
The Story of a Composer: Ludwig van Beethoven

A Composer Made of Fire

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Beethoven's Life

Ludwig van Beethoven was a complex man consumed by a towering genius – all the more remarkable for the deafness with which he struggled. He lived a life driven by an unquenchable need to make music. His legacy is music that still delights, challenges, and moves us.

Born in Bonn, Germany on December 17, 1770 (or perhaps a day earlier according to some records), Beethoven had a miserable childhood. He was one of seven children, only three of whom survived to adulthood. Although he loved his gentle mother, Maria, he feared his hard-drinking, demanding father, Johann. His father had no great talent, but he gave music lessons to the children of the nobility. From the time Ludwig was a small boy, turning the iron handle of window shutters to hear the musical noise, the child had been absorbed by music. His father recognized the boy's ability and nurtured it, possibly because he saw it as a source of income.

In 1787, when he was seventeen, Beethoven made his first trip to Vienna, the city that would become his home. There, he was quickly immersed in the life of Europe's cultural capital, even playing the piano for Mozart. Mozart's prediction was: "You will make a big noise in the world."

Difficult Times

Beethoven's stay was cut short by a series of family tragedies. He returned to Bonn to his dying mother. Shortly after, his infant sister died. When his father lost his job, Beethoven had to take responsibility for the family.

After his father's death in 1792, Beethoven returned to Vienna for good. The serious boy had grown into a man who was by turns rude and violent, kind and generous. He helped raise money for the only surviving child of Johann Sebastian Bach, who was living in poverty, and he donated new compositions for a benefit concert in aid of Ursuline nuns.

Despite his temper, Beethoven attracted friends easily. He studied piano with composer Franz Joseph Haydn. And even though the student-teacher relationship failed the two remained friends. In Vienna, Beethoven also met Mozart's rival, Antonio Salieri – the man rumored to have poisoned Mozart. Salieri was kind to Beethoven and, in return, Beethoven dedicated three violin sonatas to him.

Beethoven's struggle to hear...

At the age of twenty-eight, just before writing his first symphony, Beethoven began to lose his hearing. He tried every available treatment and, at first, there were periods when he could hear. But in the last decade of his life he lost his hearing completely. Nevertheless, he continued to lead rehearsals and play the piano as late as 1814. Possibly he "heard" music by feeling its vibrations.

As time passed, Beethoven became more and more absorbed in his music. He began to ignore his grooming, pouring water over his head instead of washing in a basin. On one of his beloved country walks, a local policeman who assumed he was a tramp arrested Beethoven. His rooms were piled high with manuscripts that nobody was allowed to touch. He had four pianos without legs so that he could feel their vibrations. He often worked in his underwear, or even naked, ignoring the friends that came to visit him if they interrupted his composing.

Watch out for that temper!

The stories about Beethoven's temper became legend: he threw hot food at a waiter; he swept candles off a piano during a bad

performance; he may even have hit a choirboy. His intensity spilled over into his family life. He became embroiled in a bitter custody battle for a nephew who attempted suicide to escape the family animosity.

Perhaps he was terrified and furious about losing the world of sound. Perhaps he was completely preoccupied by the need to create. Despite his behaviour, he was admired and respected for the music that poured from him. He knew that it moved his listeners to tears, but he responded, "Composers do not cry. Composers are made of fire."

What about the women in Beethoven's life?

With his talent and his larger-than-life personality, Beethoven was popular among women. Although he never married, he dedicated such pieces as the *Moonlight Sonata* and *Für Elise* to the women in his life.

Beethoven, Thunder and Death

In November 1826 Beethoven returned from his brother's estate to Vienna in an open wagon. By the time he got home he was ill with pneumonia, from which he never fully recovered.

Late in the afternoon of March 26, 1827, the sky became dark. Suddenly a flash of lightning lighted Beethoven's room. A great clap of thunder followed. Beethoven opened his eyes, raised his fist, and fell back dead. He was fifty-seven years old.

Ludwig van Beethoven's funeral was the final demonstration of the esteem in which he was held. On March 29, 1827, twenty thousand people lined the streets, while soldiers controlled the grieving crowd. Nine priests blessed the composer's body.

He was buried in a grave marked by a simple pyramid on which was written one word: "Beethoven." Today his remains lie beside those of the Austrian composer Franz Schubert, in Vienna's Central Cemetery.

