

## **LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN**

**Born: December 17, 1770**

**Died: March 26, 1827**

### **Beethoven's Life**

Ludwig van Beethoven may be the most important composer who ever lived. Born in Bonn, Germany in 1770, the "v-a-n" in front of Beethoven is a little confusing. Members of German nobility had names that started with v-O-n. But Beethoven's grandfather was from what is now Belgium, where names with v-A-n belonged to ordinary, everyday people.

Beethoven may have come from everyday people, but there was nothing ordinary about him. His father was a singer who worked as a court musician. When the elder Beethoven saw how musical his son was, he thought he might try what Mozart's father had done—make money by putting his son on display playing concerts. Even though that never happened, by the time Beethoven was a teenager, he wound up supporting his family with a job as a court musician. Beethoven played violin, viola, and—most of all—keyboard instruments.

Beethoven's employer decided to send him to visit Vienna, the center of musical activity in Europe, where Haydn and Mozart lived. Beethoven played for Mozart, who was so impressed that he told his friends, "Keep an eye on him—someday he'll give the world something to talk about." Beethoven wanted to study with Mozart, but had to return to Bonn because his mother was dying. By the time he got back to Vienna, Mozart was also dead. So, Beethoven studied with Haydn instead. Beethoven was moody and intense, and Haydn was very easy-going; so their student-teacher partnership didn't last very long. It was just long enough for some of what Haydn was good at to rub off on Beethoven.

Beethoven quickly became known all over Vienna as a wonderful musician. At first, he was most famous for his skill as a pianist. But when Beethoven was just 30 years old, he realized he was going to have to give up his career as a pianist. He was going deaf. Beethoven couldn't hear an orchestra well enough to stay together with it when they played; and eventually, couldn't even hear his own piano. It's hard to imagine how horrible it must be for a musician whose life depends on sound to lose his hearing. Because he was such a genius, Beethoven continued to hear compositions in his head and kept writing them down. He wrote piano music, nine glorious symphonies, string quartets and all kinds of other chamber music, ballets, religious music, songs and one opera.

In his own lifetime, Beethoven was famous all over Europe. 20,000 people came to his funeral, and in the years that followed, composers lived in Beethoven's shadow. Brahms said, "You have no idea how difficult it is when such a giant marches behind you." It took Brahms over 40 years to get up the courage to compose his first symphony, and when he did, people jokingly referred to it as "Beethoven's Tenth."

## Beethoven the Pianist

Beethoven lived at a time when the piano was literally growing up. Over the course of his writing career, he was watching his instrument improve in both power and in range. One of the other improvements to the piano in Beethoven's day was the pedal. Early pianos changed the sound of the strings with a lever near your knee which was very awkward to use. On Beethoven's piano, the pedals had been moved to where they are today—near the ground, and you operate them with your feet. Pedals change the sound of the piano. You hit a key, hammers strike the strings and the sound starts. And when you let go of the key there are things called dampers that stop the sound. The damper pedal lets the sound keep on going, which Beethoven loved.

## Beethoven's Symphonies

Franz Joseph Haydn is called "the father of the symphony." With the 104 symphonies he composed, he took that form of orchestral music and perfected it. But no one changed the symphony more than Beethoven with the nine he wrote.

When he was 22 years old, Beethoven set off for Vienna to study music. Beethoven's first symphony definitely sounds like someone who studied with Haydn and Mozart. This symphony, like many of Beethoven's, was first performed at a concert featuring the composer. One of the ways composers made a living back then was by giving concerts of their very latest music. By the time Beethoven wrote his second symphony, he realized he was going deaf. Instead of taking his misery out on his music, Beethoven poured it all out in a letter, at the end of which he said his deafness would not stop him.

When released in 1804, Beethoven's third symphony was the largest ever written to that date—45 minutes in length. When Napoleon Bonaparte started conquering Europe, Beethoven was a huge fan of his, as he thought Napoleon had the interests of ordinary people at heart. He intended to name his third symphony after Napoleon. But after the "Little Corporal" crowned himself Emperor, Beethoven was furious and changed the name to the "Eroica"—the Heroic Symphony. The fourth symphony has some very fancy music and generally gets lost in the shuffle between the Eroica and the even more famous symphony that followed, Beethoven's fifth.

One friend thought Beethoven meant the opening da-da-da-DA to be Fate knocking at the door. But another suggested that it might be nothing more than Beethoven imitating a bird call—a kind of sparrow called a yellow hammer. Whether the Fifth includes a bird or not, Beethoven put a whole story involving birds—and a lot more nature—into his sixth symphony. It even has the nature-related nickname "Pastorale."

Beethoven had the orchestra imitate a metronome in the second movement of his eighth symphony. And that brings us to the tradition-shattering Ninth Symphony, which changed how people thought of symphonies.

No one had ever put singers into a symphony before, but that's just one of the things that makes this the most amazing symphony ever. In the very last movement, first only one singer is heard. By the end, there's a whole chorus singing the famous "Ode to Joy."

People all over the world know and love Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. When the Berlin Wall came down, they celebrated with a concert featuring the ninth.