Beethoven in the Soul

By Rohan Maitzen (July 1, 2014) 6 Comments

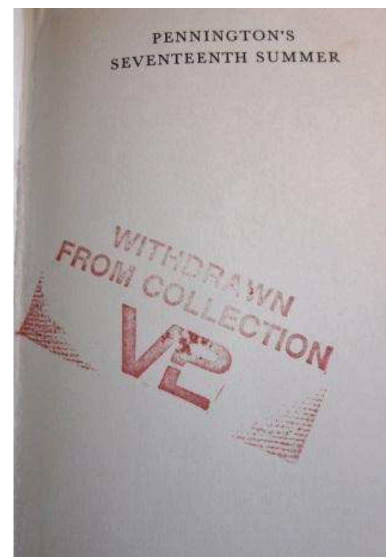
K. M. Peyton, *Pennington's Seventeenth Summer*, *The Beethoven Medal*, *Pennington's Heir*

Despite Facebook's best efforts, most of my high school friendships have lapsed: too much distance — chronological, geographical, mental — has come between the person I was then and the way I live now. There are a few that have lasted, though, and in addition to their intrinsic rewards they provide precious continuity across the changing landscape of my life.

So too, though over time I have purged my bookshelves of most of my youthful favorites, there are some books I have hung on to because they please the reader I am today as much as they remind me of the reader I once was. Chief among these cherished volumes is K. M. Peyton's Pennington trilogy: *Pennington's Seventeenth Summer, The Beethoven Medal*, and *Pennington's*

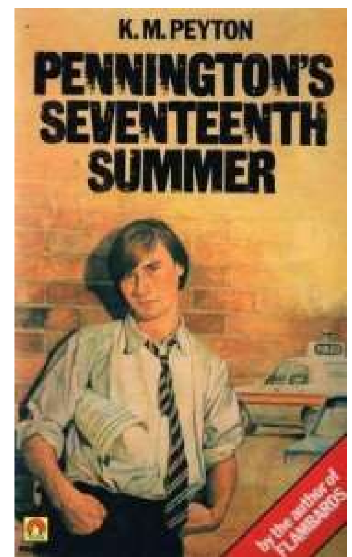
Heir. My copies of the first two are library discards aggressively stamped “WITHDRAWN FROM COLLECTION”: I guess not a lot of other readers loved them as much as I did — and do.

Why have I not only kept these books on my shelf since the 1970s — hauling them along on moves to a total of six apartments and three houses over the years — but also reread them regularly? It’s not just nostalgia: there are plenty of books I remember fondly from my childhood but have no interest in revisiting in adulthood. Like formulaic murder mysteries after I know whodunit, they have lost their allure; whatever enjoyment I might still take in them would be overlaid with boredom, because as a reader I have moved on. But just as *Gaudy Night* never gets old for me, so Peyton’s “young adult” fiction has aged just fine.



The Pennington series tells what is in many ways a classic ‘coming of age’ story, and I think some of its lasting value lies there, in what it has to say about that essential process of finding a place in the world. Like other books in the genre, from classics like Scott’s *Waverley* and Dickens’s *David Copperfield* to contemporary versions such as David Mitchell’s *Black Swan Green*, it explores both the process of becoming an adult and the meaning of that process. What kind of adults do we, or should we, want to be? What are the consequences and the costs of our choices, for ourselves personally but also for the world we imagine growing up into? A *Bildungsroman* is always about clashes between dreams and realities, and the price to be paid for achieving maturity is typically the loss of innocence. The result need not be cynicism or despair, however: if it were, we’d cling, understandably but ignominiously, to childhood, which is another way of saying we’d prefer ignorance to knowledge — or board books to *Middlemarch*. The challenge is to bring enough idealism with us into adulthood that we can continue to see both ourselves and our world as works in progress.

The Pennington series is very much in this tradition, but its special appeal for me is that its story of development is told through music, which figures in all three novels as an agent of growth as well as a human achievement that in itself is worth a lot of sacrifice and hard work. I appreciated this approach because of my own musical experience: I took piano lessons for many years and still enjoy puttering away at some Chopin. Though I have never been more than a passionate amateur, my hands-on efforts help me appreciate the greatness of Martha Argerich or Murray Perahia — or the aspiration and accomplishment reflected in Pennington’s story. Peyton’s novels don’t rely on such a musical predisposition, however: they make their own case for music as a vocation, one that makes the pressures and responsibilities of adult life more than worthwhile.



