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## Moonlight Sonata: Deafness in Three Movements

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# Moonlight Sonata: Deafness in Three Movements

## **Abstract**

This is a film review of *Moonlight Sonata: Deafness in Three Movements* (2019) directed by Irene Taylor Brodsky.

## **Keywords**

Disability, Ableism, Deafness

## **Author Notes**

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**Moonlight Sonata: Deafness in Three Movements (2019), dir. Irene Taylor Brodsky**

*Who gets to define a full life? What do we need to communicate and connect with others?*

*What truly limits us?*

These are just a few of the existential queries raised for me by Irene Taylor Brodsky's latest documentary, *Moonlight Sonata: Deafness in Three Movements* which premiered at Sundance and will soon be available on HBO. There will also be public screenings as well as an outreach and engagement campaign (Brodsky is known for her activist filmmaking).

*Moonlight Sonata: Deafness in Three Movements* is a decade-long intergenerational journey focusing on Brodsky's son Jonas, who loses his hearing at about 3 years of age and Brodsky's deaf parents, Sally and Paul. The third "movement" is Beethoven himself and his *Moonlight Sonata*; however his music serves as more glue and inspiration than a distinct movement. This is a highly personal story of one family as they face deafness, hearing, dementia,

and life. While Jonas' journey provides the film's arc, I was most moved by the senior challenges faced by Brodsky's deaf parents as their lives become increasingly constricted, yet still meaningful, as they age.

Brodsky is an Academy Award–nominated, Peabody Award–winning, and Emmy-winning filmmaker. Her first documentary, *Hear and Now*, chronicled her deaf parents getting their cochlear implants and won the Audience Award at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival. Her feature documentary *Beware the Slenderman* was nominated for an Emmy (2018) and earned Critics' Choice Award nominations for best director and best documentary.



Cast and Crew of *Moonlight Sonata: Deafness in Three Movements* at the Windrider Forum  
(Photo by Jeanette Reedy Solano)

Although religion is conspicuously absent in this film, Brodsky gladly came to speak with the Christian-based Windrider Forum at Sundance. She spoke to Windrider cohorts about how vulnerable she felt making this film having to constantly juggle being a mom, a daughter, and an artist in this project. Religion does not seem to be part of this family's journey, yet ontological questions are raised and her work has long touched upon religious and spiritual themes. For

example: her photography book, *Buddhas in Disguise* (which emerged from her work as a guide in Kathmandu, Nepal) became the basis for her first documentary made in 1993 with the United Nations.

There are many evocative scenes in the documentary that reveal its heart. One occurs when Brodsky's mother, Sally, is receiving her genetic testing results. The doctor explains they have indeed isolated a specific gene "mutation" associated with her deafness, to which she retorts: "Why do you need to call it a 'mutation'? Why not call it a variation?" The doctor is flummoxed and herein lies the crux of many deaf people's argument against ableism. Sally's life has been full of goodness and creativity, but her genes are deemed "mutations," and she is therefore a mutant. Another quiet, but vital scene occurs when Jonas' grandparents are sitting with him at the kitchen table trying to coach their iphone-addicted-hearing-impaired grandson on the finer points of how to actually connect with people. The fidgety tween is advised to actually look people in the face first, and one cannot help but ponder what other strategies deaf people develop just to connect with others; this tech-isolated generation might pay heed to such advice. There are many quotidian moments in the film that are tied to the film's ultimate message of hope and perseverance, e.g., when Jonas senses the demise of his grandfather and decides to spend more time just *being* with him. In one scene, they play chess and Jonas wins, filling his grandpa with visceral delight. Paul may be losing his cognitive abilities, but he can still connect with his beloved grandson.

The film is well edited with heart-wrenching scenes interrupted with Jonas' youthful sense of humor and playful repartee with his deadpan straight-shooting piano teacher. Brodsky's mother is also a hoot and a rock. The human drama is interspersed with beautiful, flowing animation and illustration by Jordan Domont and Brian Kinkly whenever Beethoven's story is interwoven.

Brodsky has said she hopes people leave the theater mulling over “Love, art, and sound. In any order.” I certainly did, but to that list I would add: the power of family to support you through life’s challenges, the healing power of music, the basic need to communicate and what seniors and deaf people can teach us about this, and the beauty of silence in today’s world.

I will end with a warning that this documentary may well evoke tears from parents, children of aging parents, anyone with a “disability” or close to someone differently-abled, and music lovers (which covers just about all of us, no?). If the intimate human familial drama does not get you, Beethoven’s’ music surely will.