

Ludwig van Beethoven

Although there is no definite record of Ludwig van Beethoven's becoming a member of the Craft, there are very strong grounds for believing that he was a Mason. Many of his friends and fellow musicians were Masons and there are several references to Masonry in his voluminous correspondence. The Adagio of his Seventh quartet bears the superscription: 'A weeping willow or an acacia over the grave of my brother'. Both Beethoven's blood brothers were alive when the work was written and so these words probably had a Masonic connection. Schindler, one of his biographers, mentions a handshake when visiting the composer: '... a grip of our hands said the rest'. A song, 'What is the Mason's aim', was written for the "Loge des Frères Courageux à l'Orient de Bonn" and published in 1806.



Beethoven was born on December 16th or 17th, 1770, in Bonn, Germany. He first studied with his father, Johann, who was a singer and instrumentalist in the service of the Kapelle, the church choir and orchestra, at Cologne. He then studied with C. G. Neefe, the court organist, and had his some music published by the age of 12.

He pursued his studies, first with Haydn, but there was some clash of temperaments. Later Beethoven studied with Schenk, Albrechtsberger and Salieri. Until 1794 he was supported by the Elector at Bonn. He then found patrons among the music-loving Viennese aristocracy and soon enjoyed success as a piano virtuoso, playing at private houses or palaces rather than in public. His public debut was in 1795.

As a pianist, it was reported, he had fire, brilliance and fantasy as well as depth of feeling. He took the musical scene by storm as a performer on the piano. His talent to improvise on a given theme was unsurpassed at this time and may even have been more passionate in its expression than that of Mozart. It is naturally in the piano sonatas, writing for his own instrument, that he is at his most original in this period; the Pathétique belongs to 1799, the Moonlight ('Sonata quasi una fantasia') to 1801, and these represent only the most obvious innovations in style and emotional content. Beethoven wrote 32 numbered piano sonatas in his career, making full use of the developing form of piano, with its wider range and possibilities of dynamic contrast. His piano-playing career ended in 1808 because of his deafness.

1802, however, was a year of crisis for Beethoven, with his realization that the impaired hearing he had noticed for some time was incurable and sure to worsen. That autumn, at Heiligenstadt, a village outside Vienna, he wrote a will like document, addressed to his two brothers, describing his bitter unhappiness over his affliction in terms suggesting that he thought death was near. But he came through with his determination strengthened and entered a new creative phase, generally called his 'middle period'. It

is characterized by a heroic tone, evident in the Eroica Symphony No. 3, originally to have been dedicated to Napoleon, not to a noble patron, and in the Symphony No. 5 where the somber mood of the c Minor first movement ('Fate knocking on the door') ultimately yields to a triumphant C Major finale with piccolo, trombones and percussion added to the orchestra.

In 1812, however, he wrote a passionate love-letter to an 'Eternally Beloved' (probably Antonie Brentano, a Viennese married to a Frankfurt businessman), but probably the letter was never sent. With his powerful and expansive middle-period works including the Pastoral Symphony No. 6, which conjured up his feelings about the countryside that he loved, Symphonies Nos. 7 and 8, Piano Concertos Nos. 4 (a lyrical work) and 5 (the noble and brilliant Emperor) and the Violin Concerto, as well as more chamber works and piano sonatas Beethoven was firmly established as the greatest composer of his time.

Beethoven's 9th Symphony is considered to be one of the greatest symphonies ever written. Friedrich von Schiller's Ode to Joy in Beethoven's setting for four soloists, chorus and orchestra has taken on a special meaning as a fanfare for peace, tolerance and liberty all over the world. Beethoven's drafts for his opus 125, the last in the cycle of symphonies, date back to the year 1815 or 1816. For decades he had been wanting to set Schiller's hymn to music, but it was only after the first three movements of the 9th Symphony were almost completed that he decided to compose a choral finale for the last movement based on parts of the poem. In the conventions of the 1820s it was nothing less than revolutionary to end a symphony in this manner - and at just over an hour the work was also unusually long. At its first performance, in Vienna on May 7, 1824, the audience was typically enthusiastic, while the critics, as so often before, found the composer's unique ideas too novel and daring. Beethoven himself could not hear the clamor and the shouts of 'Bravo', as he was completely deaf by this time.

His reputation went far beyond Vienna: the late Mass was first heard in St. Petersburg, and the initial commission that produced the 9th Symphony, the Choral Symphony, had come from the Philharmonic Society of London. When he died early in 1827, more than 10,000 are said to have attended the funeral. He had become a public figure, as no composer had done before. Unlike composers of the preceding generation, he had never been a purveyor of music to the nobility he had lived into the age - indeed helped create it - of the artist as hero and the property of mankind at large.