

Beethoven 1770 - 1827 - A Personal Introduction



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I'm sure most of us have heard or have even tried to play some Beethoven, whether it's Fur Elise

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xrkq-yBVcQQ&frags=pl%2Cwn>

or the Moonlight sonata

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OsOUcikyGRk&frags=pl%2Cwn>

or the Fifth symphony we began with played by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by the legendary German conductor Herbert von Karajan. We hear Beethoven even before we know him. The ninth symphony gets played at state occasions like

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the fall of the Berlin Wall which you are all too young to remember or as the European National Anthem. Beethoven is often with us throughout our lives and as well as his self affirmation in the joy of life his music can take us to the very edge of darkness as in his late string quartets which are of such deep and profound feelings that it's difficult to begin to imagine how a human mind could ever conceive of such things.



Beethoven's is not a friendly face like Haydn's or a naughty grin like Mozart's. You will only see images of a serious, unsmiling and brooding man. But he has an immensely human connection projecting his vulnerability onto all of us.

None of his works is trivial or inessential. The earliest Opus 1 trios for piano and strings contain the embryonic ideas which lie ahead in his seven mighty concertos. When he gives us 'light' variations on themes by Mozart or Handel, he is not so much honouring his predecessors as unlocking their untapped potential. He is constantly moving forward and whilst his own circumstances were miserable – loveless, pain-stricken and frustratingly deaf – he retained to the last a shining faith in peace and understanding.

His dedication to his art was all consuming. Mozart spent his evenings playing billiards. Wagner wasted whole days shopping for expensive fabrics.



Verdi liked a good cigar. Brahms drank beer. Tchaikovsky went to parties, Elgar to the races. Every great composer had some indulgence or other – except for Beethoven, who went to his desk every day determined to full fill his

task, intending his next work to be an advance on the last.

Here's what we know about the man:

Beethoven was born in Bonn, Germany December 1770. He was brought up in a musical, though dysfunctional, family, his father was an alcoholic and his mother, we understand from historical sources, had quite a temper. But his father who was a musician at the court of the Elector of Cologne in Bonn recognised his sons musical talent early on and gave the young Ludwig his first lessons on the piano and violin. Like Mozart he was a child prodigy, but while Mozart and his sister were taken all over Europe by their father, Beethoven never traveled until he was 17. By that time, his piano teacher was a man called Neefe who had studied with Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, the son of Johann Sebastian Bach. Neefe told the Elector that the young Beethoven should be given the chance to travel and he was allowed to go to Vienna. There is much speculation about whether he actually met Mozart but there is no firm evidence that he did, however on receiving a letter that his mother was seriously ill he hurried back to Bonn. After his mother died the young Beethoven had to help look after the family as his father had more deeply succumbed to his alcoholism. He played the viola in the orchestra of the Elector and started to compose. There he mixed in society and with musicians and met the aristocratic elite who would eventually help him build his career.

In 1792, a year after Mozart's death, the Elector gave permission for Beethoven to travel to Vienna for a second time this time in order to study with Josef Haydn. Haydn was a good teacher, but a year later he went off to England where his popularity was increasing. At that point Beethoven took lessons from a man called Albrechtsberger. He was a skilled musician and teacher and developed Beethoven's technical knowledge teaching him the skills of

