

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN: PART 2: HIS MUSIC

INTRODUCTION

Ludwig Van Beethoven is generally viewed as one of the most influential figures in the history of European classical music. His music has remained among the most performed, discussed and reviewed. Scholarly journals are devoted to analysis of his life and work, as well as his numerous biographies and monographs. He is widely considered as among the most important Western composers, and along with Bach and Mozart, his music is the most frequently recorded.

By listening to his music, we can get a glimpse of what his daily life was like. His own family struggles, his loss of hearing and later, his illness are revealed through the elements of his works, such as his personal expression, emotional state (bipolar disorder) and chronic pain.

His stylistic innovations were twofold. First, they brought the Classical form to its highest expressive level, expanding in formal, structural and harmonic terms the musical styles developed by prior composers, such as Mozart and Haydn. Also, they had a major influence in the musical language and thinking of the Romantic era.

Beethoven was considered as a transitional figure between Classicism and Romanticism, due to his later works including Romantic elements, and a radical departure from the past. He helped define or redefine musical terms such as tonality, sonata form, and Allegro. His social difficulties as well as his difficulties of artistic creation can also be seen in his music. Beethoven represented a new form of musical enlightenment and way of thinking by the use of his technique in his later works. This has led him to be a pinnacle figure and the bridge between Classicism and Romanticism.

THREE MUSICAL PERIODS

Beethoven's musical output has traditionally been divided into three periods, a classification that dates to the first years after the composer's death in 1827 and was formalized with the publication of Wilhelm von Lenz's influential work *Beethoven et ses trios styles* (Beethoven and his Three Styles). These period distinctions are made depending on his music and elements and styles which are seen in his work and is still widely used. Generally, each period demonstrates characteristic stylistic evolutions in Beethoven's musical language and preoccupations as well as important developments in the composer's personal life. These periods are as follows:

1. Formative period that extends to 1802
2. Middle period from 1803 to 1812
3. Mature period from 1813 to 1817

EARLY PERIOD

Beethoven's early works can be generally characterized by the composer's efforts to master the predominant classical language of the period. Beethoven developed his own individual musical style in this period, shown by the structure and form of his works. These compositions show strict conventions to the Classical style and a greater use of thematic material (greater use of themes). He tried to write longer works in these years; some of these fragments have vanished. Beethoven wrote 40 compositions while in Bonn.

Beethoven's move to Vienna helped define his own musical style, as well as expand his Classical form and idiom. While in Vienna, he also took lessons in Italian opera as well as music theory. He spent most of his time in Vienna securing his position as a performer and composer, and little time actually composing. His compositional efforts included revisions of early works as well as working on his compositions which would be published under his first opus numbers. The first of these, the Three Piano Trios under Op. 1 (July 1795) and Three Piano Sonatas

under Op. 2 (March 1796) demonstrate many of the characteristics of his early Viennese period. His first published works received negative criticism.

MIDDLE PERIOD: UNIQUE MUSICAL STYLE

This was one of Beethoven's most famous periods. Here he developed his own style and character. He continued toward another trend, larger orchestras and moved the center of the sound downward (using instruments of lower registers), which gave his music a heavier and darker feel. Another characteristic was that of his large, extended architecture-like structures by the use of extensive development of musical material, themes and motifs. By juxtaposing different keys using expected notes to join them, he is able to expand the harmonic realm by which music moves, and create a sense of musical drama in this space.

Beethoven helped to further unify the different movements in multi-movement works with the invention of the "germ motive." The germ motive, or "germinal motif", as it is sometimes called is a motive that is used to create motives and themes throughout a whole work, without making it obvious that such a thing is being done. Thus, all the themes in a piece can be tied back to a single motive in the work. An early and famous example of this is his Pathétique Sonata, where all of the subjects used in the first movement originate from germinal idea derived from its opening bar. Similarly, the opening bars of his Eighth Symphony are used to derive motives to be used throughout the whole symphony. This device lends unity to a work or even a group of works (as some motives Beethoven used not only in one work, but in many works) without repeating material exactly or turning to canonic devices.

In his Fifth Symphony, Beethoven used the four-note motif (drawn from a late Haydn Symphony) throughout the whole movement in different juxtapositions, marking the first important occurrence of cyclic form and giving a sense of a totally internal conflict to the piece.

MATURE PERIOD: LATE WORKS

Although Beethoven had some support and his household management had improved somewhat, his physical health took a major downturn. Beethoven began a renewed study of older music that was then being published in the first attempts at complete editions. With these influences emerged a new style, to which he finished his collection of piano sonatas, the last two sonatas for cello and piano, the late string quartets, and two works for very large forces: the Missa Solemnis (Solemn Mass) and the Ninth Symphony.

To satisfy the need for income, he composed piano sonatas and bagatelles. Although he had some finances coming in, many of his works remained unpublished. To this end, his brother Johann began to take a hand in his business affairs. He located older unpublished works to offer for publication and offering the Missa to multiple publishers with the goal of getting a higher price for it.

Two commissions in 1822 improved Beethoven's financial prospects. These two commissions were of a symphony, as well as three string quartets. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony which was first performed, along with the Missa Solemnis on May 7, 1824 at the Karntnertortheater; this concert was a great success. A second concert on May 24 of the same year, in which Beethoven was guaranteed a minimum fee, was poorly attended; consequently, this was Beethoven's last public concert.

BEETHOVEN'S LAST COMPOSITIONS

Beethoven wrote his last quartets amidst failing health. In April 1825 he was bedridden, and remained ill for about a month. He recovered from this illness, and finished the quartets now numbered Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Sixteenth. The last work completed by Beethoven was the substitute final movement of the Thirteenth Quartet. Shortly thereafter, in December 1826, illness struck again, with episodes of vomiting and diarrhea that nearly ended

his life. In 1825, his nine symphonies were performed in a cycle for the first time, by the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra under Johann Philipp Christian Schulz. This was repeated in 1826. From December 1826 to his death on March 26, 1827, his health declined rapidly and no new compositions were started nor finished.