

Beethoven

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) was born in Bonn, on the 17 of December 1770. He studied first with his father, Johann, a singer and instrumentalist in the service of the Elector of Cologne at Bonn. It was said that he was a violent and intemperate man who returned home late at night and dragged young Ludwig from his bed in order to "beat" music lessons into the boy's sleepy head. Despite these and other abuses - which might well have persuaded a lesser person to loathe the subject - the young Beethoven developed a sensitivity and vision for music.

Ludwig gave his first public performance as a pianist when he was eight years old. At the age of eleven he received the necessary systematic training in piano performance and composition from Christian Gottlob Neefe, organist and court musician in Bonn. When Beethoven got to the age of 12 he had some music published. In 1787 Beethoven was granted a paid leave of absence to study in Vienna under Mozart. Barely had he arrived he was summoned back to Bonn to his dying mother.

Five years later he went back, where he settled. He pursued his studies, first with Haydn, but there was some clash of temperaments and Beethoven studied too with Schenk, Albrechtsberger and Salieri. In 1794, Beethoven played at private houses or palaces rather than in public. But when he first made his public debut which was in 1795 as a pianist, it was reported, he had fire, brilliance and fantasy as well as depth of feeling in his music. It is naturally in the piano sonatas, writing for his own instrument, that he is at his most original in this period. Little does he know Vienna was to remain his home for the rest of his life.

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 a village outside Vienna, Heiligenstadt, 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'.

With his powerful and expansive middle-period works, which include the Symphony no. 7 and Symphony no. 8, Piano Concertos nos. 4 and the Violin Concerto, as well as more chamber works and piano sonatas Beethoven was firmly established as the greatest composer of his time.

His piano-playing career had finished in 1808 (a charity appearance in 1814 was a disaster because of his deafness). That year he had considered leaving Vienna for a secure post in Germany, but three Viennese noblemen had banded together to provide him with a steady income and he remained there.

The years after 1812 were relatively unproductive. He seems to have been seriously depressed, by his deafness and the resulting isolation, by the failure of his marital hopes.

Musical taste in Vienna had changed during the first decades of the 19th century; the public were chiefly interested in light Italian opera (especially Rossini) and easygoing chamber music and songs, to suit the prevalent bourgeois taste. Yet the Viennese were conscious of Beethoven's greatness. When, early in 1827, he died, 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.
(beethooven in 1803)