

“Beethoven and Mahler”

Prepared by Scott Kincaid
Student of Accounting at the University of Tulsa

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Dr. Joseph Rivers of the University of Tulsa

ABSTRACT

This report examines the history and musical ability of Ludwig Van Beethoven with a comparison to another great composer Gustav Mahler. The purpose of this report is to provide a brief summary of Ludwig Van Beethoven's life and compare and contrast Beethoven's musical work and life struggles to another great composer Gustav Mahler, who attempted to improve Beethoven's work in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Gustav Mahler and Beethoven were great composers of different times in the 19th century. Gustav Mahler idealized Beethoven and his musical accomplishments. To understand the musical compositions and the inspirations of Beethoven's and Mahler's "improved" masterpieces this report will provide (1) a brief biography of Ludwig Van Beethoven, (2) a brief overview of Beethoven's musical career, (3) inspirations and beginning works of Mahler, (4) comparison of Beethoven's and Mahler's music and life struggles, and (5) a conclusion summarizing the report.

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INTRODUCTION

Brief Biography of Ludwig Van Beethoven

Ludwig Van Beethoven was a German Composer, considered one of the greatest musicians of all time. Having begun his career as an outstanding improviser at the piano and composer of piano music, Beethoven went on to compose string quartets and other kinds of chamber music, songs, two masses, an opera, and nine symphonies.

Beethoven was born in Bonn. His father's harsh discipline and alcoholism made his childhood and adolescence difficult. At age 18, after his mother's death, Beethoven placed himself at the head of the family, taking responsibility for his two younger brothers, both of whom followed him when he later moved to Vienna, Austria

In Bonn, Beethoven's most important composition teacher was German Composer Christian Gottlob Neefe, with whom he studied during the 1780's. Neefe used the music of German Composer Johann Sebastian Bach as a cornerstone of instruction, and later encouraged his student to study with Austrian composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, whom Beethoven met briefly in Vienna in 1787. In 1792, Beethoven made another journey to Vienna to study with Austrian composer Joseph Haydn, and he stayed there for the rest of his life.

Beethoven's music is generally divided into three main creative periods. The first period extends to the year of about 1802, when Beethoven made a reference to a "new manner" in connection with his art. The second, or middle, period extends to about 1812, after the completion of his Seventh and Eighth Symphonies. The third period emerged quite gradually. Beethoven composed its most pivotal piece of music called the Hammerklavier Sonata. Beethoven then composed his last five quartets, written between 1824 and 1826, and can be regarded as marking the beginning of the fourth creative period.

During the last decade of his life, Beethoven had almost completely lost his hearing, and he was increasingly socially isolated. He had assumed the guardianship of his nephew Karl after a lengthy legal struggle, and despite Beethoven's affection for Karl, there was enormous friction between the two. Notwithstanding these difficulties, between 1818, and 1826, Beethoven embarked upon a series of ambitious large-scale compositions including the Missa Solemnis in D major, and the Thirty-Three Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli in Major. Plagued at times by serious illness, Beethoven always maintained his sense of humor and often amused himself with jokes. He continued to work at a high level of creativity until he contracted pneumonia in December of 1826. He died in Vienna in March 1827.

Brief Overview of the Beginning of Beethoven's Musical Career

In May of 1804 Napoleon had successfully named himself Emperor of France. With the rule of Napoleon Europe came a change in European society, a changed towards a military dictatorship. Napoleon's dictatorship influenced a change in musical style during his rule. In 1805 Ludwig Van Beethoven named his third symphony after Napoleon called, "Geschrieben auf Bonaparte." The European public discovered something different in Beethoven's music. It was different than that of the more famous musicians of the time such as Mozart or Haydn. The new sound that the public heard in Beethoven's music was different, but new and daring.

