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Composer Portrait: Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Born December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Beethoven was reared in stimulating, although unhappy, surroundings. His early signs of musical talent were subjected to the capricious discipline of his father, a singer in the court chapel. In 1789, because of his father's alcoholism, the young Beethoven began supporting his family as a court musician. His early compositions under the tutelage of the German composer Christian Gottlob Neefe – particularly the funeral cantata on the death (1790) of Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II – signalled an important talent, and it was planned that Beethoven study in Vienna with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Although Mozart's death (1791) prevented this, Beethoven went to Vienna in 1792 and became a pupil of the Austrian composer Joseph Haydn.

In Vienna, Beethoven dazzled the aristocracy with his piano improvisations; meanwhile, he entered into increasingly favourable arrangements with Viennese music publishers. In composition, he steered a middle course between the stylistic extravagance of the German composer Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and what the public had perceived as the over-refinement of Mozart. The broadening market for published music enabled him to succeed as a free-lance composer, a path that Mozart a decade earlier had found full of frustration.

In the first decade of the nineteenth century, Beethoven renounced the sectional, loosely constructed style of works such as the popular Septet op. 20, for strings and winds, and turned to a fresh expansion of the musical language bequeathed by Haydn and Mozart. Despite his exaggerated claim that 'he had never learned anything from Haydn – he had gone so far as to seek additional instruction from the German composer Johann Georg Albrechtsberger – Beethoven soon revealed his complete assimilation of the Viennese Classical style in every major instrumental genre: symphony, concerto, string quartet, and sonata. The majority of his works which are most often performed today were composed during the decade bounded by the Symphony no. 3 *(Eroica,* begun 1803; first performed, 1805) and the Symphony no. 8 (1812), a period known as his 'heroic decade'.

Beethoven's fame reached its zenith during these years, but the steadily worsening hearing impairment that he had first noted in 1798 led to an increasing sense of social isolation. Gradually Beethoven settled into a pattern of shifting residences, spending the summer in the Viennese suburbs – Heiligenstadt was a favourite choice – and moving back to the central city in the autumn. In 1802, in his celebrated 'Heiligenstadt Testament', a quasi-legal letter to his two brothers, he expressed his agony over his growing deafness. After 1805, accounts of Beethoven's eccentricities multiply. He performed in public only rarely and made his last appearance in 1814.

Although reports circulated among Beethoven's friends that he was constantly in love, he tended to choose unattainable women, aristocratic or married or both. In his letter to the 'Immortal Beloved' (presumably never sent and now dated at 1812), he expressed his conflicting feelings for the woman who may have been the sole person ever to reciprocate his declarations. The long-debated riddle of her identity was solved beyond reasonable doubt in 1977 by the American musicologist Maynard Solomon. She was Antonie Brentano, the wife of a Frankfurt merchant and a mother of four. Conceivably, Beethoven's sense of virtue and fear of marriage contributed to his flight from this relationship, with its deeply shattering conflicts.

In 1815, on the death of his older brother, Casper Carl, Beethoven devoted his emotional energies to a costly legal struggle with his sister-in-law for custody of her nine year old son Karl. The mother received a temporarily favourable ruling, and only the intervention in 1820 of Beethoven's most powerful patron, the Archduke Rudolph, won the composer custody of his nephew. Beethoven was not an ideal parent and enormous friction developed between the two, contributing to Kari's attempted suicide in 1826.

By 1818 Beethoven had become virtually deaf and relied on small 'conversation books', in which visitors wrote their remarks to him. He withdrew from all but a steadily shrinking circle of friends. Except for the premieres of his Symphony no. 9 and parts of the *Missa solemnis* in

1824, his music remained fashionable only among a small group of connoisseurs. His prestige was still such, however, that during his last illness he received huge outpourings of sympathy. He died in Vienna on March 26, 1827; tens of thousands witnessed his funeral procession.

