

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

(1770-1827)

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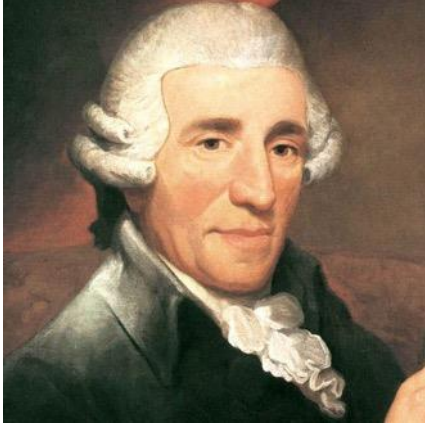
Ludwig van Beethoven was born in 1770 in Bonn to a musical family of Flemish origin. While there is no documentation of the official date, he was baptized on December 17 which, following the tradition of the time, would suggest he was born the day before. Being both the son and grandson of musicians, he received his earliest training from his father, who recognized his son's musical talent very early, and hoped to capitalize on the fame of Mozart of as a prodigy, which met with very little success.

[Christian Gottlob Neefe](#), Beethoven's first important teacher, not only taught him composition, but also introduced him to the music of Bach, in particular the preludes and fugues of "The Well-Tempered Clavier." Both the music and counterpoint of Bach and Händel would serve to impact Beethoven throughout his lifetime.



During his studies with Neefe, Beethoven would also write his first work for piano, "Nine Variations on a March by Dressler," as well as travel to Vienna, intent on studying with Mozart. While the details of the meeting are not clear, it is purported that Mozart said "this young man will make a great name for himself in the world." The visit however was cut short by the death of his mother, and Beethoven returned to Bonn in 1787.

With his father lapsing into alcoholism, Beethoven was placed in charge of his two younger brothers and spent the next five years in Bonn. He met [Franz Joseph Haydn](#) there in 1790, just over a week past his twentieth birthday. Haydn was in Germany briefly with the impresario Johann Peter Salomon before going to London, where Haydn was to perform.



Two years later, in November 1792, Beethoven was finally able to return to Vienna and study with Haydn. Showing him his scores for “Cantatas on the Death of Emperor Joseph II” (WoO 87), and the “Cantata on the Accession of Emperor Leopold II” (WoO O8), earlier that same year in July, Haydn told Beethoven he would happily accept him as a pupil providing he could arrange to come to Vienna.

Beethoven’s initial fame was as a piano virtuoso, and he is credited with creating a more modern style of playing. His music exploited the expressive qualities of a large dynamic contrast, and changed the approach to the instrument by playing with a close finger technique, enabling the pianist to have greater control over the sound produced. His use of the pedal also was far more complicated and sophisticated, which produced a larger sonority and musical effect.

In addition to his innovations for the piano, Beethoven also made advances in the development of instrumental and vocal music. His style would evolve from an outgrowth of the work of Mozart and Haydn, to a period known as *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress), and ultimately to the apocalyptic works of his last years. *Sturm und Drang* was a romantic movement in literature and music that started about 1760 in which extremes of emotions were given free expression.

The movement would have a profound influence upon Beethoven and his music, which is perhaps best heard in works like the “*Appassionata*,” “*Waldstein*,” and “*The Tempest*,” as well as the *Piano Concertos No. 3 (Op. 37)*, *No. 4 (Op. 58)*, and *No. 5 (Op. 73, “The Emperor”)*, among many others.

Beethoven was a great admirer of the spirit and ideals of the French Revolution. Initially this admiration continued through to *Napoleon*, but as time progressed he realized that Napoleon was not the liberator he believed him to be. Beethoven’s music is filled with passion and drama, but also with humanity and optimism.



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The great challenge to his musical and personal life was his impending deafness which began in 1796 when he was 26 years old, and advanced to total deafness by age 46 in 1816. The composer felt separated and at times defeated by his physical condition. He traveled to Heiligenstadt (just outside of Vienna) to seek treatment, but upon realizing and accepting that it was hopeless, he intended to commit suicide. On the 6th of October 1802, he wrote the letter which has become known as the [Heiligenstadt Testament](#), his final will. I advise all students to read it, because in it we gain insight into Beethoven as a person and his suffering, but also his resilience in overcoming this great and difficult challenge through his music. The late piano works of Beethoven including the last five piano sonatas and “Diabelli Variations” are monumental in emotional, architectural, and intellectual scope leading, I believe, to the Romantic Style. He died on March 26, 1827.

QUOTES OF BEETHOVEN

“To play a wrong note is insignificant; to play without passion is inexcusable.”

“Music is ... A higher revelation than all Wisdom & Philosophy”

“Don’t only practice your art, but force your way into its secrets, for it and knowledge can raise men to the divine.”

PLAYING BEETHOVEN

It is clear from all contemporary accounts that Beethoven’s playing was passionate, dramatic, and very expressive. The development of the piano during his lifetime enabled him to treat it more as an orchestra and draw from it a much larger dynamic and color range. I would encourage students to think in this manner. You are dealing with music of a larger scope in terms of sonority than you would with Haydn or Mozart.

DYNAMICS

Dynamic contrast is a very important consideration in Beethoven’s music. He uses a wide range of dynamic indications. Make a clear distinction between dynamic level; even within a particular dynamic such as piano or forte there should be changes. Longer crescendos and decrescendos may be used for greater expression.

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RUBATO

Czerny, a student of Beethoven, once reported that each theme should have its own particular character and tempo. There is a great deal of contrast in the mood of each theme even within the same movement, so as a performer, be sure to give each one its due. Rubato is an important tool for this. Decide what it is you want to express and use rubato as a signature element to communicate it to your audience. Two clear examples would be the first movement of the Sonata No. 14, Op. 27, No. 2 “Moonlight” and the Third Movement of the Sonata No. 17, Op. 31, No. 2 “Tempest”. The rhythm in both remains the same throughout. Without rubato it can be tedious, but with a judicious use of rubato, it becomes expressive and moving.

COLOR

Once you have decided on the volume of a passage, consider the way you want it presented. The color will depend on the degree that you curve your fingers, weight into the keys, the use of the damper and *una corda* pedals. Beethoven had the *una corda* pedal and used it freely. With color you can produce a wide range of sound in piano and forte playing. Again, think of it in a more orchestral manner.

BEETHOVEN’S USE OF THE SFORZANDO

We often find “sfz” or “*sforzando*” in Beethoven’s music. It has been debated whether it is always a big accent or if it changes depending on the dynamic of a passage. I think the latter works better, as it can then be used to reflect the particular passage, and it also will enable the performer to build to a climax. When Beethoven indicates a series of sforzandos, use them as a bridge to creating a climactic moment.

EDITIONS

The Henle edition of Beethoven is accurate, clear, and easy to use.

FURTHER STUDY

There are many biographies of Beethoven, but be aware of what is fact and what is an author’s opinion. You must always evaluate such opinions in terms of their significance and meaning for you. There are several compilations of Beethoven’s letters and impressions by his contemporaries which are very useful in gaining an insight into his character and what was important to him musically. Many recordings are also available on YouTube. The Leschetizky pupils, Elly Ney and Artur Schnabel, were fine interpreters whose performances you should hear. Claudio Arrau, Wilhelm Kempff, and Alfred Brendel are among the great performers of his music. Do listen, but then make your own musical and artistic decisions.