

Chapter 14: Beethoven (1770–1827)

I. Beethoven

A. Introduction

1. His career coincides with the ascendancy of instrumental music.
2. The stages of his career correspond to changing styles in his music: early, middle, and late, corresponding to events in his personal life.
3. Critic E. T. A. Hoffmann praised Beethoven and was reflecting assumptions about art and artists.

II. The religion of art

A. Romantic view of art

1. The Romantic view of art was a religious one. Romanticism elevated art, which gradually took on many of the trappings formerly associated with religious practices and institutions.

III. Early life and works

A. Stages of Beethoven's career

1. Comparisons were made to Mozart.
 - a) Beethoven made a journey to Vienna in the hopes of studying with Mozart. Mozart's response was that "someday he will give the world something to talk about."

B. Early life

1. Beethoven gave his first public performance at age seven, published his first work at eleven, and became court organist in Bonn at age ten.

C. The move to Vienna

1. Beethoven's first important compositions date from 1790 and were shown to Haydn, who agreed to teach him in 1792.
2. Beethoven gained recognition as a pianist among aristocratic circles in Vienna.
3. Until 1800 he was better known as a performer than composer; however, this soon changed, particularly with his first symphony and septet, Op. 20.

D. Personal disaster: the loss of hearing

1. Beethoven acknowledged he was losing his hearing in 1801 and contemplated suicide.
2. He moved to Heiligenstadt in 1802 and wrote his famous Heiligenstadt Testament that outlines his despair at becoming deaf.
3. Beethoven's compositions took a stylistic turn at this time, and the *Eroica* is often seen as the symphony marking this period in his life, musically expressing the struggles he felt.

IV. Middle period

A. The mighty *Eroica* Symphony

1. Almost everything about the *Eroica* is more than previous symphonies: length, size of orchestra, technical demands on players, harmonic drama, rhetorical vehemence, and unity of the whole.
2. He intended to dedicate it to Napoleon, but was disillusioned with the leader when he proclaimed himself emperor.

3. Even though early commentary thought the symphony too long and demanding, within a few years public opinion had changed and noted with appreciation the deep spiritual aesthetic.
 4. Musical analysis of the *Eroica*:
 - a) A low C# in the Eb-major melody hints at the conflict to come.
 - b) The second movement is a funeral march.
 - c) The *scherzo* (joke) plays with meter, moving between two and three.
 - d) The final movement is a supersized set of variations, beginning with only the harmonic outline in the bass. He used this theme in three previous pieces.
 - e) The heroic style of the *Eroica* continued for about ten years.
- B. Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*
1. Beethoven's longest work is his only opera, *Fidelio*, which dates from the middle period.
 2. It was initially a flop and subsequently revised (three versions and four overtures now exist).
 3. The final chorus of *Fidelio* is one of several works that moves the work from light to dark (see also his Fifth Symphony).
- C. The Fifth Symphony and fate
1. While the Fifth Symphony is Beethoven's most famous work today, it was not during his lifetime.
 2. The symphony also includes a feature of his music known as organicism: all movements grow out of a single germ/idea.
 3. Several unexpected passages, such as the short oboe cadenza, force the listener to ask questions of why the music behaves as it does. This is a new self-conscious subjectivity, and it is purely instrumental music making a point without reference to text.
 4. The second movement is an unusual variation set with two alternating themes.
 5. The last two movements are linked.
 6. For the design of a symphony to cover all four movements, the overarching tension and release, the sheer power of Beethoven's Fifth demonstrates what Hoffmann called "the spirit world of infinite."
- D. "More expression of feeling than tone painting": the *Pastoral* Symphony
1. Not all of Beethoven's middle-period works are dynamic and heroic. He wrote the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies simultaneously, and they were premiered on the same concert.
 2. The Sixth Symphony is intentionally programmatic.
 3. He gave each movement a descriptive title.
- E. Concert life in Beethoven's Vienna
1. Beethoven planned a special concert in 1808, and it included the premieres of both the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies and the Fourth Piano Concerto, among other works.

2. Because of a lack of standing orchestras, enough rehearsals, etc., concert performances such as this one were probably subpar by today's standards.

F. Rising fame and decreasing productivity

1. After 1808, Beethoven took his music in yet another direction, one marked by a period of depression.
2. Contemporaries such as Goethe found him socially difficult, if genius.
3. The summer of 1812, he penned the letter to the "Immortal Beloved," found in his effects after his death.
4. In 1815 he sought custody of his nephew, Karl. The ensuing legal battles went poorly and hurt all involved. Karl's attempted suicide in 1826 was a decisive blow to the composer.
5. The composer's production of major works declined in these years, but his compositional ambition grew even if the number of works trailed off.
6. When critics prophesied that Beethoven had reached the end of his creative genius, he warned them to wait and see.

V. Late Beethoven

A. An invitation to London in 1817 spurred the composer to embark on several new compositions, including the huge "Hammerklavier" Sonata.

1. Other large works from this period include the last three intense sonatas for piano, *Missa Solemnis*, the Ninth Symphony, and several works for string quartet, including the *Grosse Fuge*.
2. Even though commentators came to see the late works as Beethoven's greatest, the initial reception was not so positive. Some of the words used to describe them were "incomprehensible," "vague," and "chaotic."
3. Beethoven wrote his late works were not written to please or entertain. With Beethoven, the composer became the ultimate musical being—not the performer.

B. The Ninth Symphony

1. Like the unidentical twin Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, the *Missa Solemnis* and Ninth Symphony form another unofficial pair.
2. The Ninth Symphony is more unusual than any of his previous symphonies.
 - a) The first movement opens mysteriously with octave A's that become the dominant of D minor, the tonic.
 - b) Beethoven switches the scherzo and slow movement.
 - c) The last movement is the most famous, opening with loud dissonance and confusion that leads to an instrumental recitative.
 - d) Fragments of previous movements return in the finale.
 - e) Seemingly out of nowhere, the now-famous "Ode to Joy" melody appears in the lower strings, monophonic. It grows in various textures and writings styles.
 - f) Almost seven minutes into the movement, the entire music heard thus far begins again, this time with the recitative sung by a solo bass voice.

- g) The “Ode to Joy” becomes the theme for continuing variation, mostly for the duration of the movement.
 - 3. Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was a force to be reckoned with for the remainder of the century.
- C. Inwardness: the late string quartets
 - 1. At the very end of his life, Beethoven returned to the string quartet. He completed six more works for this medium.
 - 2. The fugue that was to have been the finale of Op. 130 outgrew its place and had to be published as a separate work.
 - a) It was extremely difficult to play and to understand.
 - 3. Beethoven took an interest in eighteenth-century music in his last years.
 - 4. At the time of his death, Beethoven was far more a public figure than any composer had ever been before.