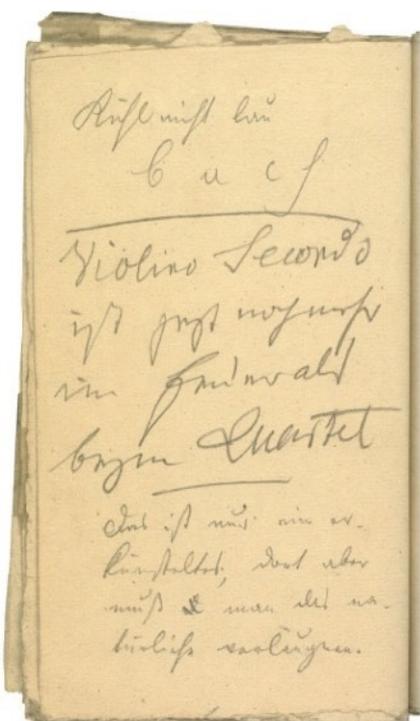
writing advanced counterpoint and fugues. Many of the Viennese aristocrats who liked music had their own private orchestras and when, in 1794 the Elector of Bonn stopped sending Beethoven money to support himself whilst studying some of them joined together to support the young composer. Beethoven was becoming a great success in Vienna and was managing to make a good living from giving concerts, commissions and his published scores. Having been a pupil of the famous Joseph Haydn , who was at the height of his popularity, did him no harm and his remarkable ability to improvise astounded his audiences. In 1795 he performed his first piano concerto and had his first music published, a group of three Piano Trios. Interestingly, Haydn had heard them at a private concert a year before and had advised Beethoven not to publish the third one in C minor however not being one to do as he was told, he went ahead with the publication and it was the C minor trio which became the most successful.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eocHThotlxQ>

By 1798 he had begun to notice that his hearing was becoming impaired. He

could still compose, hearing every note and chord he wrote in his mind's ear - but performing, and worse socialising, quickly became out of the question. Over the next few years his deafness worsened and he performed less and less giving his last public appearance was in 1814, 13 years before his death.

At this time he began to use conversation books and we have records of what visitors said to him in his later profoundly deaf years. However, his comments



went unrecorded, so we have a rather one-sided account of the conversations.

On arrival in Vienna Beethoven was a great admirer with the French General Napoleon Bonaparte who was a key player in the French Revolution. The revolution lasted from 1789–99 and was the uprising of the French middle class to end absolute power by French kings. He dedicated his third symphony to him, later angrily crossing out the dedication when Napoleon declared



himself Emperor of France. Beethoven had a strong awareness of current events and ideas and had a great affinity especially to the ideals of the revolution and his faith in the brotherhood of men, as expressed in his lifelong goal of composing a version of "Ode to Joy," by Friedrich Schiller which was later realised in his Ninth Symphony.

From his first steps in Vienna Beethoven followed his own instincts and produced one musical milestone after another until achieving fame and

recognition throughout his lifetime so that when he died in 1827 he received the biggest funeral the city had ever seen with the street lined with over 30,000 people. 'Who are they burying?' asked a visitor. 'The commander-in-chief of



the musicians,' said an onlooker. Beethoven alive was too awkward for people to approach and appreciate. Loneliness infuses his work and maybe that's why his music feels so personal and is so enduring.

Overview

Beethoven is acknowledged to be one of the giants of classical music. Together with Bach and Brahms, he is referred to as one of the "three Bs" who epitomise that tradition. He was a pivotal figure in the transition from the 18th century musical classicism to 19th century romanticism, and his influence on subsequent generations of composers was profound. Beethoven's music features twice on the Voyager Golden Record, a cultural capsule aboard the Voyager spacecraft which launched in 1977 and is the furthest human made object in space, 13.8 billion miles to be precise as of March 12th 2020, although it probably gone a few million more since then. The record is a disk containing a broad sample of the images, common sounds, languages, and music of Earth, sent into outer space with the two Voyager probes.

Amongst music of all types on the disks there are two pieces by Beethoven, the Fifth Symphony and the Cavatina from the String Quartet in B flat major Opus



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Beethoven composed in several musical genres and for a variety of instrument combinations. His works for symphony orchestra include nine symphonies (of which the Ninth Symphony includes a chorus), and about a dozen pieces of "occasional" music. He wrote seven concerti for one or more soloists and orchestra, as well as four shorter works that include soloists accompanied by orchestra. His only opera is *Fidelio*; other vocal works with orchestral accompaniment include two masses and a number of shorter works.

His large body of compositions for piano includes 32 piano sonatas and numerous shorter pieces, including arrangements of some of his other works. Works with piano accompaniment include 10 violin sonatas, 5 cello sonatas, and a sonata for French horn, as well as numerous lieder.

He also wrote a significant quantity of chamber music. In addition to 16 string quartets, he wrote five works for string quintet, seven for piano trio, five for

string trio, and more than a dozen works for various combinations of wind instruments.



