

# Beauty Born of Struggle

Beethoven's genius as a composer did not come easy

> Ludwig van Beethoven composed nine symphonies, five piano concertos, 32 piano sonatas, 16 string quartets, an opera, and many songs and pieces of choral and chamber music in his lifetime.

Today, nearly 200 years after his death in 1827 at the age of 56, Beethoven is still regarded as one of the most influential classical music composers of all time. His “Ode to Joy,” “Für Elise” and “Moonlight Sonata,” are well-known around the world.

Many of the composer's greatest works, including *Missa Solemnis*, *String Quartet No. 14* and *Symphony No. 9*, were written during the last decade of his life. What's remarkable about this is that at the time he wrote this music, Beethoven was completely deaf.

“I am resolved to rise superior to every obstacle,” Beethoven wrote in 1801. Indeed, he was such a gifted artist that he did not need to hear in order to create innovative music that ranged from heroic and powerful to deeply romantic.

“Music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy,” he once observed. “Music is the electrical soil in which the spirit lives, thinks and invents.”

Born on December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany, Beethoven was the son of Maria Magdalena and Johann, a mediocre court singer who was an alcoholic. His grandfather and namesake was Bonn's most eminent court musician at the time of his birth.



Ludwig van Beethoven detail of an 1804-05, portrait by Joseph Willibrord Mähler. Portrait by Joseph Karl Stieler, 1819.

Ludwig's father aspired for his son to be a musical prodigy like Mozart and began teaching him to play the violin and harpsichord at the age of 3. The boy was reportedly so small that he had to stand on a stool in order to reach the keyboard.

Young Beethoven loved music and showed a talent for improvisation, but his father was a harsh and demanding teacher. Legend has it that Johann



would come home drunk late at night and wake up his young son to practice. Other stories have Ludwig weeping over the keyboard as he practiced.

It wasn't long before Beethoven began taking lessons with professional teachers in harpsichord, piano, violin, viola, organ and horn. Although he showed talent in composition, he did not have formal training in the craft until 1781, at age 11.

At 13, Beethoven was appointed to serve as assistant court organist. He soon gained recognition as the city's most promising musician. When he was sent by the court to Vienna to study with Mozart, the eminent musician was said to remark after hearing the teen improvise, "Keep your eyes on him; someday he will give the world something to talk about."

Depression, family strife, periods of poverty, romantic disappointments, abdominal problems and the hearing loss, which started when he was 27, all weighed heavily on Beethoven. "Sometimes I feel I shall soon go mad in consequence of my unmerited fame," he wrote.

Beethoven continued to hone his craft as a musician and composer and as more people realized his immense talent, his notoriety grew. He wrote, a fellow composer noted, "highly developed music, in conflict with all the rules." And yet it provided "such consolation, pleasure and excitement as no other composer."

Yet depression, family strife, periods of poverty, romantic disappointments, abdominal problems and the hearing loss, which started when he was 27, all weighed heavily on Beethoven. He may have been committed to "rising above every obstacle," but struggle remained a constant in his life. "Sometimes I feel I shall soon go mad in consequence of my unmerited fame," he wrote. "Fortune is seeking me out, and for that very reason I almost dread some fresh calamity."

He completed one of his most celebrated works, his Ninth Symphony,

in 1824—just three years before his death. The symphony was praised for its formal complexity and inspirational choral finale. He completed String Quartet No. 14, which has seven linked movements performed without a break, in 1826.

Shortly before his death on March 26, 1827, Beethoven summed up his remarkable life in a manner

that reflected his irreverent sense of humor by borrowing a popular line that concluded Latin plays at the time. "*Plaudite, amici, comedia finita est,*" he said. "Applaud friends, the comedy is over." After his death, some 20,000 people clogged the streets of Vienna to pay their respects to their beloved Beethoven.

Although his life had come to an end, Beethoven's influence on music lives on. Hungarian composer Franz Liszt eloquently characterized the inspirational nature of Beethoven's music, saying, "For us musicians, Beethoven's work is like the pillars of cloud and fire which guided the Israelites through the desert ... His darkness and his light trace for us equally the path we have to follow." —



## GLOSSARY OF MUSICAL TERMS

**Chamber Music:** Music for a small ensemble of instruments, intended for performance in a room or chamber (as opposed to a church or larger building). Beethoven wrote 16 string quartets and many other forms of chamber music, including piano trios, string trios, and sonatas for violin and cello with piano.

**Concerto:** A piece of instrumental music that contrasts a solo instrument or a small group of solo instruments with the main body of the orchestra. Beethoven wrote numerous concertos, many for piano.

**Opera:** An extended dramatic composition, in which all parts are sung to instrumental accompaniment. Beethoven wrote just one opera, the two-act "*Fidelio*," which describes how a woman disguised as a prison guard rescues her husband from death in a political prison.

**Sonata:** A composition for one or two instruments, typically in three or four movements in contrasted forms and keys. Beethoven's "*Moonlight Sonata*" is one of his most popular compositions for the piano.

**Symphony:** An orchestral composition generally in several movements. Often considered the most respected and demanding form that a composer might tackle. Beethoven composed nine symphonies and was working on a 10th at the time of his death.

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