Ludwig van Beethoven: The man who changed everything

Even Mozart didn't influence the course of classical music as much as Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827 — see Figure 2-7). Born in Bonn, Germany, Beethoven ("BAY-toe-ven") was the son of a court musician named Johann. Like Mozart's dad, Johann tried to turn his son into a famous child prodigy. Unlike Mozart's dad, Johann did it the hard way, by beating his son when prodigyhood was too slow in coming. Despite this harsh treatment, Ludwig became an excellent pianist.

At age 22, Beethoven moved to — where else? — Vienna, where the musical action was. There he wrote music for various individuals, special occasions, and public concerts of his own compositions, in the process making a better living than Mozart ever did.

Both Beethoven and his music were fiery, impulsive, and impetuous; people loved to watch and listen as he played his passionate piano compositions. Offstage, however, his fiery personality got him into fights with his landlords and girlfriends. Beethoven wasn't a long-term kinda guy, either in apartments or relationships.

We all know characters like that: geniuses who, despite their incredible abilities and talents, are so much easier to deal with when they're dead.

Papa Haydn teaches Ludwig a thing or two

But Beethoven's main reason for moving to Vienna was to study composition with Joseph Haydn. (After Prince Esterházy's death, Haydn moved back to his permanent home in Vienna.) This teacher-student relationship, alas, was no less stormy than any of Beethoven's other relationships; still, Haydn tolerated his new pupil out of respect for his prodigious talents.

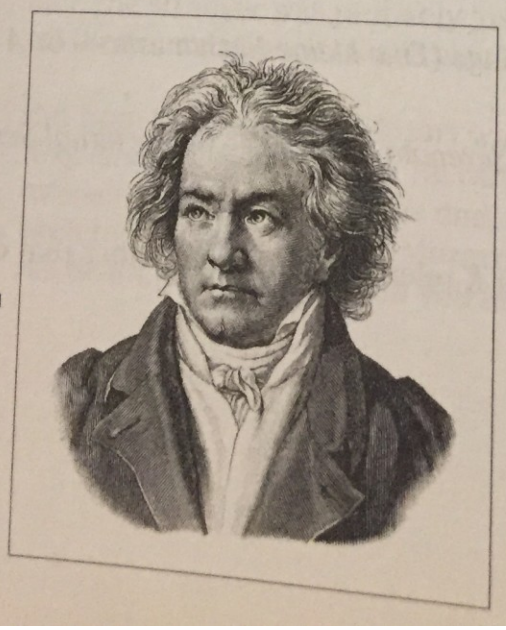

Figure 2-7: Ludwig van Beethoven changed everything.

Just as Mozart had, Beethoven learned how to write a symphony and a string quartet — Haydn's two greatest specialties. In fact, in Beethoven's first two symphonies, Haydn's influence is everywhere. In form, structure, and length, they're nearly identical to Haydn's symphonies of the day.

But then something happened that changed Beethoven forever. At 31, he began to realize that he was gradually losing his hearing. This is the worst thing that can happen to a musician — let alone the hottest-tempered one of all. The approaching deafness had a deeply disturbing effect on Beethoven.

One day, Beethoven walked through a forest with his student Ferdinand Ries, who remarked on the beautiful piping of a shepherd's flute nearby. Beethoven heard nothing — and became overwhelmingly depressed. He later wrote of his torment in a document that's both pathetic and courageous, now known to musicians as the *Heiligenstadt Testament*:

> Oh, you men, who think or say that I am evil or misanthropic, how immensely you wrong me. You do not know the secret reason. . . . For six years now, I have been horribly afflicted. . . . Ah, how could I possibly admit a weakness in the one sense which ought to be more perfect in me than in others, a sense which I once possessed in the greatest perfection? Oh, I cannot do it; so forgive me when you see me retreat when I would have gladly spoken with you. . . . I must live alone, as if banished. . . .

Beethoven's compositions of this period bear the mark of a man desperate to be the master of his own fate. If you're aware of his condition of the time, his music makes much more sense. In expressing his pain, Beethoven single-handedly took music from the Classical style into the Romantic period, where the most important element in music was the expression of *feelings*.

