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Ludwig van Beethoven, music extraordinaire, still baffles the minds of musicians everywhere with his musical prowess. Beethoven's uncanny ability to improvise and to create out of nothing such unique pieces as the *Pathétique* sonata or the *Eroica* Symphony presents only a small taste of the musical genius that lies beneath his complex skill. Born into a household of court musicians in Bonn, Germany, Beethoven grew up under an artistic atmosphere from the very first few years of life. However, his familial environment was not a stable one. To begin with, his father and grandfather had a very rocky relationship despite their mutual love for music. His father, Johann van Beethoven, was a tenor for the Elector of Cologne in which his grandfather, Ludwig van Beethoven Sr., was the court's Kapellmeister. The tension between them culminated when Johann proclaimed he would be marrying Ms. Maria Magdalena Kewerich in spite of Ludwig, Sr.'s disapproval.[1] Against his father's wishes, Johann decided to continue with the marriage plans. After one miscarriage, Maria Magdalena gave birth to the soon-to-be-prodigy Ludwig van Beethoven, Jr. The exact date of Beethoven's birth is not known, however, since it was Rhenish tradition to baptize a child within twenty-four hours of the child's birth, Beethoven's birth date is presumably December 16, 1770.[2]

Johann's father maintained an authoritarian role over him even after his marriage to Maria and the birth of their son Ludwig, Jr. Constantly belittling his son's efforts as both father and husband, Ludwig van Beethoven, Sr. drove their relationship to extremely hostile ends. At

the death of Ludwig, Sr., Johann became consumed with drinking.[3] Maria had to fulfill the duties of both provider and caretaker for the family in order to compensate for her husband's negligence. For Ludwig, Jr., his mother Maria became his hero and source of inspiration during these dark days for the Beethoven family.

In the midst of his battle with alcoholism, Johann became Ludwig's first music teacher. His methods of music education were unconventional to say the least. It had been recorded that Ludwig could be seen crying at the piano as his father (oftentimes in a drunken stupor) violently beat him when he played the wrong notes or exhibited incorrect posture. Despite his horrid instructional techniques, Johann inadvertently stirred up in Ludwig's impressionable mind a love for improvisation.[4] A psychiatric study on Beethoven's early years confirms this: "An early rebellion against his father's arbitrariness and unjust strictness laid the foundation for the revolt against every kind of authority…" (Schonberg 112). This study's conclusions explain much of Beethoven's unbridled behavior as an adolescent and young adult. It was this type of rebellion towards authority that led him to produce some of the most powerfully written compositions ever heard in music history.

In addition to his father's instruction, Beethoven received music lessons from talented instrumentalists including court organist Van den Eeden, violinist Franz Ries, and pianist Tobias Pfeiffer (Schauffler 12-14). The combined efforts from these teachers, including those of his father, were insufficient in furthering his intrinsic talent. It was at this critical point in time that Christian Gottlob Neefe entered Ludwig's life. Neefe was exactly the type of instructor Ludwig had desperately needed. His fervor for the classics and composition pushed Beethoven to new heights of musical exploration. Neefe's partiality for Bach led him to teach Beethoven the score *The Well-Tempered Clavichord* (which was still unpublished at the time) (Burk 14-15). Not only

was Neefe's musical instruction conducive for Beethoven's development as a musician, but his philosophy too played a significant role. Neefe had adopted many of his philosophical views from his friend and master Johann Adam Hiller. Hiller is one of the unsung pioneers who provoked the transition of the Classical music period to the Romantic period. Hiller's personal preference for the abstract and subjective nature in music indirectly influenced Beethoven's own musical developments, eventually bridging the gap to a novel era of music (Schauffler 16).

Neefe not only propagated Hiller's philosophy, but he also exposed Beethoven to the musical masterpieces of noted composers like C.P.E. Bach, Mozart, and Haydn. Little did Beethoven know at the time that a couple of these same composers would later become his instructors in Vienna. Another important detail concerning Neefe was that he supplied the fatherly role model Beethoven had lacked from his biological father. Neefe's willingness to cultivate Beethoven's growing mastery during the boy's early years proved later to be integral for his path to extraordinary virtuosity (Kinderman 18).