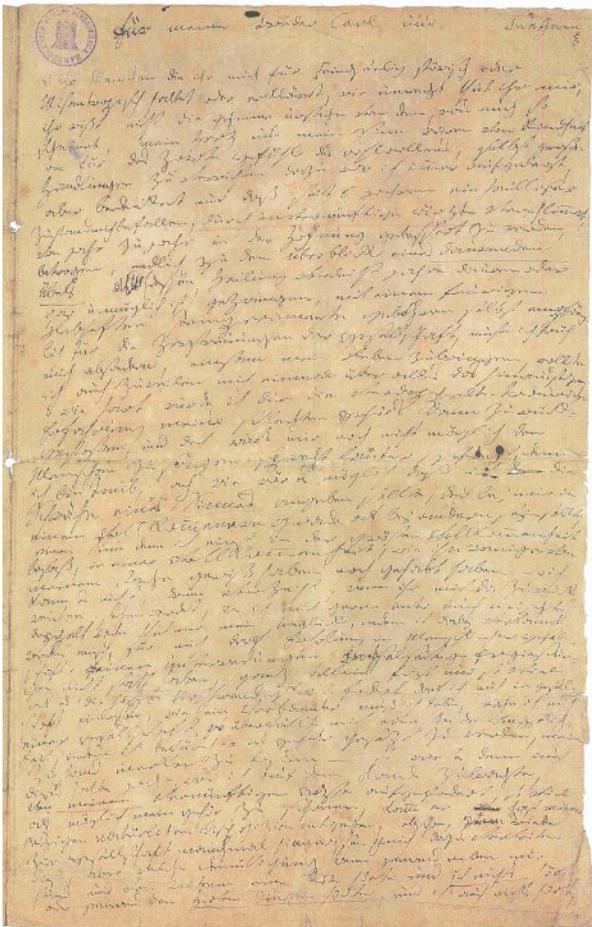
The almost universally known fact about Beethoven is his deafness.

It was a slow, painful affair that progressed in three stages. He first had hearing difficulties in 1798 and sought medical attention, which proved useless. In July 1801, when he

was just 30 years old, he wrote to a friend: 'Know that my noblest faculty, my hearing, has greatly deteriorated. I beg you to keep the matter of my deafness a profound secret to be confided to nobody, no matter whom.'

Ignorant of science and the workings of the human body, he ascribed the condition initially to his stomach aches and digestive problems. One doctor advised cold baths, which as you can imagine, only worsened his mood. The symptoms he describes suggest a form of tinnitus, a ringing or roaring in his ears. Modern diagnosticians offer an alternative condition known as labyrinthitis, a lesion on the inner ear.

Whatever the cause, by mid-1801 Beethoven had lost 60% of his hearing and much of the rest by October 1802 when he wrote the heart-rending Heiligenstadt Testament to his brothers, outlining his plight and hinting at thoughts of suicide. It's a deeply moving document:



‘You who think or say I am malevolent, stubborn or misanthropic, how greatly you wrong me for you do not know the secret causes ... For six years I have been a hopeless case, aggravated by senseless physicians, cheated year after year in the hope of improvement, finally compelled to face the prospect of a lasting malady (whose cure will take years or, perhaps, be impossible). Born with an ardent and lively temperament, even susceptible to the diversions of society, I was compelled early to isolate myself, to live in loneliness.’

Beethoven’s describes his survival strategy as self-isolation, not quite the same as we are experiencing right now, his went on for the next 25 years of his life.

By 1814, Beethoven had reached the height of his fame. He was thought of as the greatest composer by the Viennese people. It was the year in which he played his famous Piano Trio Op. 97 *The Archduke* and was the last time he played the piano in public. His deafness was making it impossible to continue. By 1816 he was completely deaf, cut off from the world of sound. As I mentioned before, his only remaining form of communication was through a notebook in which he scribbled thoughts and instructions, sometimes gathering friends around him in a café to exchange ideas on paper.

