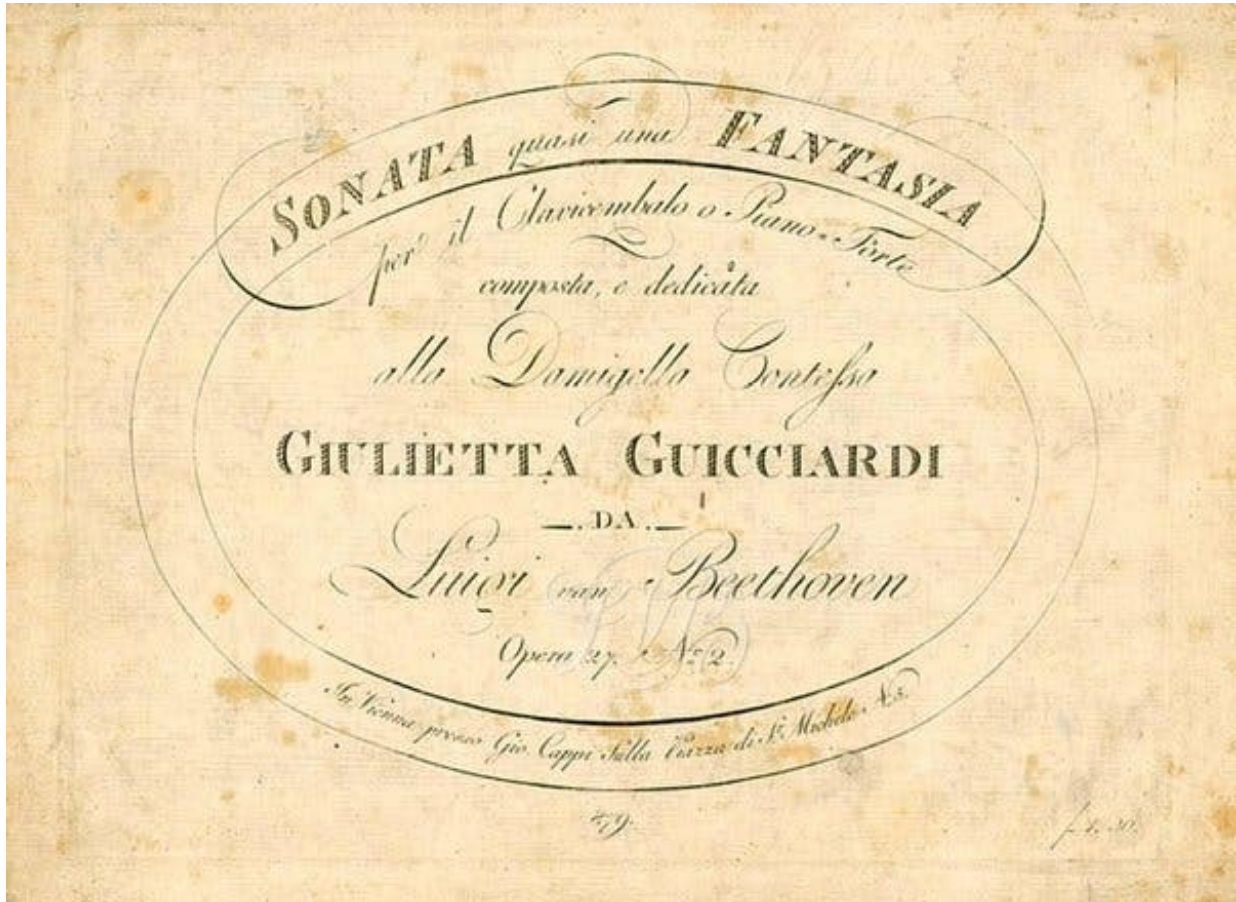


The Woman at the Heart of Beethoven's 'Moonlight' Sonata

[nytimes.com/2020/05/27/arts/music/beethoven-moonlight-sonata.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/27/arts/music/beethoven-moonlight-sonata.html)

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Four years ago, I was having lunch with an editor who mentioned that Beethoven had fallen in love with one of his piano students. She was the woman to whom the great master had dedicated the “Moonlight” Sonata. The editor thought it would make a good novel. Was I interested?

I was intrigued, but intimidated. Wagner once described Beethoven as a “titan, wrestling with the gods.” Did I want to wrestle with a titan? I’d never written historical fiction, didn’t read German and knew nothing about early-19th-century Vienna. Though I’d studied piano for 12 years, my teacher thought Beethoven’s music was too “agitating” for someone with my “high-strung” temperament.

When I got home from lunch, I listened to Maurizio Pollini play the “Moonlight.” I’d heard the sorrowful first movement before, but it suddenly touched me differently. Both my parents had recently died, but with a heavy workload and my childhood home to sell, I hadn’t given

myself time to grieve. Now Beethoven was encouraging me to mourn, hypnotizing me with doleful, dronelike melody.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/AtcPhQB7rh0>

But just as I was settling in for a good cry, he yanked me into the second movement's lively Allegretto, before pushing me headfirst into the explosive Presto. In 16 minutes, I'd gone from sorrow to happiness to defiance.