Musical Development

Beethoven's major output consists of 9 symphonies, 7 concertos (5 for piano), 16 string quartets, 32 piano sonatas, 10 sonatas for violin and piano, 5 sonatas for cello and piano, an opera, 2 masses, several overtures, and numerous sets of piano variations. He has traditionally been referred to as the 'bridge to Romanticism', and his output is simplistically divided into three roughly equal periods. Today most scholars view him as the last great representative of the Viennese Classical style, a composer who at two important junctures in his life turned away from the aesthetic of the emerging Romantic period in favour of renewed exploration of the legacy of Haydn and Mozart. After arriving in Vienna Beethoven alternated between compositions based openly on Classical models, such as the String Quartet in A Major op. 18 no. 5 (1800; patterned on Mozart's String Quartet K. 464) and those based on looser Italianate structures, such as the song 'Adelaide' (1795).

The 'new manner' that Beethoven referred to in 1802 marks his first return to the Viennese Classical tradition. Although his works of the decade 1802-1812 project a heroic aura, musically they represent an expansion of the tighter forms of Haydn and Mozart. This is apparent both in works of unprecedented scope, such as the *Eroica* Symphony and the Piano Concerto no. 5 *(Emperor,* 1809), and in formally compressed works such as the Symphony no. 5 (1808) and the Piano Sonata op. 57 *(Appassionata,* 1805). In these works, he proved that a style founded on unprecedented thematic integration and on the harmonic polarisation achieved by manipulating opposing keys could produce works of remarkable expressive power.

The completion of the Symphony no. 8 and the fading of hopes for a successful relationship with the 'Immortal Beloved' left Beethoven in a sea of compositional uncertainty. The prodigious output of the previous decade ceased. The few works of the years after 1812 – such as the op. 98 song cycle *An die feme Geliebte* (To the Distant Beloved, 1816) and the Piano Sonata in A Major op. 101 (1817) – took on an experimental hue, reviving and expanding on the more relaxed musical structures Beethoven had employed in the 1790s. This handful of open-ended, cyclic works of this period exercised the most direct musical influence on the succeeding generation of Romantic composers (apparent, for example, in the song cycles of the German composer Robert Schumann).

In 1818, Beethoven inaugurated a second return to the tightly structured 'heroic' style. The move was marked by the Piano Sonata in B-flat Major op. 106 *(Hammerklavie6,* a work of unprecedented length and difficulty that left behind he accomplished amateur performer once and for all.

The works of Beethoven's last period, rather than being composed in sets or even in pairs, are each marked by an individuality that later composers could admire but scarcely emulate. In the Ninth Symphony and the *Missa Solemnis* he gave expression to an all-embracing view of idealised humanity more rooted in the Enlightenment than in Roman Catholic doctrine, and more compelling than the equally lofty ideals portrayed a decade earlier in his only opera, *Fidelio* (1814).

The dominant private dimension of Beethoven's late style gave rise to the five string quartets of 1824-1826, the last of which were written without commissions. In these works Beethoven achieved an ideal synthesis between popular and learned styles, between the humorous and the sublime. Judged inaccessible in their time, the string quartets have become – as has so much of his music-yardsticks against which all other musical achievements are measured.

Beethoven's lifelong habit of sketching musical compositions as he worked them out became even more important as e grew older. The more than 7000 pages of drafts entered outdoors

on scraps of paper or in small notebooks, as well as the more extensive notebooks he filled up indoors, form one of Western music's most enduring monuments to musical creativity.