"I shall hear in Heaven" – Beethoven's last words

Artists Who Have Also Faced Challenges

We are haunted by the idea of Beethoven, the composer of some of the most beautiful music the world has known, losing the sense that must have mattered the most to him – his hearing. He was not the only artist to have confronted, and risen to, such a challenge.

Francisco José de Goya (1746–1828), one of the great Spanish masters, became deaf in 1792 as the result of an illness. He continued to paint, but his work reflected his sadness.

The great French Impressionist painter Claude Monet (1840–1926) found his eyesight failing him late in his life. He continued to paint, studying his subjects so closely that the paintings appeared fragmented like abstract art.

Edgar Degas (1834–1917), another French artist began to lose his eyesight when he was in his fifties. He began working in sculpture and in pastels, choosing subjects that did not require careful attention to detail.

One of the finest artists to come out of Mexico was Frida Kahlo (1907–1954). She began painting in 1925 while recovering from a streetcar accident. Many of her paintings reflect the physical pain she suffered.

The Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) suffered from seizures and depression. After quarrelling with fellow artist Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), he sliced off a piece of his ear lobe. Van Gogh committed suicide in 1890.

Itzhak Perlman (1945–), the wonderful Israeli violinist, became ill with polio at the age of four. As a result of the disease, Perlman performs and conducts from a seated position.

Beethoven's Turbulent Times

Beethoven lived in a period of great turmoil. The French Revolution, which began on July 14, 1789, rocked Europe. The ideals of the French Revolution included equality and free speech for all. Within four years those fine ideals devolved into the Reign of Terror that overtook France and affected the rest of Europe. In 1798, Napoleon conquered Egypt, beginning his rise to power. Against the political upheaval, every aspect of human life seemed to shift. It was an age of change in ideas, the arts, science, and the structure of society itself.

An age of the musician: Earlier in the 18th century, the Church dominated the world of music. As time went on, the nobility began to enjoy music and even learned to play musical instruments. Composers and musicians were their servants. With his fiercely independent spirit, Beethoven challenged this notion. "It is good to move among the aristocracy," he said, "but it is first necessary to make them respect." When a nobleman talked while he was performing, Beethoven stopped playing to declare, "For such pigs I do not play!"

Literature and art also flourished during Beethoven's lifetime. The first edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* appeared in three volumes.

An age of exploration: In 1770 Captain James Cook circumnavigated the globe, charting the coast of New Zealand and eastern Australia as well as the Bering Strait. James Bruce traced the Blue Nile to its confluence with the White Nile in 1771.

An age of invention: John Kay patented the fly shuttle in 1733, making it possible to weave wide cloth. James Hargreaves invented the spinning jenny in 1765, which spun many threads at the same time. James Watt invented the steam engine, patented in 1769, and Robert Fulton initiated steamship travel. The first railroad in England began operation early in the eighteenth century.

Beethoven became a friend of Johann Nepomuk Malzel, the "Court Mechanician." He invented the musical chronometer, which in time was refined to the metronome, a device that can be set to a specific pace to guide the musician. Beethoven loved the chronometer and even composed a little canon to the words "Ta ta ta (suggesting the beat of the chronometer) *lieber lieber Malzel.*"

An age of science and mathematics: Joseph-Louis Lagrange formulated the metric system and explained the satellites of Jupiter and the phases of the moon. Benjamin Franklin conducted his experiments with electricity. Joseph Priestley discovered oxygen. Edward Jenner developed the smallpox vaccine. Musician and astronomer William Herschel discovered Uranus.

An age of new pastimes: Coffee drinking – which Beethoven loved – became a part of social life. Gambling, lotteries, card-playing, chess, checkers, dominoes, and billiards all entertained people.

Human Rights and the Arts

Throughout history, artists have used their talents to comment on social issues. Beethoven – who lived through the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, a time of immense social and political change in Europe and the world – responded through his music. His only opera, *Fidelio*, is set in Spain and is based on the story of a nobleman who is unjustly imprisoned for threatening to reveal the crimes of a politician.

Beethoven's third symphony, the *Eroica*, was originally dedicated to Napoleon Bonaparte. The finale of his magnificent Ninth Symphony is based on a poem written by the German poet Friedrich von Schiller, with words and music that yearn for peace, joy, and the brotherhood of man.

