Ludwig van Beethoven:
Triumph Over a Life of Tragedy

Madeline Brashaw
Senior Division
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“It seemed unthinkable for me to leave the world forever before I had produced all that I felt called upon to produce,” Ludwig van Beethoven wrote in *Heiligenstadt Testament* shortly before he passed away. Ludwig van Beethoven practiced music his entire life. He told people that he did not know what he would do without music. Beethoven was brought up during the Classical Period which was defined and determined by its clear characteristics such as its emphasis on beauty, elegance, and balance, and by the variety and contrast within the musical pieces. It is said that his music altered the course of musical history and that it modified the Classical Period (Classical Music). Sadly, Beethoven’s career came to a halt when he began to lose his hearing, and it became nearly impossible for him to compose and conduct his works. The tragic loss of Beethoven’s hearing led to his triumph in changing musical history.

Beethoven was brought into this world in December of 1770. As a child, Ludwig van Beethoven often had a sad life. He had no friends and had nobody to care for him. The one thing that he did have, and he used almost every day, was his music. Beethoven’s main instruments were the piano and the violin. As a child, he even composed his own music at times. His father, Johann van Beethoven, was young Beethoven’s first music teacher. As a child, his father harshly pushed him in his musical studies. Beethoven was sometimes woken up in the middle of the night just to practice his instruments. He was often abused by his father and was not treated properly (Greene 5-7). As a child, one of Beethoven’s most powerful wishes was that his family would simply leave the apartment so that he could be alone with his music. He said that would have made him happy (Greene 9).

Beethoven’s father had high hopes for the young child. He hoped that his son would become another Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Mozart was also one of the most influential composers of the Classical Period. At the age of fourteen, Mozart traveled throughout Europe and earned money for
his family. Johann van Beethoven had hoped that his son would do the same. Some of his father’s wishes came true when, at age seven, Beethoven played well enough to perform several pieces in a concert in Cologne, Germany (Josephson 9-10).

Around age 11, Beethoven began to study music under a thirty-three-year-old man, Christian Gottlob Neefe. Neefe was a respected musician, composer, and teacher. While studying under Neefe, Ludwig van Beethoven’s talent really began to show. He began to play religious music for church services and music for the theater. Under the study of Neefe, Beethoven learned how to play the violin and the viola. Beethoven was told by Neefe that if he could learn to play the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, he could play the music of practically any composer in the world (Josephson 12-13). Beethoven soon became capable of composing great musical pieces. It was at age eleven that his first piano piece was published. Not long after, Beethoven began to help Christian Neefe with his duties; he accompanied orchestra rehearsals and played the organ for church services (Josephson 13).

Ludwig van Beethoven was always coming up with new ideas for his musical pieces, constantly jotting down his thoughts as he never wanted to forget them. In 1783, three more of Beethoven’s musical pieces were published. Beethoven slowly but surely became more known by society. In several music magazines, Neefe had written that Beethoven was a genius and that he could become the next Mozart (Josephson 15). Beethoven's life continued to prosper. He became Neefe’s paid assistant, learned to play major works by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, George Frideric Handel, and Franz Joseph Haydn, and played in the pit orchestra for many operas (Josephson 16). All of this was new for Beethoven, and his life was only just beginning.

In 1787 Beethoven traveled to Vienna, Austria where he met the world-famous musician, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Beethoven had hoped to study under the musician, however that never
happened. After meeting Mozart, Beethoven was given an opportunity to play for him. When Beethoven played his piano piece for the thirty-year-old man, it seemed that Mozart was simply unimpressed by Beethoven's abilities. However, afterward, when Mozart was talking to his friends, he told them, “Keep your eyes on him. Someday he will give the world something to talk about” (Josephson 19). At that time, Mozart did not know how true his words were.