Three periods of work

It was his biographer Wilhelm von Lenz who first divided Beethoven's output into three periods, omitting the years of is apprenticeship in Bonn. The first period begins with the completion of the Three Trios for Piano, Violin and Cello, Opus 1, in 1794, and ends about 1800, the year of the first public performance of the First Symphony and the Septet. he second period extends from 1801 to 1814, from the Piano Sonata in C Sharp Minor (Moonlight) to the Piano Sonata in E minor (Opus 90). The last period runs from 1801 to 1827, the year of his death. Though the division is a useful one, it cannot be applied rigidly. A composition begun in one period may often have been completed in another, hence the existence of such transitional works as the Third Piano Concerto and the Second Symphony, which belong partly to the first period and partly to the second. Again, the tide of Beethoven's maturity advanced at a rate that varied according to his familiarity with the medium in which he happened to be writing. The piano was his home ground; therefore, it is in the piano sonatas that the middle-period characteristics first make their appearance, even before 1800. The mass, on the other hand, was unfamiliar territory, so that the Mass in C Major, written during the same period as the Fourth Piano Concerto and the Razumovsky string quartets, sounds in many ways like an early work.

First period.

Apart from the First Symphony and first two piano concerti, the works of the first period consist entirely of chamber music, most of it based on Beethoven's own instrument, the piano. All show a preoccupation with craftsmanship in the 18th-century manner. The material, for the most part, has a family likeness to that of Haydn and Mozart but, in keeping with the contemporary style, is slightly coarser and more blunt. Beethoven's treatment of the forms in current use is usually expansive. The expositions are long and polythematic; the developments are relatively short. Slow movements are long and lyrical with copious decoration. The third movement, though sometimes called a scherzo, remains true to its minuet origins, though its surface is often disturbed by unminuet-like accents. Finales are at once high-spirited and elegant. Two characteristics, however, mark Beethoven out strongly from other composers of the time: one is an individual use of contrasted dynamics and especially the device of crescendo leading to a sudden piano; the other, most noticeable in the piano sonatas, is the gradual infiltration of techniques derived from improvisation – unexpected accents, rhythmic ambiguities designed to keep the audience guessing, and especially the use of apparently trivial, almost senseless material from which to generate a cogent musical argument.

Second period.

The second period may be said to begin in the piano music with two sonatas 'quasi una fantasia,' Opus 27, of 1801, but in the symphony and concerto it is not fully apparent before the *Eroica* (1804) and the Fourth Piano Concerto (1806). Here the use of improvisatory material is more and more marked; but, whereas in the earlier period Beethoven was more concerned to show how it could fit naturally into a traditional 18th-century framework, here he explores in greater detail the logical implication of every departure from the norm. His harmony remains basically simple-much simpler, for instance, than much of Mozart's; what is new is the way it is used in relation to the basic pulse. From this Beethoven creates in his main themes an infinite variety of stress and accent, out of which the form of each movement is generated. The result is that, of all composers, Beethoven is the least inclined to repeat himself; all his works, but especially those of the middle and late period, inhabit their own individual formal world. Other characteristics of the middle period include shorter expositions and longer developments and codas; slow movements, too, become much shorter, sometimes vanishing altogether. The third movement is now always a scherzo, not a minuet, with frequent use of unexpected accents and syncopation. Finales tend to take on much more weight than before and in certain cases become the principal movement. Decoration begins to disappear as each note becomes more functional, melodically and harmonically.

Another feature of these works is their immediacy. Here Beethoven's power is most evident; and the majority of the repertory works belong to this period.

Third period.

The third period is marked by a growing concentration of musical thought combined with an increasingly wider range of harmony and texture. Beethoven's enthusiasm for Handel began to bear fruit in a much more thoroughgoing use of counterpoint. But he never lost touch with the simplicity of his earliest manner, so that the range of expression and mood in these last works is something that has never been surpassed. A form to which he gave more and more attention at this time was that of the variation. As an improviser he had always found it congenial, and, though some of the sets he had published in earlier years are merely decorative, he had created such outstanding examples of the genre as the finale of the *Eroica* and the *Prometheus* variations, both on the same theme. It is this type of variation that Beethoven began to pursue in his final period. A unique feature of the sets that occur in his last string quartets and sonatas is the sense of cumulative growth, not merely from variation to variation but within each variation itself. In the quartets, everything in the composer's musical equipment is deployed – fugue; variation; dance; sonata movement; march; even modal and pentatonic, or five-tone, melody.