The third symphony "Geschrieben auf Bonaparte" according to one public figure, "was startling and beautiful with passages in which the energetic and talented composer must be recognized for." However, many people were not accustomed to the new style that Beethoven presented. Naturally, anything new which people are unaccustomed to is met with scrutiny and criticism. Beethoven's third symphony was:

- almost twice as long as any symphony of that time period,
- much "heavier" than the classical music of the time,
- and had very extended polyphonic passages.

Some of the public at the opening of the third symphony were reportedly so disgusted at the new style and length of Beethoven's work they offered to pay the young composer to stop playing than continue with the composition. Other critics found the amazing attention to detail and complexity intriguing and ingenious. The mixed feelings about the new musical style received an unsatisfactory ovation from the audience. None-the-less Beethoven began to make a name for himself and became the cornerstone for the romantic style in the 19th century.

Historic Period of Beethoven

During the 19th century, music was highly associated with the historical and cultural developments of the times. The division of music can be divided into three distinct periods.

1. Early Romantic (during time of war)
2. Mid Romantic (during time of peace)
3. Late Romantic (during time of revolution)

Although the distinct style of romantic music is considered 19th century, the dates stretch from the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 to the beginning of WWI in 1914. The range of romantic period concerning Beethoven ranges from the beginning of Napoleon's rule to the end of Napoleon's rule in 1815. The rise and fall of Napoleon shaped the political period, as well as the music of the early 19th century composers.

As Beethoven's music became more popular, many more composers were inspired, and began appearing in cities traditionally non-musical. Some of these cities were:

- Manchester
- Moscow
- Budapest
- Brussels
- Milan
- Prague

The integration of music in these cities made the compositions of Beethoven and other composers much more accessible to the public, which greatly aided in the expansion of Beethoven popularity and his revolutionary music style. What also helped Beethoven's influence over the musical world was that Austria, Russian and Germany were considered the world's superpowers at the time. Each of these countries represented freedom, a better quality of life, and promoted individualism unlike the rest of the world at the time. History and popularity has always been written by the ruling and with the world's superpowers celebrating Beethoven's musical ideas resulted in a huge boost of fame and influence of Beethoven's new musical style.

Mahler inspired by Beethoven

Gustav Mahler is considered a great musical composer, but a musical composer who used others ideas and made them better. In 1895 Gustav Mahler was a struggling composer and a world famous conductor who was inspired to take the musical compositions of Beethoven and improve on them.

During the 1870's to the 1890's large concert halls were playing Beethoven's works, but not to the satisfaction of Gustav Mahler. According to Mahler, the concert halls distorted the sounds of single instruments in favor of a late romantic mash of instruments, and was not satisfied with the original score. Mahler spent nine months recreating Beethoven's 9th Symphony where he set out to redress the balance from Beethoven's scores. To improve on Beethoven's 9th Symphony Mahler:

- Doubled the string section by increasing the number of violins, violas and cellos,
- Occasionally doubled the woodwind instruments for extra highlights,
- And added a tuba, because it was not invented at the time

Mahler improved on Beethoven's 9th Symphony because he felt that audiences deserved to experience Beethoven's 9th Symphony in a modern romanticized fashion. Before Mahler's premier of his recreated 9th Symphony in Vienna he justified his performance with this passage:

“As his ear complaint grew into actual deafness, Beethoven lost that indispensable inner contact with reality, with the world of physical sound, just at the time when his conceptions were developing most powerfully and moving him to find new means of expression, to use the orchestra in such a drastic manner as had been unimaginable before. It is also well known that the quality of brass instruments at his time completely precluded certain tone sequences necessary to the melody. This very short-coming ultimately led to the perfecting of these instruments, and it would seem outrageous not to use them now to achieve as perfect a performance of Beethoven's works as possible...There can be absolutely no question of re-orchestration, alteration, let alone 'improvement of Beethoven's work(source).”