Like Beethoven, we have lived through enormous social and political upheaval: world conflicts, the rise and collapse of nations, and devastating political oppression around the world. We have also seen hopeful changes, such as the creation of the United Nations as the principal international organization committed to building peace and global security.

In Beethoven's time, as in ours, the arts have been a voice to rail against political oppression and to make us aware of the plight of those in the greatest need.

All the world over, ordinary men, women, and children have been moved to action through music. "We Shall Overcome" and "Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika" (God Bless Africa) are two songs that carried a

tremendous amount of influence for Blacks in the US and in South Africa in their struggle against racism, inequality and injustice in the last half of the 20th century. And Beethoven's Ninth Symphony rang out at the Tiananmen Square protest in 1989 and at the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1990.

Beethoven's Famous Peers

Musicians

Beethoven was not the only composer writing music in this period. Beethoven influenced Richard Wagner's (-1813–1883) early instrumental works. Franz Liszt (1811–1886) "invented" the solo piano recital. Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) composed great operas. Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849) and Robert Schumann (1810–1856) also belonged to this era.

Poets

British poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850), along with Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), began the English Romantic Movement in literature. Like Beethoven in music and Turner in painting, Wordsworth used nature as a theme in much of his writing. Here is an example of one of his best known poems:

I Wandered Lonely as A Cloud

by William Wordsworth

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay;
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Outdid the sparkling waves in glee;

A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company;
I gazed – and gazed – but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

1804

Artists

The shift from the Classic to the Romantic tradition was also reflected in the work of painters and sculptors such as the Spanish master Francisco José de Goya and Swiss-born Angelica Kauffmann, who produced more than five hundred paintings in her lifetime.

The painter who most closely paralleled Beethoven's move to Romanticism was Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot (1796–1875). Early in his career he painted structured landscapes, but as he matured in works like *Ville d'Avray* and *Memory of Mortefontaine*, he showed a more imaginative style, creating a filmy aura.

Beethoven the Musician

A pockmarked, unkempt, awkward, brash, yet supremely self-confident young Beethoven easily took his place as both performer and composer in Vienna – the heart of musical Europe. He lived for a time in the home of Prince Lichnowsky, an accomplished musician who studied and played Beethoven's new piano sonatas and paid the cost of publishing his Opus 1.

Beethoven's initial purpose in coming to Vienna was to study with Haydn and to learn from the great master the style of Viennese classicism - a structured worldview where the form of things was more important than their content. Poetry, literature, painting and music of this Classic period were restrained and rational.

This formal, disciplined study, however, had little appeal to Beethoven's unruly, irrepressible, revolutionary spirit. He absorbed just what suited him, and proceeded on his own course. Thus, we find, even in his first published compositions, a bold new voice in music. Formally, these early works still hark back to traditional classical forms. But the emotional intensity, rough humor, burning energy and bold modulations reveal a creator who has struck out on a new path.

By the 1800s, Classicism was giving way to Romanticism and this shift was evident in Beethoven's music.

Beethoven and Romanticism

Romanticism valued imagination and emotion over intellect and reason. It was based on a belief that people are naturally good, that physical passion is splendid, and that political authority and rigid conventions should be overthrown.

Beethoven's Romanticism transformed every kind of music he composed. One of his most popular compositions is the *Moonlight Sonata*, the second of two sonatas making up Opus 27. It became known as the *Moonlight Sonata* well after Beethoven's death, when poet Ludwig Rellstab said that it reminded him of moonlight rippling on the waves of Lake Lucerne in Switzerland. Like all Romantic art, it appeals to the senses more than the mind.

Beethoven's Romance no.1 for Violin in G, Opus 40 and his Romance no. 2 for Violin in F, Opus 50, written between 1798 and 1802, were called romances for their light, sweet tone, almost like a song. This is typical of the Romantic period in music: many pieces lend themselves to being sung as well as played.

Beethoven's movement away from Classicism and toward Romanticism is clearest in his symphonies. Before Beethoven, symphonies, originating in courtly dances like the minuet, had conformed to the ideals of Classicism with rigid structure and rational form. Beethoven's Romantic symphonies broke out of those confines and became large, sometimes epic structures that told a story and plumbed emotional depths.

