



'If it happened today, Beethoven would be'

IN JAIL'

He gave us countless works of genius. But behind closed doors, the world-renowned composer was subjecting his young nephew to prolonged emotional and psychological abuse. Social worker **Kieran O'Hagan** has written a book about it and tells **Louise Palfreyman** what the profession would have made of the case today

Had the case surfaced in modern times, it would merit the involvement of child protection services. In fact, the perpetrator may well have ended up in prison.

But this was 1815 and, for three years, a nine-year-old boy had to endure rages, threats and punishments meted out by his uncle.

Kieran O'Hagan, writer and social work academic, focuses on a bitter custody battle that began when Karl van Beethoven was taken from his mother, placed with his celebrated uncle, and eventually returned three years later.

Kieran spent 20 years on the frontline of social work, later specialising in the areas of child development and child abuse. While reading about his favourite composer, he learned there had been a family conflict over the only son of Beethoven's brother, Kaspar.

Beethoven had always despised his sister-in-law Johanna Reiss. She was an upholsterer's daughter with a criminal record. And when Kaspar died of consumption in 1815, Beethoven was determined to remove Karl from his mother's "poisonous influence", arguing that Johanna was an unfit mother and that he should be made the legal guardian.

Unfortunately for Karl, Beethoven got custody, and as Kieran observes in his book *Beethoven: "The Poison That Is in Me"*, "far from rescuing a child, he was plunging him into grief and misery, chaos and insecurity".

It is generally accepted today that Beethoven was volatile and prone to rages. He was also going deaf. And the demands of international fame meant he moved around a great deal.

Kieran has fictionalised historical source material and tells the story from Karl's point of view, unfolding the acute suffering he went through at the hands of his uncle.

"There was huge trauma in the initial months after Beethoven took him," Kieran says. "Karl's suffering was compounded by his growing awareness of his uncle's hatred and cruel treatment of his mother. The composer was incapable of realising that when you abuse a mother, you abuse her young child even more."

"Karl suffered in silence. People around him deferred to Beethoven's reputation and his damning view of Johanna. Karl felt inhibited about even mentioning her."

IN FOCUS

Johanna and Karl were permitted to see each other for no more than one hour per month. “She would always bring him presents and Beethoven once confiscated a book. He not only wanted to end all contact, but also any physical reminders.”

Karl’s moral development was hugely impacted over the years of the custody battle, Kieran says: “He and his mother learned how to deceive Beethoven and rebel against him, and how to get away with it. They would plot and plan and meet in secret.

“Karl was learning from an early age that doing something wrong and lying about it gets results.”

The book also provides huge insight into the mind of an abuser. Kieran adds: “When you get a child abuse referral, you are always trying to understand the perpetrator, to gain insight – it’s crucial.

“And in the case of Beethoven you only have to read the self-revelation in his letters. After a few weeks as a guardian, he began to look upon himself as Karl’s father and wanted Karl to believe that himself.

“There are key insights into Beethoven as a perpetrator of abuse. His nature, his perceptions, his vulnerabilities – they’re all in there in the letters he wrote.”

Kieran believes the letters and court documents on the custody dispute provide a wealth of material for childcare social workers today.

“His letters were unbelievably revealing, in terms of his inadequacy, his lack of awareness, his insensitivity, his lack of empathy about the ‘problem’ that he had taken on when he adopted Karl.

“You have this great genius, in my opinion the greatest composer the world has ever known. But his letters show how he thinks about Karl and the awful way he tries to resolve issues, usually in the most entirely inappropriate and damaging way.”

Films have been made in the past and books have been written about Karl, but Kieran says nobody has approached the case from the point of view of child development and child protection.

“Beethoven scholars, writing from the time of his death, didn’t shirk from criticising him for the way he treated Karl and his mother. One wrote that his actions ‘bordered on the insane’; another that his behaviour in trying to separate mother and son was ‘unpardonable’. It was ‘diabolical’, ‘cruel’ ‘without pity’, they wrote. Today we would simply say it was child abuse.

“In my view, it’s one of the most vivid accounts of a case of emotional and psychological abuse I have ever witnessed. If it happened today, Karl’s suffering would be seen and referred by school staff. Beethoven would be interviewed, and his explanations for his actions deemed totally unacceptable. Karl would be returned to his mother and Beethoven prosecuted.”

The problem for Karl, back in 1815, was the status of his uncle.

“People at the school often saw Karl in tears and tried to reassure him,” Kieran says. “But they had to cope with the fact that Beethoven was probably the most famous person alive at the time.

“They were thrilled on one level, in getting Beethoven to



Karl Van Beethoven and the front cover of Kieran’s book about Beethoven and Karl

‘There are key insights into Beethoven as a perpetrator of abuse – his nature, his perceptions, his vulnerabilities – they’re all in there in the letters he wrote’

place Karl with them, but they never got to engage with Karl’s mother. Beethoven ensured that, by embarking on a character assassination of her, casting her as unfit.”

Beethoven made much of the fact that Johanna had a criminal record. He also had crucial contacts inside the court that awarded him guardianship.

“It was so illogical and damaging to remove a nine-year-old child from his mother, a couple of months after his father had died,” Kieran says. “Karl was traumatised and worst of all, Beethoven wanted to ensure that his mother would never see him again.”

Beethoven got away with his actions for as long as he did because of his status and his network of contacts. He was a formidable force. But he suffered the terrible indignity of being publicly exposed as a mere commoner during the custody hearings.

After three bitterly unhappy years, Karl was returned to his mother. But not for long. Beethoven used all his power and influence to regain guardianship.

At the age of 20, Karl tried to shoot himself. He later told police it was because “my uncle has tormented me too much”. Self-injured and hospitalised, he begged doctors to send him back to his mother.

Despite what he has uncovered about Beethoven’s abusive behaviour, Kieran says his lifelong love of the composer’s music remains undiminished.

“There is still a pervasive feeling of gratitude for what he gave us. His later quartets express his pain and anguish over Karl. Having achieved so much, he is acutely aware that on the one central issue he cared about most (being the ‘father’ of Karl), he failed abysmally.

“It is sometimes hard to believe that the man who composed music such as the Ninth and Fifth symphonies, or the *Missa Solemnis* and the quartets, could inflict that level of suffering on a mother and her child, suffering that would affect Karl for the rest of his life.”

You can download the book for free at kieranohagan.com