

## Immortal Beloved

*Amadeus* meets *Citizen Kane* in *Immortal Beloved*, a new pan-European film biography of Ludwig van Beethoven. The *Amadeus* parallel is in the highly romanticized (and often fabricated) story of the composer's life, punctuated throughout by lush extracts of the man's music, and shot in reconstructed Prague (looking wonderful) standing in for 1800's Vienna. The *Citizen Kane* element is in the structure: a kind of mystery story triggered by an after-death message which leads one character to attempt to piece together the composer's secret passion through flashbacks.

The trigger here is based on a fact: the existence of three messages left behind at Beethoven's death which were addressed to an unknown "immortal beloved," the identity of whom has never been determined. Scenarist and director Bernard Rose senses a great unresolved drama here and tries to wring the audience's emotions with it.

The film begins with Beethoven's long-time assistant Anton Schindler (Jeroen Krabbé) finding the "immortal beloved" letter (in the movie there is only one) and attempting to track down its addressee, who will inherit the great man's legacy. Among the women Schindler interviews to find out the truth are Countess Giulietta Guicciardi (Valeria Golino), once promised to Ludwig, Countess Anna Maria Erdody (Isabella Rossellini), who once hosted the composer, and Beethoven's sister-in-law Johanna (Johanna Ter Steege), whom he fought for the custody of his nephew. Through interviews with the ladies in turn, the manic moods, the triumphs and disasters of Beethoven (played by a surly Gary Oldman) are revealed to us.

This is, finally, a movie biography of a proto-Romantic composer, and that means, like almost all of its genre, it is essentially cornball. It strains for effect (like the Fifth Symphony's four "fate" notes sounding over the composer's death bed); it suggests dubious psychological motives for the music (such as a failed tryst leading to the "Kreutzer" sonata); and it messes about with the facts and chronology of Beethoven's life. Perhaps, again, like *Amadeus*, it will lead people who see it to actually look into Beethoven's life (he has been well and completely biographed) and, more importantly, to try out some of his music.

For that is what is really worthy in this film, as it was in *Amadeus*: the man's music. The soundtrack is replete with it, and it is extremely effective spreading over the wide screen and swelling throughout the movie house. Rose acquired some of the very best classical artists to perform it, led by Sir George Solti and the London Philharmonic, who perform all the full orchestral passages. Soloists of the quality of pianist Murray Perahia and violinist Gideon Kremer are also present in a score that assures that the real emotion in Beethoven's life was in his music, whatever happened in his private life.

Some use of the music is predictable but effective. For example, the funereal second movement from the Seventh Symphony figures prominently to foreshadow doom or underscore death in the film. Less predictable, and quite spectacular, is one scene where the boy Beethoven, having escaped from his abusive father, floats in a secluded pond, and while strains from the monumental Ninth Symphony swell, the boy--shot from above--moves from the star-dappled pond to become part of the heavens

themselves. It is a stunner image, but the music makes it.

To whom do you recommend such a picture? Classical music fans, I suppose, who should appreciate the music even if they reject the slightly clammy story. "Masterpiece Theater" fans, perhaps, for its splendid period look, costuming, and overall intelligent casting. It is unfortunately rated "R," because, if it had been rated more mildly, younger kids could get a painless introduction to Beethoven's genius.

Performed roughly in chronological order, or tied approximately to the period of the story, the musical score is, of course, performed in snatches--a "greatest hits" Beethoven sampler. The wonderful thing is that the music transcends such use; its impact is not dimmed by such chopping, anymore than Mozart's was. It is the music that is *never* cornball.

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