

SUCCESS **In LIFE**

**What Famous People's
Lives Reveal**

George Pan Kouloukis

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The Author

George Pan Kouloukakis is an attorney-at-law, a lawyer barrister. Of course, his book here has nothing to do with law; it is the result of a series of observations that everybody could have made after extensive research, provided he/she had experienced the specific events and situations the author has experienced, described in the book. The author is a Greek citizen, born and brought up in Greece, and he is living in Greece. His mother tongue is also Greek; English is his second language. Now retired, he was a member of the Athens Bar Association of Greece and he had provided legal services to the Ionian Bank of Greece, the Greek Electric Railways Company, and other corporations. He is married with two daughters and three grandchildren.

Introduction

Famous people's lives reveal that the good and bad seasons in their lives alternated from good to bad and vice versa according to a *certain pattern*. A good season has given its place to a bad one at a certain moment, and a bad season has given its place to a good one also at a certain moment – and so on.

Great German composer Ludwig van Beethoven, for example, went through a bad period of his life around the age of 32 because he had become totally deaf. Contemplating suicide, he wrote his will. But later, at a certain point indicated in this book, he overcame his hearing problem, was recognized as one of the greatest composers of all time –he wrote nine insuperable symphonies– and became a celebrated member of Viennese society.

Napoleon provides another such an example. During the years 1792 to 1809, he conquered almost all of Europe, was crowned Emperor of France, and lived a life full of grandeur, triumph, and success. But then things reversed, at an also certain point indicated in this book: Napoleon lost all he had achieved, he was defeated at the Battle of Waterloo, and he was exiled ultimately to the remote island of St. Helena.

Those two examples are not the only ones. Lots of more others show the same alternations in the famous people's lives, as revealed in this book. More important is however, that not only the famous people's seasons alternate according to a certain pattern, but also the *ordinary* people's lives alternate according to the *same* certain pattern, as you will see in detail in this book.

The existence of that pattern helps, of course, all of us to know how our own good and bad seasons alternate in our life. Knowing that, however, helps us to live a much better life. The moment you've finished reading this book, you'll be able to learn whether the years just ahead are good or bad for you, and how long this season will last. You'll be able thus to act accordingly: if there is a storm on the horizon, you'll take shelter in time; if sunny days loom ahead, you'll take advantage of it before the opportunity passes. In short, you'll be able to take crucial decisions regarding your career, marriage, family, relationships, and all other life's issues.

You will see among other things, why you mustn't be seized by despair and pessimism when you are in a bad season – fearing that this season will never end. Winston Churchill, for example, failed his exams in school again and again when he was in a bad season of

his life, and at a moment of another of his bad seasons he said: "I am done, I am finished." But later he became prime minister of his country.

You will also see why you can dare when you are in a good season – fate is with you. Christopher Columbus, for example, succeeded in discovering the New World since he was in a good season of his life, despite of the fact that almost everybody – the Spanish royal council included – was skeptical and had rejected his idea. There are many other benefits deriving from the certain pattern the seasons alternate in our lives, as you will see in detail in the book.

Before I continue, however, I must explain how the idea to write this book came to me. Like most of us, I had observed that in my life a certain obvious alternation of my seasons from good to bad ones and vice versa had occurred. A good season has given its place to a bad one at a certain moment, and a bad season has given its place to a good one also at a certain moment – and so on. I asked myself then whether these alternations happened according to a certain pattern or irregularly, without any pattern. For that purpose, I ought, I said, to examine what happens in the lives of other people. Have their lives alternated the same way as in my own life?

To find out what was happening in the lives of others, I decided to examine some biographies. But since biographies on ordinary persons usually don't exist, or they are very few, I realized that only biographies of famous people I could examine. That work took me many years of research. Finally, the outcome was unbelievable. The results derived from the biographies all confirmed that the alternations of good and bad seasons in my own life always occurred exactly as in the lives of the famous people I have studied – they had occurred according to a certain pattern, that is.

We start revealing that pattern by seeing in the first Chapter that follows, how the good and bad season alternated in the life of great German composer Ludwig van Beethoven.

Chapter 1. Ludwig van Beethoven

Beethoven was born in 1770. We don't know enough about the first five years of his life to know whether it was a good or bad season. But from 1776 on, we know he had a pleasant childhood. Though his family was poor, and his father was strict and severe, he was lucky enough to have a devoted mother, and he spent happy hours in her presence. He also had many friends and many opportunities to have fun.*

* I have taken all the facts and details in this chapter from Gino Pugneti's *Beethoven*, published in Greek by Fytrakis Publications, Great Men of All Seasons series, Athens, 1965. There are also Beethoven's biographies in English which you can examine to be confirmed for the truth of this chapter's facts, as for example: a) Barry Cooper's *Beethoven*, Oxford Press, 2001, or b) Maynard Solomon's *Beethoven*, Schirmer Books, 2001.