Put another way: Without Ludwig van Beethoven, we'd have no Barry Manilow.

The pendulum of classical music

You may have noticed a funny thing about musical tastes throughout history: They're a pendulum. Each period of music represents an overreaction to the style of the music before it.

The Baroque style, with its florid ornaments and improvisations, was an attempt to be freer emotionally than the cool spiritualism of medieval and Renaissance music. After the Baroque, the Classical period put a bridle on emotion once more. And the Romantic period burst violently out of that bridle.

Beethoven was the one who did the bursting.

The Heroic Symphony

If one single piece of music revolutionized music history, it was Beethoven's Symphony no. 3, known as the *Eroica* (meaning "heroic") Symphony. With this piece, Beethoven ceased to be merely the successor to Haydn and Mozart and found his own unique voice.

From the start, Beethoven conceived this symphony on a grand scale, intending to evoke the life and death of a great hero. Originally, the hero was to have been Napoleon Bonaparte; but that changed in 1804, as Beethoven's friend Ferdinand Ries wrote:

> Beethoven greatly admired Bonaparte at the time. I saw a copy of the score lying on his table, with the word "Bonaparte" at the very top of the title page, and at the very bottom "Luigi van Beethoven," but not another word. . . .
>
> I was the first to break the news to him that Bonaparte had proclaimed himself emperor. He flew into a rage and cried out: "Is he then, too, just an ordinary human being? Now he, too, will trample on all the rights of man and satisfy only his ambition. He will become a tyrant!" Beethoven seized the title page, ripped it in two, and threw it to the floor. The first page was later rewritten, and only then did the symphony receive the title *Sinfonia eroica* (*Heroic Symphony*).

The piece is almost twice as long as any symphony that came before it, and the proportions were changed dramatically. Especially unusual is the second, slow movement — it's a somber funeral march with moments of great mourning and passionate outbursts of grief.

In all, Beethoven wrote nine symphonies; they challenged and expanded all the symphonic forms that existed up to that point. With each work, he tried to make his music do more, to say more, to boldly go where no music had gone before.

Taking the Fifth

Of course, Beethoven's most famous symphony is his Fifth. It's the one that begins in the austere key of C minor, with the famous four-note snippet that everybody knows: ""Dit-dit-dit-DAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

After four movements of Herculean toil, the symphony comes to a close — but instead of ending in C minor (the serious key that began the piece), Beethoven finishes in the cheerful, triumphant, exuberant key of C major.

Now, in musical terms, the difference between a minor chord and major chord is just one note. (See Chapter 11.) But in emotional terms, the difference is *enormous*. If you go from minor to major, you feel as if the storm has passed, the clouds have lifted, the sun has come shining through, and you've found a free parking space *right* in front of the restaurant.

Listen to the first movement on Track 4 of this book's CD — and follow along by reading Chapter 5. But to fully appreciate the tormented musical journey of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, you've got to listen to the whole thing.

From sketch to final symphony

Unlike Mozart, Beethoven wasn't a facile composer; in fact, he'd wrestle with his work in his sketchbook for weeks and months and *still* he wasn't satisfied.

One of the simplest melodies ever to enter Beethoven's sketchbooks eventually became one of the most profound themes in history: the "Ode to Joy" theme from his Ninth (and last) Symphony. You may recognize this melody as the tune to "Joyful, joyful, we adore thee" — or as the ironic background music from the movie *Die Hard*.

"Ode to Joy" was a long, beautiful poem by Friedrich Schiller. From the age of 23, Beethoven had wanted to set it to music. He finally found the right place to put it — right at the end of the Ninth Symphony — 20 years later.

Up until that moment, every symphony ever written had been designed to be played by an orchestra alone. But in his Ninth Symphony, for the first time ever, Beethoven added four solo singers and a huge chorus to sing the words of Schiller's poem. For music critics of the time, adding the singers was an act of treason. Debate raged in musical circles for decades.