The first book in the series, *Pennington's Seventeenth Summer*, focuses on Patrick Pennington — Penn to his friends. "A fourteen-stone hulk of a boy, with shoulders on him like an all-in wrestler, and long reddish-brown hair curling over his collar," he's finishing up a final term at school, where he is constantly subjected to the petty tyrannies of his teachers, especially "Soggy" Marsh, his form master, with whom he has a long-running feud. Things aren't much better at home: his mother is Irish, "with an Irish temper, a flinty, unlovable mother . . . voluble, argumentative, and unpredictable"; his father is "easier to understand, although no easier to live with, settling all arguments by means of a good thumping." It's no wonder, as everyone around him says, that Penn's a "yob."

There's one surprise, though: Penn is a gifted pianist, and his only ally is "Dotty" Crocker, the music master, who regards Penn with "complicated thoughts of despair and frustration, lifted on occasion by moments of acute joy when Pennington chose to show what he was capable of." These moments are rare, as Penn sees his playing as just one more oppressive imposition. "This gift God gave you," Crocker says to Penn, in a rage at his indifference, "which you are too thick-headed to acknowledge, is the one and only grace you possess, or are ever likely to possess."

"The old fool's bonkers," thinks Penn at the time, but as the novel progresses music proves more than an unappreciated blessing. What begins for him in perversity ("I'll show you, you murky little swine," he says to the image of Soggy as he takes his seat for a local piano competition) becomes his passport to maturity and a better life. For while musical *talent* may be a gift, musical *accomplishment*, the novel emphasizes, takes hard work, something sustained as much by Penn's obstinacy as by Crocker's exhortations. *Pennington's Seventeenth Summer* offers no inspiring messages about living your dream or believing in yourself: it's all about the discipline, the sweat, the guts, needed to produce something like Mendelssohn's "Andante and Rondo Capriccioso" on demand. These are Penn's strengths, and though he is coerced into applying them to the gruelling repetitions that are the unglamorous realities of serious piano practice, the result is something even he can appreciate — or could, if he were ever allowed to do it on his own terms:

> He didn't mind, if he could play what *he* liked, but even in this thing, which was supposed to be pleasure, it was nag, nag, nag all the way, and being told who he was supposed to like. For God's sake, how could they expect you to like their deadly stuff because they said it was good? You even had to take exams in it, this *pleasure*! . . . Cripes, all these years he had played, and always to order, for Dotty or his mother!

Penn's resentful surliness never lets up, and he doesn't lose his knack for pissing off people in power, from his parents and Soggy to — with graver consequences — the local copper, Mitchell, who always has it in for him. But he wins the competition, much to Soggy's disappointment and Crocker's touching delight. And when the girl he's infatuated with drags him home to meet her parents and mortifyingly urges him to "play that thing you played at the festival for Mum and Dad," Penn shows her too, playing their requests and then every other piece he knows until she and her well-meaning Mum give up and go to bed:

> Penn sat down, taking the music with a feeling not of wanting to die, but having died. The music was an unrecognizable version of the Polonaise in A major, emasculated into beginner's fudge. He put it on the rack and started to play the real thing, and he played it with a passion that was in reality pure rage. The effect was magnificent, the best he had ever played it, even with Crocker standing over him. When he had finished the rage had died out, and an unfamiliar little quirk of elation touched him, just as when he had finished the competition and had known he had played well. He had stretched himself, and been surprised by what he could do. He was very happy and did not want to stop, and went straight into one of the nocturnes, while Sylvia's mother was still saying, 'My word, but it never sounded like that when I played it.' After the Chopin he played Beethoven's Pathetique Sonata and three of Mendelssohn's Songs without Words, and the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata, and two Chopin Preludes, a waltz, and a Mozart study.

