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Beethoven: The Man Behind the Music

Beethoven is a household name in the Classical music realm, and rightfully so – with hundreds upon hundreds of compositions credited to his name, his place in music history is a solidified. However stable his place in history might be, stability and satisfaction in life were not easy to come by for the composer. Historical documents such as the Heilgelstadt Testament, letters written by critic and traveler Reichardt and writings of Beethoven's works by E.T.A. Hoffman provide historians with a rounded view of Beethoven's life, compositions and emotional trauma. Plagued with an unconventional childhood, an early onset of deafness and a social ineptitude, Beethoven is unique in that his music reflects specific events in his life. It is the sound of his music, created with such melodic passion and torture, which marks him as a revolutionary of the Classical music period.

Born in Bonn, Germany, Ludwig van Beethoven was brought up in a household that was far from nurturing. His father has recently seen the success that Mozart's father had had with Wolfgang, touring around Europe. A successful musician, Beethoven's father decided to play the same game with his son. Beethoven was his father's student, and his father was a merciless instructor, often forcing the child into tears or worse during lessons. Nonetheless, Beethoven toured Europe as yet another 'Child Prodigy.' The stress of becoming this musical virtuoso at such a young age, and later losing his mother, had long-term effects on Beethoven's life. This

period in his life is often attributed to the root of his short-tempered disposition.

Beethoven traveled to Vienna shortly after he outgrew his father's stage gimmicks, and began studying under the famed Joseph Haydn. There are rumors that Ludwig had also traveled to Vienna to see, and possibly meet, Mozart, but there are no definite documentations of a relationship between the two. There are some who believe that Beethoven was trying to prove himself to be an equal to Mozart throughout his life, and his father's attempts to make him similar to Wolfgang during his childhood may have attributed to his feelings of inadequacy as an individual composer.

It was in Vienna that Beethoven's early period of composition took off. A keyboardist, Beethoven utilized his own virtuosity on his instrument. During this period, he is known to have composed numerous piano sonatas, including his famed 'Pathetique' sonata. He utilized the classical sonata form throughout his lifetime, using it to help program symphonies and string quartets. It is with this sonata form that the listener is able to hear a conversation in the music – it is through this sonata form that Beethoven first begins to speak to his audience. Music written during this period is often similar to that of Haydn or Mozart, and it is clear to a musical scholar that Beethoven is still finding his own musical style during the late eighteenth century, and utilizing what he admired in other composers to help him find it.

Beethoven's growth as a classical composer began to earn him the title of 'revolutionary' during his middle period, or 'Heroic Period.' It was during this time of Beethoven's life that he garnered the life experiences and passions necessary to compose in the manner he became known for. "To be sure, his stubborn outward manner may frighten off some of the jolly good-natured Viennese, but many of those who acknowledge his great talent and merits may perhaps not employ sufficient humanity and delicacy to so offer the sensitive... artist the means of

enjoying life that he may... take satisfaction in them.” (1) Reichardt’s letters during this time period, which give fascinating critiques of his performances in and around Vienna, does, in fact, state multiple times that the composer was well-liked and appreciated, a fact that Beethoven himself did not believe – which led to depression as his life garnered its own tragedy.

During the late eighteenth century, Beethoven began losing his hearing. An audaciously proud individual, he continued to perform, compose and conduct his own music up until approximately 1814. Although there has never been a definite cause declared for his deafness, it is often speculated that lead poisoning from other medications he was taking could have caused his misfortune. It is during this time that Beethoven’s persona begins its striking transformation. While the composer was always a bit socially inept – it is often remarked that during his performances, if people were heard speaking, he would stop the music and just stare at them relentlessly – Beethoven became more introverted than ever. Embarrassed at the thought of the public scrutinizing his disability, he would take to his composition room for days at a time, hardly even speaking to his house staff. “But what mortification if someone stood beside me and heard a flute from afar and *I heard nothing*; or someone *heard a Shepherd Singing*, and I heard nothing.”, (2) this excerpt, taken from Beethoven’s Heiligenstadt Testament, illustrates Beethoven’s self-consciousness of his deafness, and it is often said that he considered taking his own life because of it – but his art held him back. The testament was written as a letter to his two brothers.

