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Ludwig van Beethoven. By: Eckley, Wilton. *Salem Press Biographical Encyclopedia*. 3p. Abstract: German composer. Born in Bonn in 1770, Ludwig van Beethoven (BAY-toh-vahn) did not enjoy the happiest of childhoods. His father, a minor musician in the court of the archbishop-elect of Cologne, was generally more interested in drinking than in making music and was often a trial to his family. He knew well enough, however, that his son had a talent for music. Hoping that the boy might be a wunderkind, another Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, he pushed him into a severe musical training that left little time for the pleasures of childhood. Beethoven's playmates were the piano, the organ, and the viola.

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Ludwig van Beethoven

German composer

- **Born:** December 16, 1770
- **Birthplace:** Bonn, archbishopric of Cologne (now in Germany)
- **Died:** March 26, 1827
- **Place of death:** Vienna, Austria

One of the giants of classical music, Beethoven contributed greatly to Western music. Clearly reflecting the transition from the classical tradition in music to the Romantic, he made numerous innovations in the piano sonata, the string quartet, and the symphony.

Early Life

Born in Bonn in 1770, Ludwig van Beethoven (BAY-toh-vahn) did not enjoy the happiest of childhoods. His father, a minor musician in the court of the archbishop-elect of Cologne, was generally more interested in drinking than in making music and was often a trial to his family. He knew well enough, however, that his son had a talent for music. Hoping that the boy might be a wunderkind, another [Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart](#), he pushed him into a severe musical training that left little time for the pleasures of childhood. Beethoven's playmates were the piano, the organ, and the viola.

Not another Mozart, the young Beethoven nevertheless began to develop his musical abilities slowly but surely. By his thirteenth year, he was composing and was serving as an assistant to his teacher Christian Gottlob Neefe, the court organist, with the result that he began to gain notice from members of the aristocracy, people who, throughout the rest of his life, were to be patrons and friends. The family of Emanuel Joseph Breuning, for example, welcomed the boy, and he spent much time with them.

With the help of Neefe, the Breunings, and the archbishop-elect, Beethoven, at the age of seventeen, journeyed to Vienna, the preeminent musical city of Europe. It was for him a dream come true. There, he met Mozart, then at the peak of his career, and impressed him, moreover, with his own extemporaneous pieces on the piano. His stay in Vienna, however, was to be cut short. Upon hearing of his mother's illness, he hurried

back to Bonn to find that she had died. He lost not only a mother but also, in his words, his “best and most faithful friend.”

Shortly after his return to Bonn, Beethoven suffered another blow—the death of his younger sister. His father’s drinking, moreover, had reached the point at which he could no longer support the family, and that task now fell to Beethoven. With the same indomitable spirit that marked his whole life, he accepted the challenge and cared for his two younger brothers. He also met the challenge of his musical talent and continued to increase his social and intellectual contacts among both young and old in Bonn.

When [Joseph Haydn](#) passed through Bonn in 1790, he encouraged Beethoven to come to Vienna to study with him. It took two years for Beethoven to complete the arrangements, but in 1792, he journeyed once again to Vienna, the city that was to be his permanent home. Although his relationship with Haydn lasted only two years, Beethoven began building a reputation that was to become only stronger as the years passed.

Life’s Work

In Vienna, Beethoven studied counterpoint with Haydn, but the relationship between them was not a positive one. Beethoven thought that Haydn’s teaching was perfunctory, and Haydn was displeased by his student’s slow development—particularly in contrast to the genius of Mozart—and by his personal mannerisms and his audacious compositions. The result was that Beethoven found a new teacher of counterpoint. The young composer was, however, in the right place at the right time, because Vienna was a city rich in musical tradition and alive with the spirit of revolution.

Like so many artists and intellectuals, Beethoven was caught up in the fervor of the political changes sweeping the United States and Europe, and he no doubt saw a clear relationship between such changes and those occurring in the world of music. Although composers still found their main employment in the Church, the court, and the opera house, new possibilities of support were being introduced. Public concert halls, for example, offered sources of income, as did increased patronage from an aristocracy that was becoming more interested in the arts. Not content with the somewhat demeaning position to which artists and composers were relegated in relationships with their patrons, Beethoven, through his own strength of personality, worked to define a new kind of relationship that enabled him to be the careful creator and craftsman he was. Indeed, the Viennese aristocrats were eager not only to give Beethoven the support he demanded but also to gain his friendship.