Comparison Between Beethoven and Mahler

From the beginning of Gustav Mahler's compositional career to the very last composition composed by Mahler his music was about life emotions. Gustav Mahler felt lonely and isolated and expressed his emotion through his music. Mahler used his life issues to express and drive his music passion just as Beethoven did. Examples of Mahler's expression of his life struggles can be found in each of his compositions. Examples of Mahler's expression through music include:

- Songs of Wayfared in 1885 expressed issues of Romantic rejection.
- Symphony No. 1 in 1888 expressed struggles between hope and despair.
- Symphony No. 2 in 1894 questioned death and redemption.
- Symphony No. 3 in 1896 expressed the nature of the individual and nature.
- Kindertotenlieder in 1904 expressed the deaths of children
- Symphony No. 5 in 1902 expressed the grieving process.

This is much like Beethoven, who also wrote his music based on his thoughts and feelings. One historian writes, "Mahler's symphonies are unique. No other body of work, by any composer, traverses such expressive range, so brilliantly combines absolute symphonic music with vocal music, so clearly and profoundly define their creator, and are so honestly and deeply felt."

One of the most significant aspects of Mahler's life was his sense of alienation, because of his Jewish heritage. This alienation was self induced and aided by constant reaction to his Jewish background by his critics. Tension created by the mixture of Czech, Germanic and Jewish culture was one of the main elements that made Mahler's work so breath taking and powerful.

Beethoven similarly had emotional troubles of his own that contributed to the sheer emotions demonstrated in much of his later works. The first of these emotions were seen in a letter in 1802. For the past six years Beethoven had a progressive hearing loss and in a letter to a friend Beethoven reveals his agony and rage in a letter which was never sent. In the letter Beethoven battles despair and vows to take his fate into his own hands by cutting his throat and ending his life. Beethoven takes his emotion and anger and turns his distraught heart into the lighthearted 2nd Symphony in D major. The symphony opens with a jumpy and upbeat first movement which many critics believe was simply a scapegoat for his trouble emotions.

In 1812 Beethoven again falls into a time of deep depression. This time Beethoven's depression was over the end of a relationship. Not any relationship but a relationship with his "immortal beloved." Beethoven had many loves in his life and many close relationships. During his life Beethoven's relationships were of short durations and of temporary passions. Beethoven loved many, but rarely received the same love in return. When Beethoven's "immortal beloved" relationship finally ended Beethoven felt he lost the only person who ever and will ever understand him. However, just as the 2nd

Symphony Beethoven rebounded and demonstrated his optimism in his humorous upbeat 8th Symphony.

Eight years after his 8th symphony Beethoven's emotions are seen in his agonizing melody in his String Quartet 13 in B-flat. At this time Beethoven's deafness had greatly advanced. This is demonstrated in a slurred bass and cello harmony in low bass. Beethoven is clearly venting his emotions and frustrations in his intense string movements in the 13th String Quartet. Mahler mimicked Beethoven's emotion and intensity in his reorchestrated string movements of Beethoven's works. After listening to some of Mahler's compositions, there is an obvious connection and passion in his musical voice that can be compared to Beethoven. This voice is apparently obvious in the repetition of Mahler's 5th Symphony. This repetition and emotion combined with Beethoven's complicated passages brings a enjoyable different sound to Beethoven's musical ideas.

Mahler's 5th Symphony is one that is most similar in structure, style and musical content to Beethoven's compositional ideas of tight construction and emotion. The first movement is upbeat and optimistic followed by dark and ominous tones in the next two movements. The fourth movement is very expressive and filled with heartache, which some believe to be representative of Mahler's feelings from a love letter he had written at the time.

CONCLUSION

All of his works for the piano could be considered revolutionary at the time. His early piano sonatas often had a forceful, bold quality, which inevitably led to the slower movements of Beethoven's life. Beethoven's drive and passion for his work and performances were fueled for his desire to be remembered for centuries past his time. The fact that Beethoven realized his artistic ambitions in spite of his hearing impairment added to the fascination and inspiration of his life for us as the students to his incredible life and music left behind. Beethoven's artistic achievements generated a long shadow over the 19th century and 20th century, having set a standard against which today's composers measure their work.