Over the next two weeks, I listened to nothing but Beethoven. Soon, the titan had taken over my life. I wrestled with his music. I wrestled with his dozens of biographies. I didn't have to wrestle with the decision to write the novel that became "The Woman in the Moonlight"; it felt like Beethoven had decided for me.

Her name was Countess Julie Guicciardi. When the "Moonlight" Sonata was first published, the dedication page was in Italian, so she's been known as Giulietta ever since.

She left no diaries and few letters. I could find only three suspected likenesses: a bust, a lithograph and a portrait miniature showing a young woman with large eyes, lush lips and hair "à la Titus," the daringly short style then popular among Vienna's fashionable set. Some once thought she was the "Immortal Beloved," the anonymous woman to whom Beethoven wrote a passionate letter that was discovered after he died. (Today, far likelier candidates are the composer's friend, Antonie Brentano, and Julie's cousin, Josephine von Brunswick.)

Beethoven began giving Julie lessons in 1801, when she was 18 and so beautiful that people called her "La Bella Guicciardi." He was 30, with intense brown eyes and a volatile temperament.



A portrait miniature believed to depict Julie Guicciardi was among Beethoven's possessions when he died. The Picture Art Collection/Alamy



Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827), circa 1800. Hulton Archive/Getty Images

They probably met through the Brunswicks, who had made Beethoven's acquaintance two years earlier. Julie's aunt had come to Vienna from Hungary to marry off one of her daughters. In order to attract suitable husbands, aristocratic women were encouraged to play an instrument. The cello sat between the legs, and the violin required rigorous slicing movements; the piano was considered far more ladylike.

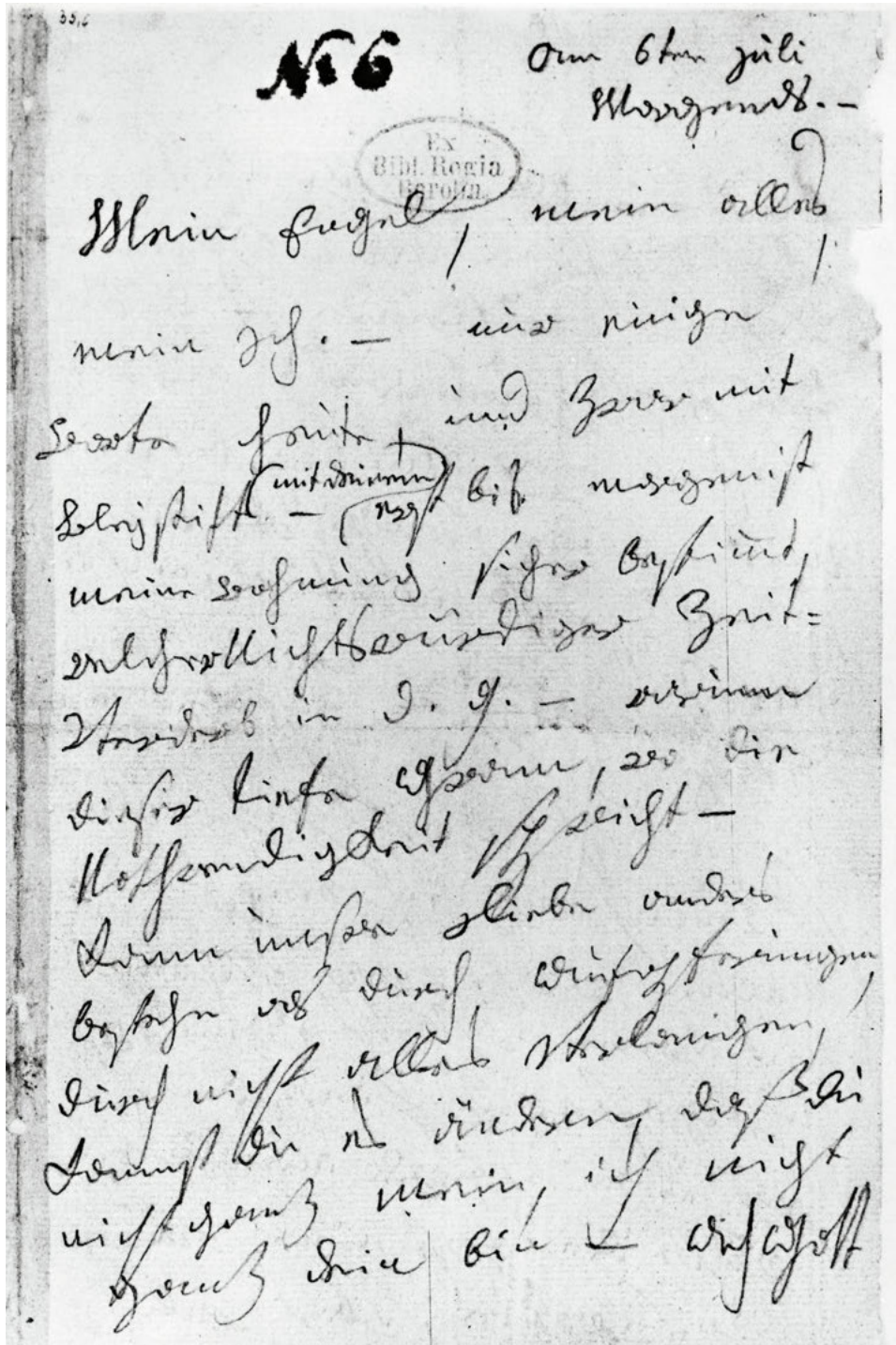
Josephine von Brunswick and her sister, Therese, got Beethoven to teach them. He admired the lovely Josephine, but she quickly found a husband, and Beethoven turned his attention to Julie.