As Beethoven continued to progress rapidly through his lessons with Neefe and later Kapellmeister and composer Andrea Lucchesi, his talent soared and people noticed. Neefe even went so far as to say that if Beethoven continued to learn and play as well as he had been, then he would surely become a "second Mozart" (Schonberg 112). At the time, Neefe probably would have never guessed just how prophetic this statement would be. Beethoven's next step in his musical career seemed obvious. Where else was there to go but Vienna, the musical center of Europe? So at the ripe young age of sixteen, Beethoven headed off to Vienna, where he received the honor of playing with Mozart. Nothing more than that is really known about Beethoven's first visit to Vienna since his time there was cut short upon hearing from his father that his mother was dying. However, before leaving, Mozart said this in reference to Beethoven's

playing, "Keep your eyes on him; someday he will give the world something to talk about" (Kamien 188-89). Like Neefe, Mozart's prophetic words would fulfill themselves in Beethoven's future career as a revolutionary composer and performer.

In returning to Bonn to take care of his mother, Beethoven found his home in utter disarray. His father had completely neglected his wife and two sons while Ludwig had been away in Vienna. Ludwig said his last goodbyes to his mother as she underwent the final effects of her tuberculosis. After Mrs. Beethoven's passing on July 17, 1787, Ludwig decided to stay in Bonn (Burk 21). Since his return home, he had quickly acquired two piano students—a brother and sister—from the well-respected von Breuning family. Beethoven quickly grew very close to the von Breunings. After Beethoven's mother passed, Frau von Breuning, mother to his two students, took Beethoven under her wing and provided him the necessary funds to continue to pursue his musical career.[5]

While Beethoven taught the von Breuning children piano, he kept up with his duties as court musician to the Elector of Cologne. At this point in Beethoven's musical career, Franz Joseph Haydn, a rising composer himself, was passing through Bonn en route to London. During his stay, Haydn was exposed to the music of the elector's court (which most likely included some of Beethoven's music). Upon Haydn's return trip back to Vienna, he stopped in Bonn again. During Haydn's second visit, Beethoven took the opportunity to show him one of his own cantatas. Haydn was reportedly so impressed by the boy's skill that he offered to teach Beethoven theory lessons in Vienna (Solomon 42). Prompted on by his friend and patron, Ferdinand von Waldstein, Beethoven left for Vienna to pursue higher education in music composition. It should be noted here that Waldstein, in his letter to Beethoven, became the first person to ever unite the names of the three composers who would later form the "Classical

Trinity" of music history. This connection is revealed in Waldstein's statement to Beethoven in his letter to him: "[Beethoven,] Receive Mozart's spirit from the hands of Haydn" (Schauffler 20-22).

Just as Waldstein had predicted, Beethoven greatly advanced in his musical ability. However, Beethoven was no easy student. His early years of instruction under his maniacal father had festered in him a spirit of rage and stubbornness (Schonberg 113). Haydn's instruction did not necessarily help the issue either. He went back on his promise to teach Beethoven composition and focused instead on subjects such as harmony and counterpoint. After undergoing much mismanagement from Haydn, Beethoven secretly began taking theory lessons from the composer Johann Schenck (Schauffler 26). It was this man who began to hone in on Beethoven's technical skill for composition writing. In January 1794, Haydn left again for London—this time placing Beethoven under the instruction of Johann Georg Albrechtsberger. Unfortunately for Beethoven, Albrechtsberger taught him the same painstaking process of counterpoint that Haydn had so insufficiently taught. Although there was still not much progress on that end, Beethoven was able to learn vocal composition from the Imperial Kapellmeister Antonio Salieri. Salieri helped Beethoven develop his skill for matching music with dramatic, operatic text. With Salieri's guidance, Beethoven was able to write some Italian arias that were later showcased at a few concerts (Burk 45-46).