Beethoven the Artist

Beethoven was more than a great composer. He was a force of nature, the first important musician to break free successfully from the mentality of servant. He was an Artist, and he wrote for posterity, not just for mere mortals who happened to live at the same time as he. When confronted with rules of harmony he had supposedly broken, Beethoven brusquely retorted, "*I* admit them." He was markedly lacking in social graces, but proud to the point where he could say to a prince and benefactor, straight to his face, "What *you* are, is by accident of birth; what *I* am, I created myself. There are, and have been, thousands of princes; there is only one Beethoven."

Did you know that Beethoven got stressed out too!

Beethoven's first public appearance as a piano virtuoso took place when he was twenty-five years old. He was to play his Second Piano Concerto, but two days before the performance it was still not finished and Beethoven was suffering from an upset stomach. He continued to write while a friend fed him remedies and, just outside his chamber, copyists sat waiting for the music as the composer finished writing each sheet.

His career would be full of such last-minute scrambles. On the morning of the concert to present an oratorio, *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, a friend found Beethoven sitting in bed, composing the part for the

trombones. The piece had its first rehearsal at 8:00 a.m., with the trombone players reading from the original sheets of music.

What to Listen for

In his nine Symphonies, Beethoven set into motion a new concept of what a symphony should be like. In contrast to the rigid structure and rational form of the genre's humble beginnings in the mid-eighteenth century, when it consisted of three puny movements lasting about ten or twelve minutes total, Beethoven increased its formal dimensions and expanded its time frame (the Third Symphony lasts about 50 minutes; the Ninth well over an hour!). He created a much bolder harmonic language, added more instruments, and, above all, heightened the emotional intensity. Every one of these symphonies is a masterpiece, and the four (Nos. 3, 5, 6 and 9) rank among the greatest of the great.

After the turn of the century, when he brought out his First Symphony, nearly everything Beethoven wrote had something novel, sensational, strange or incomprehensible about it. Take *Symphony No. 5*, for instance. Today, it is the world's most popular symphony, and with countless performances of the Fifth behind us, it is all too easy to forget just what a forward-looking and "modern" work it really was back in 1808. For example, there was not a single tune you could hum in the opening movement. Instead, listeners got an intense, concentrated onslaught of a four-note rhythmic cell (the famous "da-da-da-daaah") unfolding with unparalleled energy, leaving them gasping under the emotional impact.

A few years earlier (in 1804), Beethoven completed his *Symphony No. 3* ("*Eroica*"). It was originally dedicated to the First Consul of France, Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon represented to Beethoven all that was noble and glorious in the human race - a daring young man who had risen through the ranks on his own initiative and powers, who had liberated men from tyranny, who had defied oppressive governments, and who was espousing the battle cry of the French Revolution: "*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité!*" But when Beethoven learned that Napoleon had proclaimed himself Emperor (in May of 1804), he flew into a rage, rushed to the table on which the *Eroica* lay, ripped off the dedicatory title page and cried, "Is he then too nothing more than an ordinary human being? Now he, too, will trample on all the rights of man and indulge only his ambition. He will exalt himself above all others, become a tyrant." Some time later, Beethoven inscribed the title "Sinfonia Eroica, Composed to Celebrate the Memory of a Great Man." (Note: not "a great man," but to the *memory* of a great man!) But the *Eroica*

Symphony is not really about Napoleon, or even about the memory of this man. It is about music - how notes are put together into musical cells, groups of cells, phrases, paragraphs and towering edifices in sound. The real hero of the *Eroica* is music itself.

Beethoven's single *Violin Concerto* was longer and more complex than any previous work of its kind by a wide margin, but in symphonic thought and expansiveness of gesture, it eclipsed all predecessors. It is still considered one of the most exalted of all concertos for any instrument. As was common in Beethoven's day, he wrote the concerto for a specific soloist, the virtuoso Franz Clement. The deeply lyrical quality of this concerto, the finesse of its phrases and its poetry all reflect the special qualities of Clement's playing. The third movement is a lively rondo - a formal structure in which one particular theme keeps returning, with other themes in between. You may hear a relationship between this main theme and that of Beethoven's "ode to Joy" theme, which comes next on the program. There is an outdoorsy, down-to-earth, informal spirit to this music.