In 1778, little Beethoven recognized as "a child prodigy:" he gave his first public concert in Bonn, where he was born. The following year, he began to study with a well-known musician –a director of the National Theater– who immediately recognized his talent and took him under his wing. After two years of instruction, in 1781 –when Beethoven was only 11– he composed three sonatas and one concert for the piano, all of which were published immediately. The same year, he had another reason to be very happy: he became acquainted with a family in Bonn that offered a supportive environment and nurtured his musical talent. Their home was a "refuge for happiness,"¹ as he put it.

In 1784, Beethoven became financially independent –while only 14 years old. That year he was appointed deputy organist in Bonn's court, with an excellent salary. Thus he could support his whole family. His father had become an alcoholic, his mother was seriously ill, and there were two younger brothers to care for.

Three years later, in 1787, Beethoven's big dream came true: he was able to leave Bonn for Vienna. Vienna was a cultural magnet at the time, where all the arts and especially music flourished. Bands "played in the streets and the whole city was awash in music,"² while "the theaters and the academies were always overflowing."³ There, the young Beethoven met Mozart for the first time and received the first major encouragement of his life from him. He improvised a composition on the piano, but Mozart was skeptical because he believed that the young man had previously memorized the composition. Beethoven then asked Mozart to choose the theme himself – and he improvised again. When Beethoven finished, Mozart said, "This young man will surprise the world someday."⁴

But Beethoven's first stay in Vienna lasted only a few months, since he became the head of his family and had to return to Bonn. That year his mother died, while his father was still an alcoholic. That bad event didn't change Beethoven's good season, however: he soon managed to be granted a substantial allowance by the state with which to take care of his father as well as his two younger brothers.

In 1789, Beethoven met Prince Maximilian, who held him in high esteem and received him under his protection. With the prince's help, Beethoven enrolled that year –at the age of

19– in the university, where he had an opportunity to study the works of the philosophers and writers of his era: Kant, Schiller, Goethe, and others. The next year, Beethoven's first important musical compositions were published, and he began to be recognized as a composer.

At the age of 21, in 1791, he entered high society. He was received at the most exclusive salons, where he taught music, and moved in fashionable court circles. A year later he met the great composer Haydn, who heard him playing a serenade on the piano. Enthusiastic, Haydn invited Beethoven to Vienna. A jubilant Beethoven again left Bonn for Vienna –this time as Haydn's student. Another dream had become a reality. He was now 22 years old.

The Bad Season from 1792 on

In Vienna, however, Beethoven's experiences did not meet his expectations. Haydn, no longer young, had too many other preoccupations, and turned out to be indifferent to his gifted student. Disappointed, Beethoven had to start studying with other, lesser-known musicians in 1793. The next year he was able to accept the hospitality of a prince, but even that was short-lived, because Beethoven found the atmosphere in the prince's palace uncongenial. To support himself, he was now obliged to give music lessons to a diverse array of students.

The big shock in 1794 was more personal: Beethoven began to realize he had a hearing problem. He was only 24. And in 1795, another cause of worry was added: Beethoven gave in Vienna his first major concert, performing his Concerto No 2 for piano and orchestra. It was a novel, stunning piece that made people think: Beethoven was bringing a more philosophical perspective to music. But the Viennese, accustomed to joyful music and entertainment, had serious reservations.

Beethoven continued giving concerts in other cities –Nuremberg, Berlin, Dresden, Prague. But though he had great success, at the end of one of those concerts he realized with terror that his hearing had become worse. He began experiencing an incessant buzzing in his ears that sounding like a waterfall. And he couldn't always understand speech clearly. At first he kept quite about his problem.

But over the next several years (1797-1800), the situation became catastrophic: Beethoven became almost totally deaf. The "winter" has entered now Beethoven's life. While the previous bad years can be described as "autumn," the years that followed are real "winter." In 1801 Beethoven decided to confide in a close friend: "I am extremely distressed," he wrote to him, continuing that: "the most vital part of myself –my hearing– has become impaired and is steadily worsening. And I do not know whether I will ever be cured."⁵

To his doctor he also wrote: "For the last two years I have avoided any social interaction –I cannot tell people that I am deaf. It is terrible."⁶ In 1802, his doctor advised him to spend the summer recuperating in the countryside. But "it was a summer full of despair."⁷ Beethoven composed a letter to his brothers that was meant to serve as a kind of will, with the proviso that it be read after his death. He was only 32 years old. The document said, among other things: "I want to end my life, but the music prevents me from doing so. For so long, I have never felt any real happiness. I live as if I am in exile, since it is impossible for me to participate in the company of others, to talk with friends, to hear and be heard. I feel I am indeed a miserable creature."⁸

The same year, a new reason for despair was added to Beethoven's life. The woman he loved, Giulietta Guicciardi –said to have been “frivolous and self centered”⁹– abandoned him after a two-year relationship. His despair over the lost relationship, combined with his illness, created the worst crisis of his life so far. Beethoven was on the brink of suicide. He didn't know that his bad season would follow by a good one at a certain time.

Things were not much better in the musical arena, normally his only consolation. In 1805 Beethoven's melodrama *Fidelio* was performed –the only opera he wrote. Though it would later be considered a masterpiece, the initial production was a total failure; it closed after only three days. This failure was repeated the following year. *Fidelio* was presented again, in a new form, but only for two performances –the theater was almost empty, the earnings insignificant.