His music from this period is often masked with personal struggle. Not only was Beethoven heartbroken over the loss of his hearing, but he was also very emotionally involved with the political situation at the time: Napoleon was conquering Europe. It wasn’t until Beethoven realized that Bonaparte’s imperialistic agenda was the antithesis to Enlightenment

doctrine that he began composing music in honor of Napoleon's defeats. In fact, Beethoven's 3rd Symphony, also known as the 'Eroica' Symphony, was originally written in honor of Bonaparte, but the dedication changed after Beethoven's realization. Beethoven's 3rd Symphony is double the length of the normal classical symphony of the time, and was considered so heavy and tumultuous that it is said that the audience was in either a state of shock, or awe. The heroic style of the piece brings forth a setting of victory and triumph, something Beethoven did not want to attribute to Napoleon.

"Beethoven's instrumental music opens up to us also the realm of the monstrous and the immeasurable", (1) describes E.T.A. Hoffman in his writings about Beethoven's music. This sense of a musical monstrosity is something unique to Beethoven at this time. His music was well-known for its ability to drain the listener's energy throughout. It was emotionally taxing, and written as to share Beethoven's personal tragedy with the souls of the audience. E.T.A. Hoffman goes on, however, to explain that no matter how tragic Beethoven's music was, he wrote only to convey imagination and a sense of magic to his listeners, never trying to impart his own ego upon that which he composed.

Beethoven's personal struggles and personal commentary on societal elements lead to his use of programming in his music. A fairly new concept, programming allowed the composer to make his opinion of society known without social consequences. Music could say just as much as language, but with less self-incrimination on the part of the composer.

Beethoven's later period is marked by quite a few piano sonatas and quartets, as well as some larger-scale works by the composer. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is often spoken of as one of the most revolutionary pieces of music ever composed. Not only did Beethoven embody his sense of struggle and reconciliation with God, but he also introduced something that had

never been done before in a Classical symphony – he wrote for the human voice. A choral symphony, the Beethoven's Ninth brings voice and instrument together, creating, for all intents and purposes, a masterpiece of sound. It's thematic 'Ode to Joy' melody stands as one of the most timeless excerpts of music ever written, and is still recognized by most people in the world today – even those who have never listened to a minute of classical repertoire.

Beethoven's reach as a revolutionary extends far beyond his lifetime. He brought a striking voice to the classical sonata form, evidenced in his Pathétique Sonata, and embodied it with such emotion – even in his early years. Towards the middle of his life, his programming of heroic and terrifying music, such as his 3rd Symphony, brought Vienna and all of classical Europe to its knees. His late period was, arguably, the most revolutionary of all with the composition of his 9th Symphony. The introduction of the human voice into the Classical symphony was unheard of, and Beethoven, of all people, was the first to hear it in his own mind. It is with these compositions that Beethoven left his mark on Classical music.

Works Cited

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2. Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin, eds., *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents* (New York: Schirmer, 1984)

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Music 206

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A Judgement of Beethoven

Out of the ashes of the Classical period rose the Ludwig Van Beethoven, a man who would change the formula of composition forever, bringing on the age of Romantic music. Being a child prodigy, Beethoven began developing his reputation in the German musical circle from a very young age. He began his relationship with the public as a piano virtuoso, and threw this he was originally going to be instructed by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, but due to his untimely death in 1791 he was handed over to “Papa” Franz Joseph Hayden to be tutored in the art of musical composition, this was due to Viennese aristocrats seeing the young man as a musical investment. Once Beethoven became established as amongst one of the most respected musicians in Vienna the aristocracy saw him as such value to the city that from 1809, at the age of thirty-nine until his death in 1827 Beethoven was payed annually just as long as he kept his residence in a Vienna.

Johann Friedrich Reichardt, musician who also worked as a music critic wrote a series of letters in late 1808 from his visitation the Vienna where he encountered old acquaintances such as Haydn, Salieri and Beethoven. In Reichardt’s first letter he wrote about locating Beethoven and how difficult it was, stating that the people in Vienna took little interest in Beethoven and how that made it difficult for Reichardt to find him. This comes as a surprise noting that this was during his middle era, which was the most active time for the composer musically. Maybe the

level of interest in Beethoven had something to do with his reputation as a person among the people of Vienna. Another possible reason Reichardt had trouble locating him could have something to do with how frequently Beethoven had moved, it's recorded that he had moved two dozen times within the thirty year period of time that he lived in Vienna. Reichardt describes Beethoven's living quarters as deserted and gloomy, which is also how he describes the appearance of Beethoven towards the beginning of his visit, but he grew to be cheerful as time passed. This can be compared to the depiction he has in popular culture as the miserable and angry composer, but, as Reichardt has shown in his letter, he does have a lighter side that wasn't stapled into the public's mind as much. Reichardt also seems to say that appearance is much more fierce than this actual personality, he writes, "His is a powerful nature, outwardly Cyclops-like, but in reality sincere, friendly, and kind".