Through the ups and downs of Beethoven's early instruction in Vienna, he was able to establish a name for himself among the high class Viennese society. His wildly impassioned piano playing diverted largely from the usual light, airy movements of the classical players, but it was this manner of playing that entranced his listeners. It did not take long before Beethoven's notoriety reached the same heights as that of his instructor Haydn. At this point in Beethoven's

career, he wanted to completely break away from the structural conformity of the classical era and move into something new, untried in music history—something revolutionary.[6]

No one could have predicted what would happen to Beethoven next. Right at the pinnacle of his career in Vienna, he started experiencing hearing loss. Naturally, Beethoven did everything he could to save his hearing. He even went so far as to try to cure his condition through galvanism (Schonberg 115). His attempts were futile, and his deafness became inevitable. On October 6, 1802, Beethoven wrote an emotional letter to his brothers relaying his battle with hearing loss. The document, famously known as the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, reveals a man severely troubled by the future implications of his disease. Although Beethoven admits to suicidal thoughts in this document, he mentions the one thing, which keeps him from acting out on these emotions as evinced by the statement: "I would have ended my life—it was only *my art* that held me back. Thanks to [virtue] and to my art, I did not end my life by suicide" (Kamien 189 and Solomon 118).

The following years marked Beethoven's most triumphant period yet. Often called the "Heroic Period," Beethoven claimed victory over his depressive state and turned it into his most powerful production of music yet. His *Pathétique* sonata is a singular piece whose introduction conveys the first signs of Beethoven's grief but is soon requited with a rondo-finale, giving the piece its conclusive positivity (Schauffler 52). Not much time lapsed before Beethoven produced what would become music history's ultimate turning point in musical style—the *Eroica* Symphony. At its first performance, audience members were astonished by the pure size and monstrosity of the symphony. Reactions were highly varied. Beethoven, however, was not stunted by the largely negative response he received from the public. In fact, he became more

determined than ever to create pieces that strayed from the norm of current music culture. From then on, music would never be the same (Schonberg 116).

Beethoven's life as both performer and composer was one of incomparable greatness. While composers like Mozart and Haydn contributed invaluably to the music scene at the time, Beethoven contributed his *soul*. He not only wrote music for others, he also wrote for himself. He did not fall captive to the aristocratic bonds of society but rather broke the bonds and developed a musical form that would challenge the standard for decades to come. In fact, it was this bold spirit of Beethoven that finally brought forth the birth of Romantic music. This development was largely due to his efforts to convey the strong emotions inside his mind directly onto composition paper. Every time one listens to the slow, paused notes of anguish from his *Apassionata* sonata or the heightened, lively notes of excitement from his Ninth Symphony, one can picture a man behind the music—a man who was not only a musician but a living composition.

Notes

1. Ludwig van Beethoven, Sr. had an unfortunate marriage to Maria Josepha Poll whose only surviving child was Johann. Maria was reportedly an alcoholic and had to be placed in a cloister until her death on September 30, 1775. He viewed marriage negatively from then on (Solomon 7-8).

2. Beethoven formed the preconceived notion that he was actually born two years later than what the baptismal documentation records. This was due in part by his father's intentional falsification of his age in order to place him on equal turf with the young Mozart prodigies. (Solomon 4)

3. Johann's alcoholism was most likely inherited from his mother (Solomon 10).

4. "Without meaning to do so Johann taught the boy that printed melodies are sweet but those unprinted are sweeter" (Schauffler 3).

5. Frau von Breuning became a mother figure to Beethoven, and she even succeeded in smoothing away some of the rough edges Beethoven had built up from a childhood of neglect (Burke 28-29).

6. Carl Ludwig Junker even reportedly made the comment: "His style of treating the instrument is so different from that usually heard that it gives one the idea that he has attained that height of excellence on which he now stands by a path of his own discovery" (qtd. in Schonberg 113).

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