



45 LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

1770 - 1827

Ludwig van Beethoven, the greatest of all musical composers, was born in 1770, in the city of Bonn, Germany. He exhibited talent at an early age, and his first published works date from 1783. As a young man, he visited Vienna, where he was introduced to Mozart; however, their acquaintance was fairly brief. In 1792, Beethoven returned to Vienna, and for a while he studied under Haydn, then the leading Viennese composer (Mozart had died the year before). Beethoven was to remain in Vienna, at that time the music capital of the world, for the remainder of his life.

Beethoven's immense virtuosity as a pianist impressed everyone, and he was successful both as a performer and a teacher. He soon became a prolific composer as well. His works were well received, and from his mid-twenties on, he was able to sell them to publishers without difficulty.

When Beethoven was in his late twenties, the first signs of his deafness appeared. Not surprisingly, the young composer was deeply disturbed by this ominous development. For a while, he even contemplated suicide.

The years from 1802 to 1815 are sometimes considered the middle period of Beethoven's career. During this interval, as his deafness steadily progressed, he began to withdraw socially. His increasing deafness caused people to form the unwarranted impression that he was a misanthrope. He had several romantic attachments with young ladies, but all appear to have ended unhappily, and he never married.

Beethoven's musical output continued to be prolific. As the years went by, however, he paid less and less attention to what would be popular with the musical audiences of his day. Nevertheless, he continued to be successful.

In his late forties, Beethoven became totally deaf. As a consequence, he gave no more public performances and became even more withdrawn socially. His works were fewer and harder to understand. By now, he was composing primarily for himself and some ideal future audience. He is alleged to have said to one critic, "They are not for you, but for a later age."

It is one of the cruelest ironies of fate that the most talented composer of all times should have been afflicted with the disability of deafness. Had Beethoven, by a superhuman effort of will, managed to maintain the quality of his compositions despite his deafness, it would have been an inspiring and near-incredible feat. But truth is stranger than fiction: in fact, during his years of total deafness, Beethoven did more than merely equal the level of his earlier compositions. The works that he produced during those last years are generally considered to be his greatest masterpieces. He died in Vienna in 1827, at the age of fifty-seven.

Beethoven's large output included nine symphonies, thirty-two piano sonatas, five piano concertos, ten sonatas for the piano and violin, a series of magnificent string quartets, vocal music, theater music, and much more. More important, however, than the quantity of his work is its quality. His works superbly com-

bine intensity of feeling with perfection of design. Beethoven demonstrated that instrumental music could no longer be considered an art form of secondary importance, and his own compositions raised such music to the very highest level of art.

Beethoven was a highly original composer, and many of the changes that he introduced have had a lasting effect. He expanded the size of the orchestra. He extended the length of the symphony and widened its scope. By demonstrating the enormous possibilities of the piano, he helped to establish it as the foremost musical instrument. Beethoven marked the transition from the classical to the romantic style of music, and his works were an inspiration for much that characterized romanticism.

Beethoven had a very great influence upon many later composers, including persons with such diverse styles as Brahms, Wagner, Schubert, and Tchaikovsky. He also paved the way for Berlioz, Gustav Mahler, Richard Strauss, and many others.



An original manuscript by Ludwig van Beethoven.

It seems plain that Beethoven must outrank any other musician on this list. Although Johann Sebastian Bach is almost equally prestigious, Beethoven's works have been more widely and frequently listened to than Bach's. Furthermore, the numerous innovations that Beethoven made have had a more profound influence on subsequent developments in music than Bach's works have.

In general, political and ethical ideas can be more easily and clearly expressed in words than in music, and literature is thus a more influential field of art than is music. It is for this reason that Beethoven, though the preeminent figure in the history of music, has been ranked somewhat lower than Shakespeare. In comparing Beethoven with Michelangelo, I have been strongly influenced by the fact that most persons spend far more time listening to music than they do looking at painting or sculpture. For this reason, I think that musical composers are generally more influential than painters or sculptors whose eminence in their own field is equivalent. All in all, it seems appropriate to rank Beethoven roughly halfway between Shakespeare and Michelangelo.