importantly, no one ever, ever called her Haddles.