Things only got worse between 1807 and 1809. Beethoven experienced another disappointment in love. He fell in love with a young, aristocratic Hungarian woman, Theresa von Brunschwick. Though they became engaged, her mother disapproved, and did not allow them to see each other. Finally they broke off the engagement.

Beethoven was also beset by financial problems. In 1808 he decided to leave Vienna to accept position as a choir director in Kassel. But some of his friends interceded and helped him get a state allowance, so he could stay in Vienna. In 1809, however, the situation worsened: Napoleon's army seized Vienna after a violent attack that convulsed the city. The “royal court and all the nobility abandoned the city, while in the streets and homes chaos prevailed.”¹⁰

Beethoven “found shelter in a pub, covering his aching ears with pillows to avoid the deafening report of the cannons.”¹¹ Ordinary life in Vienna came to a standstill. The currency “became worthless, prices soared, and inflation loomed.”¹² Beethoven's state allowance almost evaporated, and he often didn't even have enough money for food. At the same time, he suffered “from excruciating abdominal pain.”¹³ Shabbily dressed, “ill, and stooped over, he attended the funeral of his former teacher Haydn, under the menacing guard of armed French soldiers.”¹⁴

But at some point in 1809, this bad season finally ended for Beethoven.

The New Good Season from 1809 on

Just after this season began –in 1810– Beethoven finally achieved a major goal: he became acquainted with a charming, clever woman, Bettina Brentano, who would devote herself to him, and would make up for all the failed relationships he had experienced with other women. “Being close to Beethoven,” she wrote in a letter to Goethe, “causes me to forget the world.”¹⁵

The most important fact however, is that in this favorable season Beethoven managed to triumph over his cruel fate –over the problem of his deafness. This problem stopped bothering him, because he found a solution: he would hold with his teeth a wooden hearing aid –basically a long, slim piece of wood– and touch it to the piano; this allowed him to perceive the sound of the music through the mouth to the inner ear.

In other ways too, the good days returned: In 1812 Beethoven became acquainted with Goethe, and a comfortable friendship evolved between them despite their age difference (Beethoven was 42, Goethe 62). When they strolled through the streets of Vienna, people would bow –something that annoyed Goethe, but for Beethoven it was heaven sent: “Don't

worry, Your Excellency,” he once said to Goethe jokingly, “maybe the bows are only for me.”¹⁶

In 1813, Napoleon began to lose power, and Beethoven, full of enthusiasm, started to compose the *Victory of Wellington* –an immediate success. The following year Beethoven performed that work at the congress that took place in Vienna after Napoleon’s downfall. The czar of Russia, the emperor of Austria, the kings of Denmark, Prussia, and Bavaria, “princes, ministers, diplomats, and other statesmen”¹⁷ were all present, and they paid homage to Beethoven. It was a concert triumph.

From then on, Beethoven’s life was glorious. The years that followed can be described as “summer” in his life compared with the previous good years which were rather “springtime.” In 1814, Beethoven’s melodrama *Fidelio* –a failure a few years earlier– was performed again in Vienna, this time in revised better form –the good season in which he was had helped very much – and it was a tremendous success. Repeat performances of *Fidelio* were held in other European cities, including Prague, Leipzig, and Berlin, always to great acclaim.

As Beethoven’s reputation reached its apogee, he began to earn a great deal of money. His performances attracted audiences of thousands, among them many celebrities. The Austrian government offered state-owned halls for his performances. And friends began to surround him and draw him into an active social life. He frequented the various cafés and restaurants of Vienna, where the previously gloomy Beethoven became unrecognizably gregarious, telling jokes and drinking champagne. He walked the streets of Vienna, stopping in shops to browse or buy things and talk with ordinary people.

In Vienna’s central park, the Prater, children would offer him flowers. After his walk, Beethoven would meet his friends in the park’s noisy cafés, where “amidst cigarette smoke and the smell of alcohol, all the artistic and intellectual problems of the times were solved.”¹⁸ To communicate, he would hand a notebook to his companions and have them write down their questions or comments. He would respond orally with ease and humor.

In this good season, too, the women who had previously ignored him began to fill his life. They were young, beautiful, and from the upper social echelons. His biographers report that there were at least fifteen of them: besides Bettina Brentano, they included Dorothy von Ertmann, Marianne von Westerholt, Eleonore von Breunig, Rachel von Ense, and Josephine von Brunschwick (the sister of Theresa von Brunschwick, to whom Beethoven had been engaged in 1807, until her mother cut it off). Giulietta Guicciardi –the Italian woman who had abandoned him in 1802, leading him to contemplate suicide– also returned, but Beethoven was no longer interested.

In the professional arena, Beethoven had a prodigious musical output: he finished his 32 sonatas for the piano, composed his famous oratorio *Missa Solemnis*, and finished part of the *Ninth Symphony*. The oratorio *Missa Solemnis* –“Beethoven’s hymn to God”¹⁹– was completed in 1820. From then on, Beethoven had a deeply spiritual outlook.