His isolation was aural more than social. However given that he relied on sound to make sense of the universe, his isolation was, if anything, psychologically more severe than bodily quarantine.

The two dates of self-diagnosis and total deafness, 1801 and 1816, coincide with decisive shifts in Beethoven's evolution as an artist. The first marks the onset of what is known as his middle period, with the onrush of terror and sorrow channelled in the *Eroica* Symphony Opus 55 which I'd like to introduce you to now.

The *Eroica* is Beethoven's first symphony that purports to be about something (the concept of the Heroic) and even about someone. The story that Beethoven tore up the original page in anger about Napoleon Bonaparte being crowned Emperor of France is reliably documented, as is the change of title from *Bonaparte* to *Sinfonia eroica*, with the new subtitle *composta per festeggiare il sovvenire di un grand Uomo* ('composed to celebrate the memory of a great man'). But the principal handwritten source retains the remark *geschrieben auf Bonaparte* ('written on [the subject of] Bonaparte'). Thus the symphony's connections with Bonaparte, and more generally with the ideals of the French Revolution of more than a decade earlier, cannot be eradicated by the turn of political events around the time of its composition.

And Beethoven must have found the notion of portraying revolution in music intriguing. Late in 1801 – a year before starting work on the *Eroica* – he had been invited to compose a 'revolutionary sonata' according to a particular tonal scheme devised by a distant admirer. After about five months of wrangling, the commission was withdrawn (Beethoven's fee was thought unreasonably high), and he never wrote the work; but the project may have planted in him the idea of composing something on a large scale, with suggestions of a battlefield, a fallen hero, a final victory. On the face of it, Beethoven's *Eroica*, composed 1803–4, looks like many other symphonies of

the time except for its length, it being almost twice the length of any symphony written by Haydn or Mozart.

The first movement is more expansive: its themes are more numerous and they are developed at greater length, a new theme is introduced in the middle of the work, and there is a unprecedentedly long coda which brings together some of the surprises encountered earlier. So now I'd like to introduce you the that first movement. This is a wonderful performance given at the Musikverien in Vienna by the great conductor Leonard Bernstein and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-uEjxxYtHo&frags=pl%2Cwn>

The Funeral March greatly expands the traditional three-part form of the genre, previously used in a Beethoven piano sonata (Op. 26): the first return of the opening is interrupted by a double-fugue, whose angular counter-subject prepares a passage of terrifying harmonic intensity before the sombre mood of the main theme returns.

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The Scherzo is cast in conventional ternary form, with the Trio section featuring the three horns in fanfare in the home key of E flat; in the outer sections, however, the main theme seems forever being stated in the wrong key: the oboe first plays it in B flat, the flute follows in F. We do not hear it in its proper key until after the oboe has replayed the theme in B flat; then the whole orchestra enters and the end of the movement, now entirely in the home key, is expanded to 'correct' the false start and its consequences.

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In terms of design, the most unusual part of the *Eroica* is its finale. It derives from a set of piano variations Beethoven had written two years before, based on a slender orchestral dance which had been recycled in the final number of the ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus* (1800–1).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0eWcb1_uGM&frags=pl%2Cwn 6.15'

Instead of beginning with the theme itself, he presents just the bass line as if it were actually the theme, then writes variations on the bass line before presenting the theme itself. At this point, variation form breaks down almost altogether, and rest of the finale is an amalgam of developments and varied restatements of the dance tune. Much space is given to a transformation of this theme, slowed to a third of its original tempo; this not only reverses the



normal course of musical tempo, from slow–fast to fast–slow, it also balances the earlier pathos of the Funeral March with a kind of victory celebration. There are ten variations altogether including a fugue course.