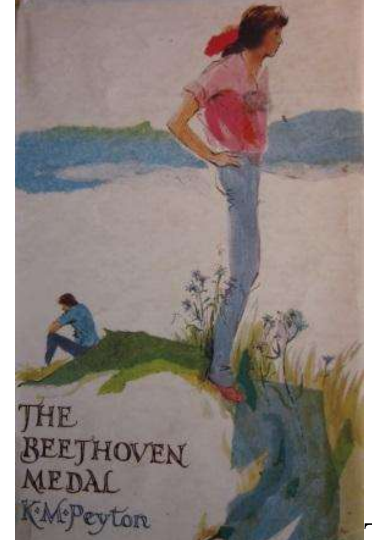
Penn has discovered that music can give him both pleasure and power, that playing "the real thing" may be something more than an obligation or punishment; this epiphany is crucial to his development, both as a pianist and as a man.

Penn's fit of pique also has serendipitous practical consequences: an eminent music professor visiting the flat upstairs who has, perforce, listened to him play all night, looks him up and offers to take him on as a student — even negotiating his release from a stint in prison. "People like me aren't students," Penn says. "Don't be so Victorian," responds the Professor; "Underprivileged backgrounds are in, these days. Parents like yours are fashionable." Penn is offended at first, but he can see that the Professor is offering him more than just music lessons. Not that he offers a life

of ease. “Oakhall would be nothing,” Penn thinks ruefully, “compared to what was opening up before him”:

> Cold showers and press-ups would be as summer zephyrs beside the relentless pressures of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms that hove on the horizon.

As the novel ends, Penn is finally done, with school, with his parents, with a whole depressing life of squalor and castigation. But can even the Professor harness his bull-like determination in the service of civility as well as art? Can Penn learn not just to play but to live well?



This question is unresolved at the end of the first book, and we find out the answer to it only gradually in the second, because *The Beethoven Medal* focuses not on Penn but on Ruth Hollis, a shy, horse-loving girl who knows him only as Pat, the baker’s delivery boy. He’s as surly as ever, but to Ruth that’s part of his appeal. The rest of her family sees him less favorably: “the boy,” observes Ruth’s older brother Ted, “was not the sort to please mothers,”

> being offhand and long-haired and as scruffy as Ruth herself. He was tall and powerfully built, but moved with an aggressive ease; there was a scornful, belligerent air about him that suggested to Ted that he could easily get into trouble.

That’s the Penn we know, all right. But it’s different looking at him through Ruth’s eyes: the physicality that characterizes him as a dangerous thug in the first book sends other signals now. “Loads of sex appeal,” Ted says to his mother, who is just as disgusted as he anticipates: “there’s lots of boys round here call for her, all decent, respectable boys.” “Did his mother not remember,” Ted wonders, “even a little bit, what it felt like?” The truth is the opposite, though: Ruth’s mother remembers only too well, and (with some reason) fears the consequences for Ruth of getting involved with someone like Pat.

The Beethoven Medal, then, is also (or still) a coming-of-age story, but as is common when the protagonist is female, Ruth’s effort to define herself is closely tied to her vexed relationship with her own desires (as her passion for horses, a familiar literary displacement for female sexuality, implicitly suggests). Like Pat, Ruth needs to break away from her parents’ stifling influence, but her family situation is too safe, not too brutal, and she needs to find the courage to take risks that her parents see as inappropriate for her. She yearns for Pat, but her yearnings are part of a more general, if ill-defined, longing “to be on her own somewhere and think her own thoughts and just

— just be,” which is exactly what the bourgeois conventionality of her home does not allow. “Oh, Pat*rick*,” she says to herself in an agony of confused emotion,

> and it meant a thousand thousand thing — half things and fragments. She didn’t know what. It was all tangled up like the winter fuzz of the wild clematis that had died and still hung in one of the old pear trees; it was as insubstantial as the smell of the absent pony, the fluff of the dandelion clocks that disintegrated around her ankles as she walked through the grass. She put out her arms and shut her eyes and revolved in big circles on the grass . . . knowing nothing, and feeling everything.

Pat embodies the escape she was already looking for: his presence “did not suggest contentment, but an aggressive energy, a dissatisfaction; there was a searching element, something that suggested pressures and difficulties she could not guess at.”

