Beethoven, Ludwig van, 1770–1827

German composer. His mastery of musical expression in every type of music made him the dominant influence on 19th-century music. Beethoven's repertoire includes concert overtures; the opera *Fidelio* (1805, revised 1806 and 1814); 5 piano concertos and 1 for violin; 32 piano sonatas, including the *Moonlight* (1801) and *Appassionata* (1804–05); 17 string quartets; the Mass in D (*Missa solemnis*) (1819–22); and 9 symphonies, as well as many youthful works. He usually played his own piano pieces and conducted his orchestral works until he became deaf in 1801; nevertheless he continued to compose.

Beethoven was born in Bonn. His family were musicians in the service of the Elector of Cologne. He became deputy organist at the court of the Elector of Cologne when he was 13; later he studied under Joseph Haydn, who influenced his early work. From 1808 he received a small allowance from aristocratic patrons.

Beethoven's career spanned the change from Classicism to Romanticism, and he himself contributed to this change through his expansion of classical form, harmony, and thematic development. He was aware of the problems his music created for listeners and performers alike (part of the slow movement of the Choral Symphony had to be cut at its premiere), but although audiences of the day found his visionary late music difficult, Beethoven's reputation was well established throughout Europe. His best-known symphonies are the Third (*Eroica*) (1803), originally intended to be dedicated to Napoleon, with whom Beethoven became disillusioned, the Fifth (1807–08), the Sixth (*Pastoral*) (1808), and the Ninth (*Choral*) (1817–24), which includes the passage from Johann Schiller's 'Ode to Joy' chosen as the anthem of Europe.

Beethoven became a pupil of Christian Gottlob Neefe in 1781. In 1783 he was a harpsichordist in the court orchestra, and in the same year published three piano sonatas. He was second organist at court in 1784, and in 1789 also a viola player. A visit to Vienna in 1787 to study with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was cut short after only a few weeks as his mother was dying. He continued as a court musician in Bonn, and met Count Waldstein in 1788. In 1792 he returned to Vienna to be a pupil of Joseph Haydn, whom he had met in Bonn. He remained in Vienna for the rest of his life. Beethoven found Haydn too easy going, and instead took lessons from Johann Baptist Schenk, Johann Albrechtsberger, and Antonio Salieri (although his early music is full of Haydn's influence). In 1795 he published his Op. 1, three piano trios, and made his first public appearance in Vienna as a pianist and composer. He lived by playing and teaching, and later increasingly by the publication of his works.

The set of six string quartets Op. 18 (1798–1800), though classical in form, are strongly expressive in content: according to Beethoven the slow movement of the first work portrays the tomb scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. The First Symphony, written in 1800, was easily understood as it was similar to recent works by Haydn and Mozart. The deafness that had threatened from about 1795 increased, and his despair gave rise to the suicidal 'Heiligenstadt Testament' in 1802; Beethoven's musical response was the radiant and untroubled Second Symphony of 1802. His Third Symphony (*Eroica*) was dedicated
to Napoleon, but Beethoven changed the dedication when Napoleon proclaimed himself Emperor. The symphony was important in moving music towards the Romantic style that developed later in the century; symphonic form was also hugely extended.

Beethoven conducted his only opera, *Fidelio*, in 1805. He faced many difficulties in reaching a final version, which is typical of his painstaking working methods. Beethoven's compositional process is summed up in *Fidelio*’s development from old-fashioned *Singspiel* in the first scene to a convincing drama.

He refused to accept regular employment under the old system of patronage, but received support from the aristocracy: in 1808, for instance, Archduke Rudolph, Prince Kinsky, and Prince Lobkowitz agreed to pay him an unconditional annuity; the fifth symphony dates from the same year, and seems to proclaim the individual's sense of worth and identity. By 1806 he was forced to abandon public performance altogether. More time was now available for composition: there followed the fourth piano concerto, the Rasumovsky quartets, the violin concerto, Sixth (*Pastoral*), Seventh, and Eighth symphonies and the Emperor concerto. By turns lyrical, expansive, serene, and dynamic, the music of this middle period gained Beethoven further public recognition as the leading composer of the day.

In 1815, after his brother's death, he temporarily became guardian to his nephew Karl, a task he took very seriously and which caused him constant worry. Composition of the last five great piano works (four sonatas and the Diabelli Variations) started in 1818, with the *Hammerklavier* sonata being the first. These works pushed piano technique to new limits. By 1819 Beethoven was totally deaf, and communication with him was possible only in writing. He had begun work on the Choral Symphony in 1817 and this was followed by the Missa solemnis in 1819–22 and the last five quartets in 1822–26. In 1826 he caught an infection from which he never recovered, and died the following year. The cause of his death is still uncertain, although analyses of his hair in 2001 suggested that it was due to lead poisoning.

**Works**

**Stage opera**, *Fidelio* (1805, revised 1806 and 1814), incidental music for *Egmont* (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1810), *The Creatures of Prometheus*, overture, introduction and 16 nos. for a ballet produced at the Burgtheater, Vienna, 1801.


**Chamber** Trio in B♭ for clarinet, cello, and piano, Op. 11 (1797); Variations for piano trio on *Ich bin der Schneider Kakadu*, Op. 121a (1798); Serenade for flute, violin, and viola in D, Op. 25 (1800); Septet in E♭, Op. 20 (1800); two quintets, for piano and wind in E♭ (1796), for strings in C, Op. 29 (1801); 17 string quartets, Op. 18 nos. 1–6, in F, G, D, C minor, A, and B♭ (1798–1800), Op. 59 nos. 1–3 (*Rasumovsky*) in

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**Solo voice** Scena and aria Ah! Perfido! for soprano and orchestra (1796), Adelaide for tenor and piano (1795–96), An die ferne Geliebte for tenor and piano (1816).

**quotations**
Beethoven, Ludwig van

**essays**
Ludwig van Beethoven

**didyouknows**
Beethoven, Ludwig van
Messiaen, Olivier Eugène Prosper Charles

**images**
Beethoven, Ludwig van
Beethoven, Ludwig von

**audios**
Beethoven, Ludwig van Appassionata Sonata, Third Movement
Beethoven, Ludwig van Coriolan Overture
Beethoven, Ludwig van Fifth Concerto
Beethoven, Ludwig van Moonlight Sonata, First Movement
Beethoven, Ludwig van Sixth Symphony
Beethoven, Ludwig van Symphony No. 5, First Movement
Beethoven, Ludwig van Symphony No. 9, Fourth Movement

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Beethoven, Ludwig van Third Symphony Eroica

Beethoven, Ludwig van Violin Concerto op. 61, Fourth Movement

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