The same year (1820), the city of Vienna proclaimed Beethoven an honorary citizen of the city, an honor that thrilled him. In 1825 –at the age of 55– Beethoven arrived at the high point of his life: his *Ninth Symphony* was performed in Vienna and was an unprecedented triumph. The audience went wild, and Beethoven was profoundly moved. When the concert was over, several theater workers “had to carry him out: he had fainted!”²⁰

The New Bad Season After 1825

Starting in 1825, Beethoven began facing serious health problems: arthritis and eye ailments. He remained at home, often in bed. He was forced to ask his brother for help, and retreated to his brother's home in the countryside, staying in a small room and subsisting on an inadequate diet. The next year (1826), things got worse. Beethoven's friends abandoned him, he gave up composing, and his works stopped being performed. After the *Ninth Symphony's* success in 1825, no other concerts featured his works. Deeply disappointed, he complained in his diary: "Vienna's high society seems interested only in dancing, horseback riding, and attending the ballet."²¹

Beethoven tried to get all of his works published, but without success –his bad season didn't allow it. The royal court that previously supported him now ignored him. Late in 1826, on a chilly December day, he abandoned his brother's "lukewarm hospitality"²² in the countryside and returned to Vienna –on the "milkman's cart,"²³ because his brother, despite having his own coach, had not made it available to him. As a result, Beethoven arrived in Vienna seriously ill with pneumonia.

After a few days his health took a turn for the worse: his feet became swollen and he suffered from abdominal pain. On January 3, 1827, he wrote his will. Bedridden, he complained to two friends visiting him, that he had been left alone in life, without family members to care for him. Besides him was a portrait of Theresa von Brunschwick, the woman he had been engaged to two decades earlier.

On March 24, 1827, the end came. Beethoven asked the two friends attending him for Rhein wine. But it was too late. Two days later, on March 26, 1827, the great Beethoven died –at the age of 57– while a violent storm battered Vienna.

Conclusion

From Beethoven's life derives that in 1776 a good season began for him. Then, a bad season started in 1792. A new good season began in 1809 while another bad season started in 1825. We'll see later what that means.

We also see later why Beethoven would not have contemplated suicide at age of 32, because he had become totally deaf, if he knew the revelation we'll see later in this book. Meanwhile, we'll see in the next chapter what derives from the life of great Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi.

Chapter 2. Giuseppe Verdi

Giuseppe Verdi was born in 1813 – that is 14 years before Beethoven died. We do not know much about his childhood and youth years until the age of 18 to say whether these years were good or bad. We only know that he was born in a small village near Parma, Italy, his father was a grocer, when he was eight his father bought him a piano, and at the age of 12, he was appointed an organist in the village church.*

* All the facts and details in this chapter derive from Gino Pugneti's *Verdi*, published in Greek by Fytrakis Publications, Great Men of All Seasons series, Athens, 1966. There are also Verdi's biographies in English, as for example: a) Mary Jane Phillips-Matz's *Verdi: A Biography*, Oxford University Press, 1993, or b) William Weaver's *Verdi: A Documentary Study*, W.W. Norton and Company, 1977.

But we do know that from 1832 on, when Verdi was 19, he was in a bad season of his life. A wealthy merchant friend of Verdi's father's was aware of his great talent and offered him a music scholarship in Milan. Accompanied by his father and his teacher, Verdi arrived in Milan in May 1832. A great disappointment, however, awaited him there: he applied to the Milan Conservatory, but after hearing him playing the piano, the school rejected his application.

He was a "foreigner," they said, he was above the age of 14, and he had a "rural look."¹ He also seemed inadequately trained. Deeply disappointed, the young Verdi "felt uprooted and lost in the big city."² Finally, he enrolled in a different private school. The same year (1832), he experienced another blow: his beloved sister Josephine died. It was the first great sorrow of his life.

The following year, 1833, Verdi encountered one more injustice. The Philharmonic Orchestra of Busseto –a small town near his village– was without a conductor and invited Verdi to take that position. The church authorities rejected him, however, and "appointed a candidate of their own choice."³ The scandal even attracted the attention of the local government, and a major uproar ensued. Though finally Verdi got the job in 1835, the incident caused him deep wound.

After two years, in 1837, a great misfortune found Verdi. From his marriage to Margherita Barezzi in 1836, he had a daughter, Virginia, whom he adored. But Virginia died when she was only a few months old –in 1837. In a dispirited condition, Verdi isolated himself in his home. He resigned from his position with the Philharmonic Orchestra of Busseto –a position he had fought so hard for– and in 1838, he left for Milan.

In Milan, Verdi faced tremendous difficulties: he was jobless, had no money, and often could "only eat once a day in miserable inns."⁴ As if all that were not enough, in 1839 his second child –a young son– died. Verdi's life became unbearable. Despite all that sorrow, he had to compose lighthearted music to earn a living. He was commissioned –in 1840– to write *Un Giorno di Regno (King for a Day)* for the impresario Merelli, a famous Italian manager.

The bad season hasn't yet finished for Verdi. In 1840, he received the most tragic blow of all: his beloved wife, Margherita Barezzi, died. Grief stricken, Verdi fled Milan for Busseto,

so that he could find solace. But impresario Merelli reminded him of his obligation to complete *King for a Day*, so Verdi had to return to Milan.