While it is a general custom to approach the works of a composer, writer, or painter in terms of periods such as style and chronology, one must remember that the works themselves do not necessarily fall neatly into such divisions. As for Beethoven, most musicologists see his work falling into three distinct periods. The first period ends at 1802 or 1803 and includes the Op. 18 string quartets, the early piano sonatas, and the first two symphonies. The compositions of this period show the singular influences of Mozart and Haydn. The second period covers approximately the next ten years and may well be considered Beethoven’s most productive, with 1814 being his peak year. This second period includes the Third Symphony (*Eroica*) through the Eighth Symphony, the opera *Fidelio*, the Op. 59 string quartets, some piano sonatas, and two piano concertos. The last period includes the last piano sonatas and quartets and the powerful Ninth Symphony (*Choral*).

While Beethoven was fulfilling his early promise as a composer, he discovered in his late twenties that his hearing was gradually getting weaker. With the devastating realization that he was going deaf, he contemplated suicide. “But how humbled I feel when someone near me hears the distant sound of a flute, and I hear *nothing*; when someone hears a shepherd singing, and I hear nothing!” he wrote to his brother. His faith in his art,

however, was stronger than his desire for death, and, despite this cruel blow, he prepared to go on with his life and his music.

Stone-deaf at thirty-two, Beethoven became more depressed and eccentric in his daily living; in his music, however, he sought hope amid despair. His Third Symphony, the *Eroica*, was dedicated to [Napoleon I](#) and was meant to celebrate the heroic ideals of revolutionary leaders. The symphony itself was revolutionary, representing a distinct break with the classical past. Its length and complexity caused consternation among some critics, but through the years it has become one of the most widely performed of Beethoven's works.

Following the *Eroica* and the opera *Fidelio*, Beethoven concentrated primarily on the symphony, and between 1806 and 1808 he completed his Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Symphonies. The Fourth Symphony is light and jovial and seems to be an effort on Beethoven's part to capture in music the joy that he was unable to realize in life. The powerful Fifth Symphony, on the other hand, is generally seen as symbolic of Beethoven's struggle against, and victory over, fate. The Sixth Symphony (*Pastoral*) expresses the romantic feelings and moods aroused by a walk through the Vienna woods.

Having accepted his silent world, one in which he could hear music only in his mind, Beethoven turned meditative in his later work. Two works dominate this third period—the Mass in D (*Missa Solemnis*) and the *Choral*. The former, which Beethoven himself believed to be his greatest work, is a complex vocal and instrumental piece that owes much to [George Frideric Handel](#). More a symphony than a mass, it is considered both a personal and a universal confession of faith. The *Choral*, whose outlines developed over eight years, was first performed on May 7, 1824, with Beethoven sharing in the conducting. The occasion was Beethoven's public farewell, and a tumultuous one it was as the audience applauded and waved handkerchiefs in appreciation not only for the *Choral* but also for a glorious career of musical creativity.

Significance

Each lover of classical music has his own favorite or favorites among the many great composers who have made the music of the Western world what it is. No one, however, can dismiss the tremendous contributions to that music made by Ludwig van Beethoven. A bridge between the classical tradition and the Romantic in music, he did much to transform a number of musical forms. His innovations included expanding the length of the symphony and of the piano concerto and increasing the number of movements in the string quartet from four to seven. His experiments in harmony and rhythm brought a new dimension to the symphony, as did his expansion of the orchestra itself. Introducing the trombone, the contrabassoon, and the piccolo, he sought to give the orchestra a broader range through which to reflect the breadth and depth of his compositions. In regard to his own instrument, the piano, he did much to bring it from its status as a relatively new invention (1710) to one in which it was seen to become the dominant and versatile instrument it is today.

Surely the greatest testament to Beethoven's power of creativity and to his overall contribution to the world of music is the universal and lasting popularity of so many of his works. His symphonies—particularly the Third, Fifth, Sixth, and Ninth—are performed regularly by virtually all orchestras. The same is true for the Fourth and Fifth Piano Concertos and the Violin Concerto in D. The opera *Fidelio* is also widely performed, as are the *Missa Solemnis* and the piano sonatas and string quartets.

Beethoven had his arrogance and his uncompromising character. He also had pain and tragedy in his life. Most of all, however, he had genius—and the strength of spirit to bring that genius to the highest level of accomplishment. Some twenty thousand admirers attended his funeral. They were saying goodbye to the man. The genius, however, lives on in the music.

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