The mousy girl wistfully eyeing the broodingly remote hero is a scenario familiar to us from romances from *Jane Eyre* to *Dirty Dancing*. (Perhaps it’s because it was also painfully familiar, from experience, to my adolescent self that *The Beethoven Medal* is still my personal favourite of Peyton’s trilogy.) From these models we have also learned to expect that this initial pulse-racing voyeurism turns to true love only as the hero’s dominance is undermined, whether by chastening experience (symbolic castration was popular in the Victorian period) or by revelations about his underlying vulnerability. For Ruth, Pat becomes more attractive the more he defies her initial impression of uncomplicated animality: “He did not fit into any particular pigeon-hole: an uncouth student, a hypochondriac he-man . . . It just added to the fascination.” The discovery that Pat’s a musician makes sense of some details that have puzzled Ruth (his extreme care for his hands, for instance) but only adds to her larger sense of dislocation: “Pianists were, she supposed, eminently respectable — but, even in this generalization, Pat was a contradiction.”

As in the first book of the trilogy, in *The Beethoven Medal* the characters’ evolving feelings are channelled through the piano. When Ruth listens to Pat play, she feels transported from her customary constrained existence:

> Ruth felt one of her familiar, strange longings for something quite out of her reach, out of her experience. With everything unresolved, not really happy, yet strangely content to

> be just so, with life's possibilities spread out this way and that way. Ruth was suspended in that little moment, with the smell of soap and roses and the sound of the piano.

But music, like love, is not all tranquility ("She shut her eyes, and the thunder came, a torrent of arpeggios . . . 'Oh, God,' Ruth prayed, 'don't let it go wrong again. Let it be moonlight'"), and the unrelenting work it demands keeps her at a distance from Pat even as she becomes more and more emotionally entangled:

> She saw his hands, very strong and agile as she had watched them all morning, and his expression changing with the music, his involvement making this invisible barrier that kept her from following, that kept her apart . . .

Worse, and more confusing, there's turbulence in Pat's life as well as in his playing, as she learns first-hand when they run up against PC Mitchell and Pat ends up beaten and arrested for assaulting him. "In music," the Professor observes wryly to Ruth, "he has an intuitive grace, in the very best sense, and in his behaviour he can be so graceless that it is hard to credit."

Ruth begins *The Beethoven Medal* as an awkward, uncertain teenager, but her struggle to understand the complexities of Pennington's life and of her own feelings for him propel her into maturity. "Pat had caused her to grow up more quickly during the last few weeks than in all the other years of her life," she realizes; "what she had got into was altogether the most demanding situation she had ever encountered." Though part of her development is explicitly sexual (dancing with Pat, she "felt the heat, and the stirrings of her own instincts, charged and suddenly very painful"), here again growing up is also tied to appreciating music as something worth extraordinary effort and self-suppression. *Pennington's Seventeenth Summer* approached this from the performer's perspective; *The Beethoven Medal* seats us now in the audience, as we follow Ruth from infatuation into something deeper and more demanding:

> There was a long, long silence. Then, quietly, the chords she remembered, not nervous and stumbling at all, but rich and urgent, unrolled towards the waiting strings and the raised baton . . . surging into the great tide of melody, so that Ruth forgot she was nervous and in despair, only marvelling that this was Pat, who had written 'God save us' in his diary, who was no doubt in as deep a despair as herself, but yet was capable in his playing of making everything else but the music completely irrelevant.

Peyton's challenge here is to make us believe through words what Ruth understands through music. The translation of sound into language isn't an easy thing for a writer to pull off. Frank Conroy in *Body and Soul* and Vikram Seth in *An Equal Music* both do it pretty well; Lynne Sharon Schwarz manages it wonderfully in *Disturbances in the Field* but not in *Two-Part Inventions*. Peyton has already trained us to read her musical moments in terms of plot and character; now, with Ruth as her vehicle, Peyton carries us away emotionally into Pat's climactic performance of Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto:

> the climax building up between the piano and orchestra stopped the silly wandering of her brain, shaking her, stopping her from everything but a pulsing participation. It was impossible to be detached as the piano climbed the scale and ran down again in spectacular figures Ruth could put no name to, while the orchestra soared up on the last

> outpouring of the marvellous tune, the piano crying out underneath until, faster and faster, it cascaded to the final thudding halt with chords delivered by Pat with the whole of his very considerable strength in exact accord with Backhaus's cutting-off gesture with the baton.