He would have been better off not returning. *King for a Day* was performed in La Scala on September 5, 1840, but it was a catastrophe. After pandemonium broke out, with the audience whistling and shouting its disapproval, the opera ceased being performed the same day. Verdi was devastated. He became reclusive and lost his desire to compose music.

In late 1840, Merelli –who never lost faith in Verdi–, asked him whether he would like to compose the music for a work titled *Nabuchodonosor*. Verdi refused. But Merelli insisted, putting the libretto for that work in Verdi’s pocket. Half-heartedly, he tried to start composing. But “the notes weren’t appearing”⁵ –or if they were, they were full of sorrow, like the composer’s soul. However, he finished it in 1841.

The Good Season from 1842 on

Rehearsals on the opera *Nabuchodonosor* –or *Nabucco* as it turned to be named in the meantime– started early in 1842. But immediately it became clear that Verdi had composed a masterpiece. *Nabucco* was performed for the first time in La Scala in Milan on March 9, 1842. What followed was an unprecedented triumph. The enraptured audience responded with a standing ovation, “demanding –with a frenzy of applause– repeated encores of the moving chorus song ‘Va, pensiero, sull’ ali dorate’ ”⁶ which still causes shivers of emotion.

Verdi –now 29– had suddenly become famous. People were singing the chorus song from *Nabucco* in the streets, while “hats and neckties with Verdi’s name inscribed on them”⁷ were sold everywhere. Milan’s wealthiest families opened their homes to him. The same year (1842), the composer became acquainted with a famous soprano, Josephina Strepponi, and developed a lasting relationship with her that persisted until her death in 1897.

During the next nine years, between 1843 and 1851, Verdi composed thirteen operas, which were performed in all the big cities of Italy –Milan, Rome, Venice, Naples, Trieste– as well as in London, and all had great success. The first of those operas was *I Lombardi*, which was performed at La Scala on February 11, 1843. The day of its premiere, enthusiastic crowds mobbed the theater, and the success of that opera was similar to *Nabucco*.

Ernani followed in 1844, based on Victor Hugo’s work of the same name. It premiered in Venice on March 9, 1844, to great acclaim. Exuberant Venetians “lifted Verdi to their shoulders and carried him triumphantly around Saint Mark’s square.”⁸ With the money he earned from *Ernani*, Verdi was able to buy a small farm near his village.

Jeanne d’ Arc (Giovanna d’ Arco) followed in 1845, with equally great success. Verdi had now so much money that he acquired a mansion in Busseto. Other accomplishments included *Attila* in 1846, and *I Masnadieri (The Bandits)* in 1847. The *Bandits’* premiere was held in London with a particular fanfare: Queen Victoria and almost all the members of Parliament were present. The opera was a big hit, and Verdi made staggering amounts of money. He bought a large farm with woods and vineyards near Busseto, and an apartment in Paris, where he retreated from time to time to relax with his companion, Josephina Strepponi.

Tension between Italy and Austria was mounting in this period, and to stir up patriotic sentiments, Verdi composed *La Battaglia di Legnano* (*The Battle of Legnano*). That opera was first performed in Rome in 1849. Tickets for the premiere were sold out. It was another smash hit. Ecstatic, the audience demanded as an encore “the repetition of the entire fourth act.”⁹ Verdi had become a national hero. At the end of the same year, a Verdi opera was performed in Naples, too: *Luisa Miller*, based on Schiller’s tragedy of the same name.

At this point, the “summer” entered Verdi’s life. While the previous good years can be described as “springtime,” the years that followed are like “summer.” During the next eight years (1851-1859), Verdi composed his extraordinary masterpieces *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore*, *La Traviata*, *Les Vêpres Siciliennes*, *Simon Boccanegra*, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, and others –and he arrived at the culmination of his glory. He finished the first of those masterpieces, *Rigoletto*, early in 1851, and its premiere was staged in Venice on March 11 of the same year. All night, Venice’s canals resounded with the voices of gondoliers’ singing “Feather in the Wind,”¹⁰ a song well-known even now. After 21 performances in Venice, *Rigoletto* began to be performed all over the world.

In 1851, Verdi also began to compose his next masterpiece *Il Trovatore*, which he completed the following year. The premiere was held in Rome in January 1853, again to great acclaim. Two months later, his third masterpiece –*La Traviata*– premiered in Venice. It was again an instant hit and was even performed in America.

In 1855, Verdi finished *Les Vêpres Siciliennes*. Its premiere was held in L’ Opera de Paris; in 1856 it was performed in La Scala in Milan with tremendous success. Its ardent patriotism stirred the souls of Italians. In 1857, *Simon Boccanegra* was performed in Venice, and the same year, Verdi composed *Un Ballo in Maschera*. The latter opera was performed in Rome in February 1859 with great success –“the ticket prices were seven times normal.”¹¹

Verdi had arrived at the pinnacle of his career; at the age of 46 he was considered Europe’s greatest composer. To make his success complete, he married early 1859 the woman with whom he had lived for the last 17 years, Josephina Strepponi.