In a letter dated October tenth of that same year, Reichardt writes about a series of concerts he has been attending. He eventually came to a new Piano trio written and performed by Beethoven. The virtuosity of the trio was not left unnoticed. Some of his earlier pieces were also performed and the quartet was described to have "special skill and dexterity.." he goes on to bring up the level of difficulty in the piece, "in these difficult Beethoven compositions, in which the violin frequently competes with the piano in the execution of the most difficult keyboard figures, the piano with the violin in singing tone." (Reichardt 1034) Through the comparison of Beethoven's performances and those of his contemporaries, make him sound even better. What for the most part the performances are reflected as good, not fantastic, one performance is described as pretty pathetic, having string players with bad intonation and having to tap their foot to keep time. This would make Beethoven look even better, for out of the performances

Reichardt attended his was the only that really stood out as great. In that same letter he recalls a Liebhaberkonzerte he recently attended. A Liebhaberkonzerte is defined by the footnotes of the letter as an orchestra consisting mostly of amateur musicians with a few professional players. The room in which this was performed was constricting and volume of the music was exaggerated for this reason, which which made Beethoven's performance of the overture to Collin's "Coriolanus", which he described as "overpowering" and he claimed that "my head and heart nearly burst with the vigorous blows and crackings which each one strained himself to the utmost augmenting." He claims that Beethoven has a delusion that he is being persecuted by his peers causing him to have a outward stubborn appearance and that because of this he had frightened of many of the upbeat people of Vienna who respected the man. He says to this that "It often pains me to the quick when I see this altogether excellent and splendid man gloomy and unhappy", but after this he says that it was possible that it was this unhappiness that caused him to write such great music.

Reichardt's seventh letter concerns the premiere night of the "Pastoral Symphony", which premiered on December 22, 1808. As a whole the night seems to have a mixed review, attributing the negatives of the evening mostly on the length of the performance and the temperature of the building. The theater was freezing cold, audience and performers are said to shiver, and the performance was long starting at half past six going on to half past ten four hours later. It is also stated that Beethoven was unable to have any full rehearsals for the performance resulting for the evening to have a degree of chaos, which must have had even more impact on how the performance went. Most of the performances received praise from Reichardt, which

included, Beethoven's fifth and sixth symphonies, a piano concerto, and a fantasy. But the two piece that stood out as flops were Gloria and Sanctus, both both from the Mass in C, Op. 86, perhaps these pieces being part of the same Mass had something to do with its preparation, and how they didn't come to meet some of the higher standards.

In an article written by E. T. A. Hoffmann he goes into the subject of "Romantic Music". In this article Beethoven is compared to Mozart and Haydn in the composition of instrumental music, basically saying what each man did contributed to music. Hoffmann says that Beethoven is a completely romantic composer and is on par with his predecessors Mozart and Haydn. The article doesn't so much get in to the theoretical aspects of Beethoven's music, but what his music may try convey to each person, which after all is what Romantic music is all about. So from Hoffmann's opinion it can be concluded to some that Beethoven's music is more influential to heart than the head and hands, that how Beethoven influenced certain theoretical aspects isn't as important as how his music can make one feel.

In 1802 a letter was written to his brothers Carl and Johann, Beethoven had announced to his siblings that he was beginning to lose his ability to hear, something that usually brings the end to a musicians career. At this point he states that he hearing has worsened for six years at this point, and the process has been accelerated by "senseless physicians", and given up all hope for a "lasting ailment". His hearing seems to be source for embarrassment, causing him to live in solitude, he expresses "(hearing)a faculty which ought to be more perfect in me than in others" due to his practice. At the end of the letter Beethoven begins to be grabbed into the subject of death, perhaps the master composer was contemplating suicide at this time, ridding the important middle and late periods of his career.

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