Fortunately, the public didn't care much about musical circles; the first performance was a great success. After it was over, the audience rose to its feet, cheering Beethoven in a thundering ovation. But by this time, Beethoven was totally deaf; he sat onstage facing the orchestra, unaware of the audience's reaction. In a famous act of kindness, one of the singers gently grasped Beethoven's shoulders and turned him around to see the adoring audience.

By the time Beethoven died, he was a hero; 30,000 mourners attended his funeral. One of the coffin bearers was Franz Schubert — the next musical guy you can read about in this chapter.

Hearing Beethoven

If you'd like to hear more music by Beethoven (and you *really* should), check out these orchestral masterpieces:

- The symphonies — all nine of them are amazing
- Piano Concerto no. 4 in G major, opus 58
- Piano Concerto no. 5 in E-flat major, opus 73
- Violin Concerto in D major, opus 61

11:04 "And now we *really* mean it!" says the orchestra. The movement is over.

So now you have an idea of the structure of this beautiful music. The themes boil down as follows: A – B – A – C – A – B – A. In other words, a perfect example of a *rondo*.

4 Beethoven: Symphony No. 5, First Movement

This piece is one of the most well-known movements in all of music, for good reason. In this first movement of the Fifth Symphony, Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) gives us a musical statement of anger, driving intensity, and great beauty — and the quintessential first-movement *sonata form*.

If you've read Chapter 3, you may remember that sonata form is a prescribed three-section structure: (1) an *exposition*, in which the composer puts forth two main themes; (2) a *development* section, in which he fools around with them; and (3) a *recapitulation*, in which he brings them back again. In this case, you'll also find a *coda* — a tail.

Exposition

0:00 The movement begins in a rage, with strings and clarinets shouting out a concise theme. The famous four-note melody at the beginning is the basis of the entire movement: "dit-dit-dit DAAAAH!" Beethoven called it "Fate knocking on the door."

Composer Richard Wagner imagined how Beethoven may have described those "DAAAAH!" notes: "My held notes must be long and serious. Do you think I wrote them in jest, or because I could not decide what to write next? Of course not! That strong, exhausting tone . . . becomes a rapturous and horrible spasm. The note's life-blood must be squeezed out to the very last drop, with enough force to stop the waves of the sea and reveal the bottom of the ocean; to arrest the clouds in their courses, dispel the mists, and expose the pure blue sky, and the burning face of the sun itself. This is the meaning of the sudden long-sustained notes!"

We're with you, Richard.

0:08 And they're off! The four-note theme flashes through the orchestra like lightning: violins, violas, violins. Then the entire orchestra enters, leading to a mini-climax. After everybody stops playing, the first violins keep holding their note . . . and holding. Suspense . . . great suspense . . . .

0:20 Crash! The entire orchestra hammers out the four-note theme again, holding onto the last note as before. And again, fleetly the music takes off. Once more, the little tune is tossed around, and the orchestra becomes louder and louder until, with two forceful chords, it stops momentarily.

0:46 Proudly, the horns announce the beginning of the second theme. The second theme is in a new key; the piece remains in this key until the end of the exposition. It begins with the same three fast "dit-dit-dit" notes that you heard first in the theme; but now those notes are followed by *three* long notes.

0:48 When the violins enter, the mood becomes more lyrical. This line is taken up by the quiet clarinet and then by the flute. But if you listen carefully, you can still hear the four-note theme simmering down low in the bass instruments. Gradually, the music builds up to another mini-climax. The orchestra bubbles and boils.

1:23 We hear three decisive statements of the four-note theme. Then silence. And that's the end of the exposition.

1:28 But wait — the furious four-note theme starts again, exactly as at the beginning. In fact, we now hear a full repetition of the *entire* exposition from the beginning. As you listen, try to identify the different sections as they come by again.

Development

2:55 As the development begins, the horns sing the four-note theme at the top of their lungs, echoed by the string section.

3:00 Now the fast motion begins again — quietly, as at the beginning — in the strings. Don't forget: In the *development* section, we expect to hear the main ideas of the exposition in a slightly different form, as the composer develops them. And indeed, this development is made up almost entirely of the four-note tunelet. Amazing how Beethoven can use that theme over and over, always exploring new ways to present it so that it never becomes stale.