The New Bad Season from 1859 on

From 1859, however, Verdi began to be shaken by a profound moral crisis –a crisis that lasted for a number of years. He isolated himself on his farm in Busseto, and became preoccupied with ordinary farm chores. He rose “at daybreak, took care of the farm animals (horses, dogs, and so on), bought cows and other animals at the local market, and looked after the harvest.”¹²

“There is not a place uglier than this one,” he complained in a letter, “but where else can I find solitude for thinking?”¹³ Especially during the winter, time stood still, and the tediousness was unbearable. Verdi’s connection with the larger world was through the mail. To alleviate his boredom, he took interminable walks in the area around his farm, accompanied only by his dogs –his precious assistants, as he called them.

Verdi also spent quite a bit of time composing music during that season. Still, he managed to compose one work every four or five years –in contrast to his previous output of one work a year. For a while, he was distracted by politics, because he was elected to the Parliament of Turin in 1861. But he didn’t know he was in a bad season of his life: political wrangling left him disillusioned, and so he stopped attending the sessions.

The next year, Verdi finished his work *La Forza del Destino* (*The Power of Destiny*), which the Russian Theater of Petrograd had commissioned. But when the opera was performed –after many obstacles and delays– in November 1862 in Petrograd, it had little success. More than five years passed before Verdi finished another work. In March 1867, *Don Carlos* was performed for the first time in Paris. What followed, however, was a major disappointment for the composer: the critics accused him –unjustifiably– of borrowing from Wagner’s music. Deeply wounded, he closeted himself in a hotel before he could face the public again.

The same year, Verdi suffered two more blows. First, his father died, which had a devastating effect on the composer. Soon afterward, his father-in-law (his first wife’s father), his benefactor Antonio Barezzi to whom Verdi owed so much also died. At the funeral, the eulogy was extraordinarily moving: “My second father, who loved me so much and whom I loved dearly, is gone,”¹⁴ Verdi lamented.

Now the “winter” entered Verdi’s life. Four more years would pass before he was able to finish another work. At the end of 1871 –after numerous delays– his opera *Aïda* was performed in Cairo. The performance lasted more than eight hours –from 7:00 p.m. to 3.00 a.m. – and was attended “by odd and variegated audience members ranging from Christian Coptics and Jews to many women from the harem.”¹⁵ But the composer wasn’t satisfied with his work. For the first time in his life, he had decided not to be present to conduct the performance himself.

The same year, the great conductor and Verdi’s close friend Angelus Mariani, who had conducted many of Verdi’s operas, abandoned him and joined the ranks of Wagner’s supporters. The Wagner camp was extremely antagonistic toward Verdi. Mariani’s decision to conduct Wagner’s opera *Lohengrin* in Bologna was a blow to Verdi. He now felt an immense loneliness and sorrow. He expressed these feelings in his next work, the mournful *Messa da Requiem*, performed in May 1874, in the church of St. Mark in Milan.

But finally, this bad season for Verdi ended.

The New Good Season from 1875 on

In 1875, Verdi’s sorrowful *Requiem* suddenly realized enormous success. After having conquered all of Italy, it did the same in the rest of Europe, while in London an “unbelievable chorus of 1,200 voices”¹⁶ would participate in the performance, a fact that moved the critics to write rave reviews.

Verdi had shaken his loneliness, and –now aged 62– again began to enjoy the delights of life. He became acquainted with a young intellectual, Arrigo Boito, who shared the pleasures of culture with him, exposing him to the new intellectual currents and fashions. Verdi acquired a new lease on life, and a prolific new period began for him.

In 1876, Verdi conducted –personally this time– his *Aïda* in Paris, and soon the opera was performed triumphantly all over Europe. From now on, the composer began writing new works, though each now took him many years to complete because of his advancing age. In 1881 he rewrote *Simon Boccanegra*, which was performed that same year in its new form with great success.

From 1879 furthermore, he had started setting the music for Shakespeare’s *Otello*, which he finally finished in 1886. The premiere took place at La Scala in 1887. Celebrities from

all over Europe arrived for the performance, and tickets prices reached unprecedented heights. At the end of the performance, the audience's cries of joy could be heard blocks away. When Verdi came out of the theater overcome with emotion, the people "unhitched the horses of his carriage and drew it themselves to his hotel."¹⁷

Between 1888 and 1892, Verdi composed another masterpiece, *Falstaff*, again based on Shakespeare. But now, he worked only a few hours a week. It was "as if he was in a long summer vacation,"¹⁸ his biographers say.

The New Bad Season After 1892

In 1892 Verdi was 79 years old. The idea of death, therefore, was often on his mind. Two years later, when *Falstaff* was performed in La Scala, he reiterated Shakespeare's words: "Everything has finished, old John. Go away now."¹⁹ More disturbing was the fact that Verdi's romanticism was losing its luster in Italy. Verdi found himself increasingly dismissed as old-fashioned. He began to question the quality of his early works and discouraged their revival. Many of his works had virtually vanished from the stage; many of his greatest achievements were unknown.