If Beethoven's Third Symphony broke records, his *Symphony No. 9* went even further – much further. In its grandeur, elemental power, cosmic scope and affirmation of the universal human spirit, the Ninth seemed to embrace the whole world. Among its special features is the use of a chorus and vocal soloists to deliver a textual message, not just a musical one. This had never before been done in a symphony. Beethoven borrowed and adapted some stanzas from the "Ode to Joy" by the German poet and dramatist Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805). The main theme of the final movement, where the chorus sings, is known to almost everyone in the western world. It sounds so simple and natural, yet Beethoven went through nearly twenty versions of it before he was satisfied, changing a note here, sustaining one there, or repeating another. (Composing is not as easy as you might think!).

We encounter Napoleon again in connection with another Beethoven composition called *Wellington's Victory* which received its first performance in 1813 (on the same concert with the premiere of another Beethoven symphony, the Seventh). It is sometimes called the "Battle" Symphony, though it is not really a symphony at all, but rather a short, single-movement work for orchestra with some special effects to simulate the sounds of battle. This work celebrates the British victory over Napoleon in the Peninsular War. Wellington's triumph contributed

to the downfall of Napoleon. Beethoven wrote *Wellington's Victory* for a gala benefit concert in Vienna for Austrian and Bavarian soldiers wounded in the Battle of Hanau.

What would a piece of music by Alexander Brott be doing in a Beethoven concert? Well, his *Paraphrase in Polyphony* has a curious story behind it that relates directly to Beethoven. In 1966, a yellowed scrap of paper was found containing a tiny fragment of music, a canon, by Beethoven. This paper had originally belonged to a man named Theodore Frederic Molt, who had received the canon directly from the great Beethoven himself back in 1825. Molt, a German musician, was living in Montreal at the time. He had visited the composer in Vienna to pay his respects, and Beethoven presented him with this tiny composition. Molt returned to Quebec with the canon, but after his death it disappeared until 1966 when it was found in New York.

When Montreal composer Alexander Brott learned about this discovery, he examined Beethoven's canon and wrote a full-length, 20-minute composition he called *Paraphrase in Polyphony*, from which we hear an excerpt, based on this canon. Alexander Brott is the father of today's conductor and still living in Montreal; in a little over a month from now, he turns 87. A "paraphrase" is simply another way of saying something. "Polyphony" is the use of two or more musical lines at the same time. A "canon" (*not* the war machine, which is spelled with two "n"s) is a type of polyphony. You all know the songs "Three Blind Mice" and "Frère Jacques." Both are examples of canon - one voice begins, a second starts a bit later singing the exact same tune, and a third enters still later.

Beethoven's *Symphony No. 6 (Pastorale)*, composed in 1808, is another of the world's greatest symphonies. Into it Beethoven poured all his love for the simple pleasures of the countryside. His personal life was one of turmoil, stormy relationships and constant stress caused by growing deafness, which eventually became total. He greatly valued the time he spent in the woods outside Vienna. "How glad I am to be able to roam in wood and thicket," he wrote in his Diary, "among the trees and flowers and rocks. No one can love the country as I do. My bad hearing does not trouble me here." But there are storms in nature as there are in people's lives. The excerpt that we hear on this concert is one of the most famous storms ever conceived in music. First a few isolated raindrops are heard falling, the wind picks up, and suddenly the

heavens burst open. Torrents of rain, lashing wind and flashes of lightning are vividly depicted in this exciting episode. Trombones, seldom used by Beethoven (they're in the Ninth Symphony also) are heard here, as are the shrill piccolo and thundering timpani (drums).

Beethoven's Ninth Symphony

By the time the Ninth Symphony premiered in Vienna in 1824, Beethoven was almost completely deaf. Nevertheless, he insisted on conducting the orchestra himself. He continued conducting even when the piece had ended because he could not hear that the orchestra had stopped playing. One of the sopranos tugged at his sleeve so that he would turn around to face the audience – an audience wild with applause.

Beethoven's Ninth Symphony continues to move the hearts of people everywhere. It was played during the Beijing student protests in China in 1989 and at the dismantling of Germany's Berlin Wall in 1990. It has become a symbol of unity, of love, and of the overwhelming power of music to change those who hear it forever.

Ode to Joy from Symphony No.9 in D minor, Opus 125

Praise and joy, immortal gladness
Gift to all eternally.
We give thanks for joy unbounding,
Celebrate life's harmony.

Refrain (2x)

Music's magic boldly sounding,
Bring together friend and foe.
All unite as sisters, brothers.
Sing with joy in lustrous glow.