The three periods

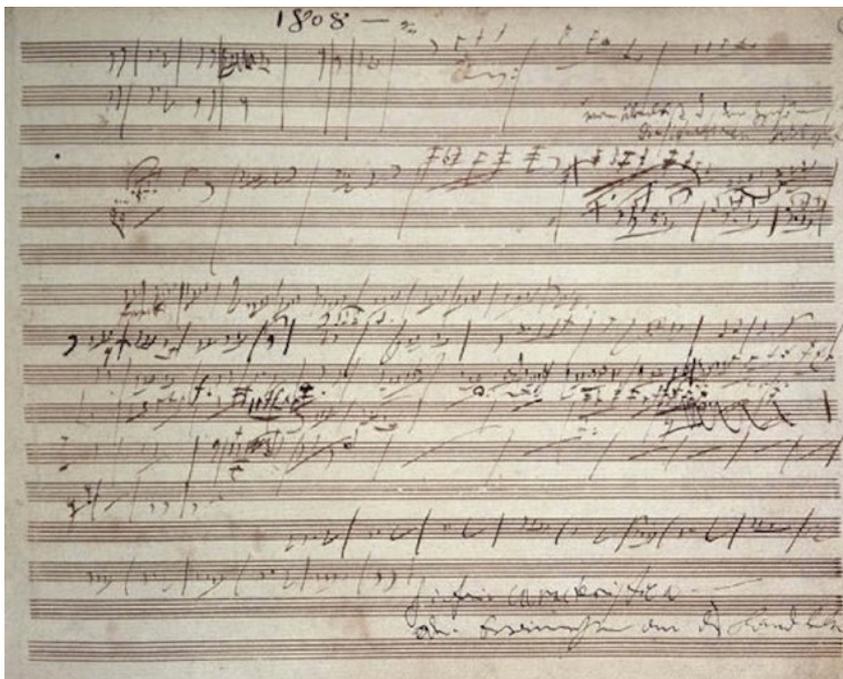
Beethoven's career as a composer is conventionally divided into early, middle, and late periods. The "early" period is typically seen to last until 1802, the "middle" period from 1802 to 1812, and the "late" period thereafter. This

distinction was first introduced in 1828, just one year after his death, and while often challenged and refined it remains a starting point to understand the development of Beethoven's work.

Beethoven's early years in Bonn arguably represent a further, preliminary, period. His earliest known composition was from 1782, and a total of 40 pieces by him dating from 1792 or earlier are known today (though mainly from much later sources). Today his best-known works from before 1790 are three piano quartets and three piano sonatas, the quartets being closely modelled on Mozart's sonatas for piano and violin. From 1790 to 1802, his best music can be found in a cantata and a number of concert arias, and in some variations for solo piano, while his instrumental music (including movements of symphonies and a draft violin concerto, as well as various fragmentary chamber works) is conservative and uninspired.

First period

The conventional "first period" begins after Beethoven's arrival in Vienna in 1792. In the first few years he seems to have composed less than he did at Bonn, and his Piano Trios, op.1 were not published until 1795. From this point onward, he had mastered the 'Viennese style' (best known today from Haydn and Mozart) and was making the style his own. His works from 1795 to 1800 are larger in scale than was the norm (writing sonatas in four movements, not three, for instance); typically he uses a scherzo rather than a minuet and trio; and his music often includes dramatic, even sometimes over-the-top, uses of extreme dynamics and tempi and chromatic harmony. It was this that led Haydn to believe the third trio of Op.1 was too difficult for an audience to appreciate.



He also explored new directions and gradually expanded the scope and ambition of his work. Some important pieces from the early period are the first and second symphonies, the set of six string quartets Opus 18, the first two piano concertos, and the first dozen

or so piano sonatas, including the famous *Pathétique* sonata, Op. 13.

Middle period

His middle (heroic) period began shortly after the personal crisis brought on by his recognition of encroaching deafness. It includes large-scale works that express heroism and struggle. Middle-period works include six symphonies (Nos. 3–8), the last two piano concertos, the Triple Concerto and violin concerto, five string quartets (Nos. 7–11), several piano sonatas (including the *Waldstein* and *Appassionata* sonatas), the *Kreutzer* violin sonata and his only opera, *Fidelio*.

The "middle period" is sometimes associated with a "heroic" manner of composing, but the use of the term "heroic" has become increasingly controversial in Beethoven scholarship. The term is more frequently used as an alternative name for the middle period. The appropriateness of the term "heroic" to describe the whole middle period has been questioned as well: while some works, like the Third and Fifth Symphonies, are easy to describe as "heroic", many others, like his Symphony No. 6, *Pastoral*, are not.