In 1897, Verdi was left alone in life: his beloved companion, his wife Josephina Strepponi, the "divine gift"²⁰ as he called her, died. From then on, his health crumbled, and the year 1900 found him confined to a wheelchair. In 1901, the great composer—one of the greatest in the world—departed from this life, at the age of 88.

Conclusion

Verdi's life shows that his good and bad seasons alternated in the dates 1842, 1859, 1875, and 1892. In 1842 a good season begun for him, then a bad season started in 1859. A new good season begun in 1875 while another bad season started in 1892.

As you can recall, Beethoven's dates alternated in 1776, 1792, 1809, 1825, as we've seen in Chapter 1. Connecting Beethoven's dates to those of Verdi, we find this row of dates: 1776, 1792, 1809, 1825, 1842, 1859, 1875, and 1892.

We observe, however, that between one of these dates there are 16-17 years. Between 1776 and 1792 of Beethoven's days there are 16 years while between 1792 and 1809 there are 17 years. The same also happens in the following dates: between 1809 and 1825 there are again 16 years. Also, between 1825 and 1842 there are 17 years, while between 1842 and 1859 there are 17 years, and between 1859 and 1875 there are 16 years. The same also happens in the following two dates: between 1875 and 1892 there are again 17 years.

We'll see later what all that means. We also see later why Verdi had not to worry when he applied to enter the Milan Conservatory and the school rejected his application, if he knew the revelation we'll see later in this book. Meanwhile in the next chapter we'll see what derives from the turbulent life of Pablo Picasso, the famous Spanish painter.

Chapter 3. Pablo Picasso

Pablo Picasso was born in Malaga, Spain, in 1881 –that is, 68 years after Verdi. When he was 11 years old –in 1892– a bad season was underway for him. Picasso's family moved to La Coruna, a town on the Atlantic Ocean, where they lived for about four years. There, rain and fog prevailed almost every day, in contrast to sunny and hot Malaga. "The rain ... and the wind," Picasso wrote in a melancholy tone as a young child, "have begun, and will continue until Coruna is no more."^{1*}

* My source of all details in Picasso's biography is Lael Westenbaker's (and the editors' of Time-Life Books) *The World of Picasso*, Time-Life Books, Library of Art series, Amsterdam, 1976, European edition. For further reading you can see Patrick O'Brian's *Pablo Ruiz Picasso: A Biography*, Collins, 1976.

After 1895, Picasso's family moved to Barcelona. There, Picasso, now 14, entered art school and started producing his first drawings. Almost immediately, conflict with his father arose. The father –also an amateur painter– felt his son's drawings were not up to par. Not surprisingly, Picasso wanted to get away from his father's influence. In 1897, he left for Madrid, with financial help from one of his uncles. There he enrolled in the School of Fine Arts, but almost immediately he dropped out. His uncle then stopped supporting him, and Picasso became penniless. He didn't have enough money for food, and in 1898 he became seriously ill from scarlet fever.

A year later, Picasso was forced to return to Barcelona. His moods alternated between joy and despair. In 1900, he resumed wandering: he left Barcelona for London. But he didn't get farther than Paris, which he decided to explore for a few months. In the Christmas season of 1900, he returned to Barcelona. It was a disastrous homecoming. Picasso's unkempt hair, his "bohemian" attire, and especially his paintings, aroused his father's ire. To escape his father's wrath, he fled to his uncle's home in Malaga again.

But the situation there was equally bad: his uncle demanded that Picasso cut his hair and begin painting "naturally." Not able to find peace anywhere, Picasso went back to Madrid. There, he found a friend from Barcelona –an anarchist named Francisco de Asis Soler– and they both decided to publish a magazine for which Picasso would provide the illustrations. But after a few issues, the magazine folded.

Picasso again left Madrid in the spring of 1901, heading for Paris. On the way he stopped in Barcelona to say goodbye to his family. But his father had become extremely hostile; the rift between them would never be bridged. Not long after that, the son stopped using his father's name –Ruiz– and kept only the name of his mother: Picasso.

In Paris Picasso faced extreme hardship. He was unable to sell any of his paintings and he became more desperate from day to day. At the end of 1901, the prodigal son's life continued: he was forced to go back to his family in Barcelona again so he would at least have something to eat.

Picasso stayed in Barcelona for three years. Those years were full of depression, which was reflected in his work. He painted beggars, prostitutes, and other lonely and dejected

street people. These paintings were dominated by the color blue, which suited their themes and Picasso's mood.

In the spring of 1904 Picasso became restless again, so he returned to Paris. He stayed in a miserable ground floor room with a rotten floor, without ventilation, and without heat. He was as poor as many of the "bleu people" he was painting. He tried to sell some of his works, but the results were disappointing. He made contact with an agent who handled artworks, an unscrupulous former circus' clown named Clovis Sagot, who used him and bought his works for almost nothing. He had another bad experience with the owner of a furniture shop who wanted to sell some of his paintings. This man who had a drinking problem and knew nothing about art, bought Picasso's drawings "wholesale" for a penny.