If it disappoints me slightly that Ruth's vocation turns out to be Pat — that her *Bildungsroman* folds into his — I'm comforted that it is both a conscious choice and a willing one, and that in making it she is choosing not just Pat but what he has elected to stand for. "She didn't want a concert pianist, she wanted Pat," she thinks resentfully when the Professor stresses the demands of Pat's chosen profession — but later she realizes that "it was useless to think that Pat existed apart from his music, because he didn't. She could not, any more, want him without it." Experiencing the music teaches her this – and shows her why it's worth it.

But throwing her fortunes in with Pat's does not mean being only a worshipful observer, an acolyte in the temple of Pat's genius. In the third book, *Pennington's Heir*, Ruth and Pat — spurred into marriage by an unexpected pregnancy — build a partnership through which they complete their transformation into adults, independent of the pressures and expectations of their parents but dependent on each other to define and sustain their *own* family. *Pennington's Heir* reflects this new phase of their relationship in its form, by alternating its point of view between Pat and Ruth. We've seen Pat through Ruth's eyes before, but now for the first time we see Ruth

through his, and we learn that she has underestimated herself: “he felt her strength; he admired her. It steadied him.” In terms of his playing, she may be “only on the sidelines” (“that was her job for life,” she thinks, not with irritation but with dedication), but without her there he would flounder, at the mercy of all those around him who regard him as either a curiosity or an opportunity.

Once again, in the third book, music measures their movement towards maturity. Forced to give up the Professor’s patronage, Pat must now rely solely on himself as a musician, and his first public performance under these new conditions is a defining moment:

> The feeling was quite terrifying. His *own* concert, the pieces entirely his own concern, worked over without advice from anybody, the interpretation his own, the success or failure his alone, credit to no one. He had thought himself ready for it, kicked out of the Professor’s nest but the wings ready, the feathers formed; sitting down at the piano, he was not sure at all. The isolation was terrible.

Looking into the wings, though, he sees Ruth: “Seeing her there helped. She smiled at him. He played the Schumann for her.” His success reassures them both about the new life they have embarked on.

It’s not a particularly easy life: Ruth and Pat face a lot of obstacles and set-backs in *Pennington’s Heir*, from poverty to injury, and the novel does not trade in any “happily ever after” fairy-tales — babies cry, couples quarrel, rent is expensive, and you risk failure with the Liszt B-minor Sonata no matter how hard you practice. The novel does end on an uplifting note, but it offers hope for the future, not wish-fulfilment in the present. However gloomy things seem, though, there’s always inspiration at hand:

> He started to play the music that came into his head, the first variation of Beethoven’s Opus 109, and whether it came into his head because it suited the moment, or whether, having come into his head, it changed the moment, he did not know, only that it was suddenly very desirable to be a piano-player, impossible not to be one, Beethoven in the soul, to be his medium, his ghost, realizing his incredibly perfect, hesitant, melancholy, haunting tune, so that one was moved all by oneself to a rare and ecstatic state of communication. For Beethoven to nod his head and say, “Yes, that’s what I meant.”

Ruth and Pat are still very young at the end of *Pennington's Heir*. Perhaps that, along with their lingering idealism — their belief that somehow they can make it, in spite of everything — is what makes this series "YA." That's how the spines of my library copies are labelled, anyway. It's a distinction that seems clearer at first than it does on closer inspection: is it defined by the storyline? the age of the characters? the difficulty of the prose? the target market? I started planning this essay well before the Great YA Debate of Spring 2014, in which YA fiction was first declared an embarrassment for adult readers then vociferously defended. It has been impossible not to think about these arguments as I wrote, and it was briefly tempting to seize the moment and frame this piece explicitly as a salvo in the battle. It turns out, however, that I have no interest in writing manifestos. Vast generalizations are the most fatuous and prescriptions the least interesting forms of literary criticism. The argument I would make is implicit in the 4000 words you've already read — and if you're still reading, you have tacitly agreed with me. "I measure the worth of a book," said Leslie Stephen, "by the worth of the friend whom it reveals to me." Such worth is only revealed through reading, which, like playing the piano, is easy to dabble in pleasurably but hard to do well. When we find books that prove both worthy and lasting friends, then regardless of their label, we owe them what Pat offers Beethoven: our attention, our loyalty, maybe even our soul. And, of course, a permanent place on our shelves.

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Rohan Maitzen teaches in the English Department at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She is an editor at *Open Letters Monthly* and blogs at Novel Readings.