3:09 The music builds, seemingly to a climax. But then, at the last second, just before it reaches a climax, Beethoven backs off. Frustration in music!

3:14 The music rises toward another climax . . . and he thwarts that one, too.

3:27 But this time, he means it for real. This third buildup is not a fakeout. The skies open up, and the heavens storm.

3:35 Until now, this section has been developing just one thing — the four-note theme. But now, we hear the notes of the horn call that began the second theme. In fact, that's *all* we're going to hear from the second theme in this development section. The lyrical, submissive side has no place in the maelstrom.

3:45 Now Beethoven does something especially ingenious. He ceases the constant, fast-note motion and develops the long notes for a while. Winds alternate with strings; as they do, they gradually become quieter and quieter — until suddenly, at **4:05**, the orchestra blasts out the four-note theme.

4:09 Again, alternation, quietly . . . and then again, an outburst, leading to . . .

Recapitulation

4:13 This time, the entire orchestra makes the outburst (not just the strings and clarinets as at the beginning). Here are the two statements of the four-note theme, each with a powerful hold, as Beethoven shakes his fist at the heavens.

4:26 Again, they're off — the four-note theme makes its way around the string section. But this time, at **4:36**, everyone stops playing except the oboe, which plays a little free-sounding passage by itself. A short *cadenza* for an oboe solo — unheard of in a place like this! (You can read about *cadenzas* in Chapter 3.) Music scholars have described this solo as a little blossom growing out of the pause.

4:48 The motion begins again and builds up, reaching a climax with two forceful chords, signaling that the second theme is about to begin.

5:09 Beethoven announces the second theme in the horns. But here, he had a problem. As you can read in Chapter 9, the old *natural horns* could play only a few notes — in a single key. This piece is now in a different key from the beginning — and the horns don't have the notes to play it! So Beethoven substitutes the next best thing: bassoons.

We should point out that many conductors today, understanding this fact, simply replace the bassoons with modern horns. (Modern horns can play in any key.) But this recording preserves Beethoven's original instrumentation, and it's bassoons that you hear.

What follows is almost identical to the corresponding music in the exposition, but, again, in a different key. The music builds and builds, reaching a final-sounding climax.

Coda

5:54 Just when you thought the music was going to come to a halt (as it did at the end of the exposition), it goes on. And on! The intensity continues to build as Beethoven takes you into the *coda,* or tail, of the movement. The four-note theme plays again and again; the notes repeat in a frantic, driving rhythm.

5:59 Then, to add to the excitement, the melody note in the violins goes *up* a notch exactly at this point, as if shifting into a higher gear. Then, for a moment, the storm pauses — just long enough for a quiet bassoon rendition of the four-note theme.

6:05 And then the music rages again. From here on, Beethoven is unrelenting. He shouts, he rages, he pounds his fist, until . . .

7:00 All the forces in nature and music convene in this one moment. A final statement of the two four-note themes, each with an earth-shaking hold. And then, with a series of concise blows, Beethoven ends the movement.

5 Brahms: Symphony No. 4, Third Movement

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) was incredibly self-critical; he never let a piece out of his sight until it was perfect. He didn't give birth to his first symphony until he reached the age of 43; and he wrote only four symphonies in all.

The final symphony is perhaps the most severe and intense of the four — except for the third movement. This charming *Allegro giocoso* ("Lively and joyous") movement is a ray of sunshine. It's Brahms in one of his rare, "unbuttoned" moods. At its first performance, this movement caused such spontaneous cheers that it had to be repeated.

It also has the distinction of being the only movement of a Brahms symphony that uses a triangle.

0:00 A *fortissimo* (very loud) burst from the entire orchestra (except triangle, that is) starts the boisterous mood. Remember this rhythm, because it comes back later. "Come and get your beans, boys! Come and get your beans, boys!" would accurately describe this rhythm, although we're quite confident that's not how *Brahms* would have described it.