In the meantime Picasso got involved with a young woman who lived next door, Fernande Olivier. And he now tried to make his works "commercial" in an effort to sell them. Two years after arriving in Paris, in 1906, he produced *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*, featuring five nude women with deformed bodies and animal-like faces. When he showed the painting to his friends, it caused a stir. No one had a good word to say about it. Matisse, the great French painter, said that that painting "would sink Picasso."² Deeply disappointed, he put the painting in a corner so nobody could see it.

But Picasso continued with his bizarre paintings. In the summer of 1908 he went to the countryside near Paris, and on his return he brought some paintings with country scenes. They were, however, all distorted landscapes in which you couldn't tell "where the grass ends and the sky begins."³

The Good Season from 1908 on

From the first year of this season Picasso at last began to earn a good income from his paintings, and he could in 1909 go for a summer vacation with Fernande to a small village in Spain. In the fall of the same year, he abandoned the miserable room he had lived for the past five years, and moved with Fernande to "a large apartment ... with a living room, dining room, bedroom, and a separate [room for a] studio"⁴ –in one of the best sections of Paris. He furnished this in great luxury, and decorated with expensive carpets and statues. He also hired a maid, and started receiving wealthy friends and others at receptions on Sunday afternoons.

In 1909, Picasso inaugurated a new kind of painting –cubism. This was a bizarre kind of painting: his works emphasized objects and faces divided into squares and other geometric forms. But he was in a good season of his life: soon these paintings made him world famous. The following year, he produced a great number of those works, which were snatched up immediately by collectors. In 1911, Picasso's paintings were exhibited in the Salon des Indépendants in Paris. The cubist movement spread rapidly, and collectors from New York, Munich, and London proudly showed off their collections of Picasso's cubist works.

The same year, Picasso ended his relationship with Fernande, after they'd been together for seven years. He immediately became involved with another woman, Marcelle Humbert (or Eva, as he called her). At the same time that he was beginning a new life with her, he moved his studio to a more exclusive section of Paris: Montparnasse.

In 1914, World War I began. Though the wartime situation was very difficult for many people, for Picasso it was not. Most of his friends went to the army –and he never saw many of them again– but because he had Spanish citizenship, he was not required to

serve in the military. On the contrary, he spent the summer of 1914 with Eva at Avignon, where he continued with his cubist paintings –usually with vivid colors now.

Though at the end of 1915 Eva became seriously ill –probably with cancer– and died the following year, Picasso soon found a substitute: Olga Khokhlova, a Russian ballet dancer and a general's daughter, whom he had met while doing the costumes and set design for a ballet performance. In July 1918, Olga and Picasso were married.

From now on a “summer” entered Picasso's life – the previous good years can be described as “springtime.” The ballet not only brought Olga to Picasso; it also brought him huge profits and fame. His works were now eagerly bought up, and his income was so substantial that he and Olga could move to a luxurious apartment in the fashionable Champs Élysées area. Their apartment was decorated according to the latest fashion. And paintings by Renoir, Cézanne, and other famous artists hung on the walls. Picasso rented another similar apartment upstairs for his studio.

He could no longer be described as a bohemian; by the age of 37, he had become bourgeois. He wore tailored suits, had a handkerchief tucked into his breast pocket, sported a gold watch with a chain attached to his buttonhole, and had meticulously groomed hair. He could often be seen walking his wife's Russian wolfhounds, while she spent freely on whatever pleased her.

World War I ended in 1918. The next year, Picasso accompanied the ballet to London. London was a triumph for him: the English were fascinated by his decorations for the ballet, and he was invited to receptions everywhere. With his morale at a high point in 1920, Picasso depicted whatever pleased him: he painted his old love, the clowns, and his new one, the dancers, as well as the bathers by the sea and the peasants in the countryside. He employed a variety of styles, ranging from realism to cubism.

For Picasso the next five years between 1921 and 1925 were full of money, comfort, and pleasure. He was deprived of nothing during those years, while he was constantly invited to the receptions and dances of the Parisian nobility. He spent the summers in the most expensive French resorts –for example, at Cannes on the Riviera.

The New Bad Season from 1925 on

Beginning in 1925, Picasso became, according to his biographers, “possessed by some great inner rage.”⁵ He began painting nightmarish works, depicting figures with the faces of monsters, rotten teeth, naked human bones, and twisted limbs –all for no apparent reason. The first of those works was done in 1925. It was *The Three Dancers*, showing figures with dislocated bodies and displaced noses, mouths, hands, and breasts –a work that revealed his own fragmented mental state, a state of perpetual nightmare.

That situation continued into the next years. In 1927 he painted the *Seated Woman*, depicting another disconnected, menacing figure, while in 1929 he produced the *Woman in an Armchair*, having only a “suspicion” of a human head, with displaced breasts, a gaping jaw, jagged teeth like a shark's, and a confusion of limbs that made it impossible to tell “which of these limbs are arms, [and] which are legs.”⁶ In 1930, he painted another seated woman (seated women were the subjects of most of his works in this period). Called the *Seated Bather*, this painting again shows a nightmarish, distorted figure, with pincer-like jaws and sharp teeth. In short, the theme is pure brutality.

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