Late period

Beethoven's late period began in the decade 1810-1819. He began a renewed study of older music, including works by Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel, that were then being published in the first attempts at complete editions. The overture *The Consecration of the House* (1822) was an early work to attempt to incorporate these influences. A new style emerged, now called his "late period". He returned to the keyboard to compose his first piano sonatas in almost a decade: the works of the late period include the last five piano sonatas and the *Diabelli Variations*, the last two sonatas for cello and piano, the late string quartets (see below), and two works for very large forces: the *Missa Solemnis* and the Ninth Symphony. Works from this period are characterised by their intellectual depth, their formal innovations, and their intense, highly personal expression. The String Quartet, Op. 131 has seven linked movements, and the Ninth Symphony adds choral forces to the orchestra in the last movement. Other compositions from this period include the *Missa solemnis*, the last five string quartets (including the massive *Große Fuge*) and the last five piano sonatas.

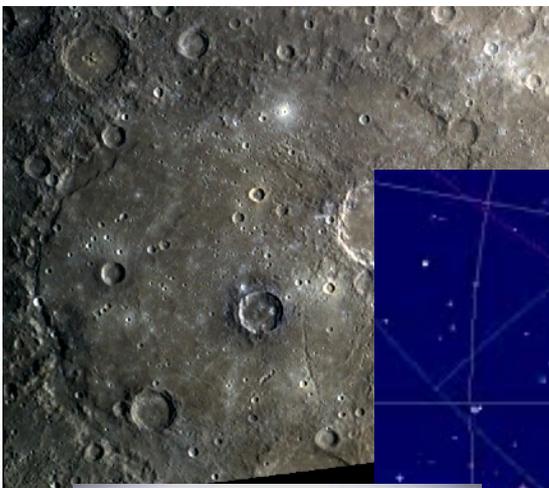
Legacy

The Beethoven Monument in Bonn was unveiled in August 1845, in honour of the 75th anniversary of his birth. It was the first statue of a composer created in Germany, and the music festival that accompanied the unveiling was the impetus for the very hasty construction of the original Beethovenhalle in Bonn (it was designed and built within less than a month, on the urging of Franz Liszt). A statue to Mozart had been unveiled in Salzburg, Austria, in 1842. Vienna did not honour Beethoven with a statue until 1880. His is the only name inscribed on one of the plaques that trim Symphony Hall, Boston; the

others were left empty because it was felt that only Beethoven's popularity would endure.

There is a museum, the Beethoven House, the place of his birth, in central Bonn. The same city has hosted a musical festival, the Beethovenfest, since 1845. The festival was initially irregular but has been organised annually since 2007.

The third largest crater on Mercury is named in his honour, as is the main-belt asteroid 1815 Beethoven.



Everyone has their own favourite Beethoven works, mine include the 3rd, 6th and 7th Symphonies, the Violin concerto in D major Opus 61 of course, the 3rd Piano Concerto in C minor, the Piano Sonatas Opus 57, the Appassionata and

Opus 109, the Violin Sonatas in C minor Opus 72 and the Kreutzer in A major Opus 47, the Cello Sonata in A major Opus 69 , the String Quartet in Opus 127, the Piano Trio, the Ghost amongst many others ! I have compiled a list of 12 compositions and some of my favourite performances on YouTube which I'm going to share with you all in the hope that you might delve in and open your minds to the music of this incredible composer. I've also downloaded scores which, for some of you might help your involvement in the music. I have found that there are as many different ways to appreciate music as there are people to listen to it. For each and every one of us it is a unique personal experience. The beauty of music compared to other arts, say painting or literature, is that it simply taps into an emotional reaction without necessarily going an intellectual process , the word to describe this is visceral. Anyway, perhaps you could open yourselves up to that experience and I would suggest choosing a piece from my list and really listen to it without any distractions, these days just as difficult for me as it is for you. See if you can allow yourselves to be absorbed by Beethoven's music.

Ludwig Van Beethoven