Influence

Perhaps Beethoven's most profound influence was in changing the perception of the role of the composer from that of a craftsman producing work to order for church or aristocratic patron (a role which Mozart and Haydn had been obliged to adopt), to an artist producing work to meet his own artistic needs, financially independent through publishing and performing his works – a change in perception that is one of the hallmarks of 19th-century Romanticism. In this respect, he paralleled the influence of Byron in poetry or Turner in painting.

His explicit musical influence was limited. For some composers – such as Johannes Brahms, who produced no symphony until his 40s – Beethoven's presence was paralysing. The German composer Richard Wagner invoked Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, particularly its choral finale, as support for his own vision of the music drama. Not until the late-Romantic symphonies of the Austrian composers Anton Bruckner and, especially, Gustav Mahler, was Beethoven's symphonic ideal carried to what many regard as its final stage of development. Today Beethoven's works form the core of orchestral and chamber music repertoires the world over.’

Structural innovations

Beethoven remains the supreme exponent of what may be called the architectonic use of tonality. In his greatest sonata movements, such as the first allegro of the *Eroica*, the listener's subconscious mind remains oriented to E-flat major even in the most distant keys, so that when, long before the recapitulation, the music touches on the dominant (B flat), this is immediately recognisable as being the dominant. Of his innovations in the symphony and quartet, the most notable is the replacement of the minuet by the more dynamic scherzo; he enriched both the orchestra and the quartet with a new range of sonority and variety of texture.

The same is true of the concerto, in which, strictly speaking, he introduced no formal innovations, the entry of solo instrument before an orchestral ritornello in the Fourth and Fifth piano concerti having been already anticipated by Mozart. Although, in the finale of the Ninth Symphony and the *Missa Solemnis*, Beethoven shows himself a master of choral effects, the solo human voice gave him difficulty to the end. His many songs form, perhaps, the least important part of his output. His one opera, *Fidelio*, owes its pre-eminence to the excellence of the music, rather than to any real understanding of the operatic medium. But even this lack of vocal sense could be made to bear fruit, in that it set his mind free in other directions. A composer such as Mozart or Haydn, whose conception of melody remained rooted in what

could be sung, could never have written anything like the opening of the *Eroica*, in which the melody takes shape from three instrumental strands each giving way to the other. Wagner was not far wrong when he hailed Beethoven as the discoverer of instrumental melody.

Beethoven holds an important place in the history of the piano. In his day, the piano sonata was the most intimate form of chamber music that existed – far more so than the string quartet, which was often performed in public. For Beethoven, the piano sonata was the vehicle for his most bold and inward thoughts. He did not anticipate the technical devices of such later composers as Chopin and Liszt, which were designed to counteract the percussiveness of the piano, partly because he himself had a pianistic ability that could make the most simply laid-out melody sing; partly, too, because the piano itself was still in a fairly early stage of development; and partly because he himself valued its percussive quality and could turn it to good account. Piano tone, caused by a hammer's striking a string, cannot move forward, as can the sustained, bowed tone of the violin, although careful phrasing on the player's part can make it seem to do so. Beethoven, however, is almost alone in writing melodies that accept this limitation, melodies of utter stillness in which each chord is like a stone dropped into a calm pool. Beethoven was less successful in combining the piano with one other instrument, and his duo sonatas remain on a slightly lower level. But it is above all in the piano sonata that the most striking use of improvisatory techniques as an element of construction is found. Among later composers it was chiefly Liszt who extended Beethoven's principle of transferring structural weight from the first movement to the finale, making it the basis of his symphonic poems as well as of his two concertos. The two works of Beethoven that undoubtedly had most influence over succeeding generations were the Fifth and Ninth symphonies, with their progression from storm and stress to triumph. Brahms' Symphony No. 1 in C Minor, Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5 in E Minor, César Franck's Symphony in D Minor, and Mahler's Symphony No. 2 in C Minor are all examples of Beethoven's spiritual progeny, though few will grant that they equal, let alone surpass, their models.