It was an agonizing period in his life. For the previous four years, he'd been suffering from tinnitus, a ringing and buzzing in his ears, and was having trouble discerning high notes. He feared the situation was irreversible and tried to keep it secret. He became reclusive, afraid of what people would say when they learned that Vienna's foremost piano virtuoso was going deaf. Apart from the social stigma, he knew that it would probably end his brilliant performing career.

Julie helped lift his despair. It's generally agreed that she is the "dear, enchanting girl" he refers to in a letter to his friend Franz Wegeler. He confided to Wegeler that he was thinking of marriage, but that the aristocratic young woman wasn't of his station.

At some point in 1801, he completed the "Moonlight" Sonata. It's difficult to pinpoint the exact date; he recorded his compositional process in sketchbooks, and many pages related to the "Moonlight" have been lost. When it was published in March 1802, it had only a generic name; its romantic title emerged after Beethoven's death. In 1823, the writer Ludwig Rellstab described the first movement as a lake reposing in the faint shimmer of the moon, and that association eventually caught on.

Even before it became the "Moonlight," however, the sonata was a hit; the dreamy first movement was played so often that Beethoven grew tired of it. He complained to his student, the composer Carl Czerny, that it seemed to be all anyone wanted to hear.



The anonymous "Immortal Beloved" Beethoven addresses in this famous letter was once thought to be Julie Guicciardi. DeAgostini/Getty Images

One imagines that Julie would have been thrilled to be its dedicatee, but in 1852, when Otto Jahn interviewed her for his biography of Beethoven, she painted a different picture. She told Jahn that Beethoven had originally given her his Rondo in G, but when he suddenly needed to dedicate that work to the sister of his foremost patron, he offered Julie the “Moonlight” instead. (The story doesn’t quite add up. The Rondo had been written several years earlier and was published after the “Moonlight.” Perhaps Jahn didn’t gain Julie’s trust — the rest of the interview is relatively uninformative — or perhaps, having already been suggested as the “Immortal Beloved,” she didn’t want any more scrutiny.)

In November 1803, Julie wed Count Wenzel Robert von Gallenberg, a composer of modest talents and limited means, with whom she moved to Naples. There her life, never dull, became even more dramatic. She met Joachim Murat, the King of Naples, and his wife, Caroline, Napoleon’s youngest sister. In October 1814, Julie appeared at the Congress of Vienna, the assembly that reorganized Europe after the Napoleonic Wars. According to local police records, she was an “emissary” for the Murats, who wanted to make sure they’d keep their kingdom.

In a city teeming with spies, Julie was one of many, but she had certain advantages. Her sister-in-law, Countess Eleonora von Fuchs, was married to an imperial chamberlain, and, according to the Viennese police, Julie was the mistress of a prominent Saxon diplomat. Did she see Beethoven during the trip? There’s no record of it, but he was the musical star of the Congress, conducting his bombastic “Wellington’s Victory” and Seventh Symphony before a crowd of luminaries. It’s hard to believe that Julie wouldn’t have encountered him.

Their lives intersected again in 1822, when Julie and Gallenberg moved back to Vienna, where he’d been hired at the Theater am Kärntnertor. The Kärntnertor will always be remembered for one event in particular: the 1824 premiere of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. Was Julie sitting in a box that night to listen to the soaring “Ode to Joy”? Again, there’s no evidence.

But Anton Schindler, Beethoven’s secretary and early biographer, met Gallenberg at the Kärntnertor. This prompted Beethoven to reminisce about Julie: he claimed that Julie loved him more than her husband, and that after her wedding, she’d come to him crying but he had spurned her. Knowing of her financial hardships, though, he’d arranged through a friend to give Gallenberg money.

It would seem that he hadn’t entirely forgotten his “dear, enchanting girl.” After Beethoven’s death in 1827, friends discovered several items tucked away in a secret compartment of a desk drawer. Among them was the “Immortal Beloved” letter and two portrait miniatures. One was that “à la Titus” image believed to be Julie Guicciardi.

Patricia Morrisroe is the author of “Mapplethorpe: A Biography” and the novel “The Woman in the Moonlight,” coming in September.