

Burgess and Beethoven, Part I

By [Lord Birkett](#)

My friend Anthony Wilkinson is a talented film director and also a considerable musician. It was not surprising, then, that a few years ago he asked me to collaborate, as producer, on a movie about Beethoven. His treatment was very far from the birth-to-death biographies so beloved of Hollywood. It was a very spare, intense story about Beethoven's last years. Almost a three-hander, about Beethoven, his nephew Karl, and Karl's mother. When Beethoven's mother died, he made Beethoven the guardian of young Karl. Beethoven had profoundly disapproved of his brother's marriage and thought his wife little better than a loose woman.

He therefore took every step he could to prevent her seeing her son, lavished a jealous and obsessive affection upon Karl, and so traumatised the young man that eventually Karl attempted suicide. Unsuccessfully as it turned out. Friends and family were so distressed at the turn of events that they procured a commission in the army for Karl, in order to send him away from the tyrannical behaviour of his uncle. When Beethoven's final illness came on him, Karl was sent for but never saw his uncle again. He could not reach the house because the streets of Vienna were too densely blocked with vehicles. It was Beethoven's funeral procession.

This would not have been a very musical film. Not many scenes of inspired composition. Because the battle over Karl seems rather to have traumatised Beethoven as well. His flow of compositions all but dried up. When it came again it was of transcendental majesty : the late piano sonatas, the late string quartets, and the Missa Solemnis.

We thought that this film would need two elements to get it off the ground:

1. A major star to play Beethoven. From a rather cynical, even patronising, view of public perception we thought the two attributes needed were a blunt, almost square, build, and

immense charisma. We thought of Richard Burton and Rod Steiger. Burton didn't seem interested. Steiger, on the other hand, was highly intrigued.

2. An utterly compelling script. And here we reckoned that Beethoven by this time was profoundly deaf, highly eccentric, both feared and admired by everybody from royalty and aristocracy to charcoal-burners and chestnut-sellers. So we thought he ought to speak with a unique voice and in a unique idiom. In other words a language all of his own. Quite intelligible, on the surface, to all and sundry. But carrying hints and echoes and resonances which would somehow bridge the gap between his everyday needs like groceries and the sublime sounds in his head.

Very few authors in any age have been able to invent languages. Bocaccio perhaps, Swift perhaps. In our own time the most compelling example was "A Clockwork Orange". This vicious Russian orientated slang seemed a long way from Promethean agonies of Beethoven ("Ludwig Van" and the unholy distortions of the ninth symphony are irrelevant here.) But as prophetic utterance Anthony Burgess's private language of the Droogs was of unparalleled virtuosity. What's more Burgess was known to be a prolific and highly skilled composer. And even more, he was known to be an admirer, an informed and scholarly admirer, of Beethoven. Lastly he was already a friend of Anthony Wilkinson's.

The next step was obvious. Would Burgess be interested ? There was no money available for the project, so don't do any work, we said. If you are interested we'll put together a pre-production package, and then hopefully commission a first draft script, etc. etc. We could not have been more candid.

Imagine our dismay (and not a little excitement) when only a matter of weeks later a thick script came thudding through the letterbox. As an old-fashion film producer I was aghast. I hadn't negotiated a fee, and hadn't any funds to pay out even if I had. I hadn't even hinted that the author should write a line. I hadn't had a briefing meeting. I hadn't invoked an agent, etc. etc. But here was a full-scale full-length script, signed Anthony Burgess.

Another problem was this: the script was full of amazing perceptions and inventions, but they didn't seem to coincide very much with our perceptions and inventions. Had we perhaps not been very clear, even in our "are you interested" message? Had our message been all too clear and been magisterially overruled by Burgess? A meeting was obviously called for, and duly took place on his next London visit.

We all had a friendly and enjoyable lunch together. I had not met Burgess before, though he and Wilkinson were old friends, so the early courses of lunch were not productive. Burgess was cagey and defensive. I was nervous and deferential. It wasn't until lunch itself was over and we decided on a little malt whisky, "to round it off", that I became explicit and Burgess became expansive. The interregnum was all too short, so we wound up on the most affectionate terms, but with almost nothing decided or agreed.

That wasn't the end of it, though The Two Anthonys, Burgess and Wilkinson, swapped ideas and treatments and scripts on Beethoven long after my diplomacy had been forgotten.

One day Anthony Wilkinson will tell you of it.

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