After a great amount of triumph over the course of a few months, Ludwig van Beethoven went through a very tragic period in his life. He received word that his mother was dying from tuberculosis. On July 17, 1787, just a few months after he came home from Vienna, his mother died from the disease. He was extremely mournful because his mother was, “Such a kind, loving mother to me,” he wrote in his diary. After his mother died, Beethoven’s father became an abusive drunk who was angry and violent. When his father was sober, he was unhappy and disengaged. Tragically, only two months after his mother’s death, his baby sister, Maria Margaretha passed away as well. Beethoven became the head of his household and took on the responsibility to earn money for his family. Unfortunately, the small amount of money he earned in his early musical career was not enough to support his family. Many friends and members of his family tried to help and financially support the Beethoven household. Beethoven’s friend, Count Ferdinand Waldstein, gave him money so that he could continue to practice and write music (Josephson 19-21). These few months proved to be a dark time for Beethoven, filled with much sadness and grief.

Even though Beethoven lived through a tragic youth, his life soon started to turn positive. On February 20, 1790, the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Joseph II, passed away (Holy Roman Empire). Beethoven was asked to compose music to honor the deceased emperor. Beethoven worked vigorously to compose this piece of music to the best of his ability, but many
musicians said that the music was too difficult to play. Even though Beethoven had hoped the piece would be performed, it was not (Josephson 20).

On December 5, 1791, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart passed away, and Beethoven’s dream of studying with the composer ended. Nearly a year later, in November of 1792, Beethoven moved back to Vienna where he lived quietly for a short amount of time. He moved into the mansion of Prince Karl Lichnowsky. Prince Lichnowsky was one of Vienna’s most important patrons of the art. Beethoven soon began to perform at concerts held by the prince, meeting many men and women who also highly supported the art culture (Prince Lichnowsky).

Beethoven soon became temperamental and had developed poor manners. Meanwhile, his teacher at the time, Franz Joseph Haydn, had exceptional manners and was a gentleman (Josephson 25). Beethoven felt that Haydn was not teaching him properly and that he was not receiving the lessons he felt he deserved. Beethoven decided to secretly take lessons with other teachers: Johann Schenk, Johann Georg Albrechtsberger, and finally with Antonio Salieri. When Franz Joseph Haydn found out that Beethoven had been taking lessons behind his back, he took offense to it and was furious (Autexier 30).

In 1794, Beethoven first sensed his loss of hearing. This was immensely tragic for the composer, as in the profession of music, hearing is the most important of the five senses. He said that he heard noises that sounded like crickets in his ears. He had hoped that this tragic period in his life would pass, but it never did (Josephson 30).

Beethoven pushed through this tragic time, and on March 29, 1795, he appeared before a Viennese audience to play in the Musicians’ Society benefit concert. The piece that he played was one of his own piano compositions, one of his early pieces known as Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat
Major. The show was a success! After this time, Beethoven primarily focused on composing pieces specifically for the piano (Autexier 30-32).

Soon Beethoven threw himself completely into the musical aspect of composition. Beethoven only played his own compositions during this period; he would not play any pieces written by other composers. Over the course of several years, Beethoven had written ten sonatas for the piano, the Six String Quartets for Prince Lobkowitz, several trios, several sonata duets, two concertos, and a symphony (Autexier 37). Beethoven had already begun to leave an imprint of his music on the world.

With all of Beethoven’s new success, he began to do something that most musicians were not capable of. He was earning enough money to support himself. He was able to live comfortably and was constantly moving into different houses and apartments. Occasionally, he would have two or three apartments rented to him at one time. Ludwig van Beethoven also spent his summers in the country. He was inspired by the countryside, and it genuinely helped him to compose music (Josephson 28). He wrote in his letter to Baroness von Drossdick, “No man on earth can love the country as I do.”

Soon after Beethoven started to feel success in the musical world, the young man hit another tragic period in his life. He began to experience frequent headaches, bronchitis, and stomach problems. He wrote about his problems in his diary, and he hoped the issues would resolve on their own. He willed himself to stay strong and to push through these ailments (Josephson 29).

Once again Beethoven’s loss of hearing began to affect the musician. On one occasion, Beethoven was visiting the countryside with a friend. His friend heard a shepherd playing the flute in the distance, but Beethoven could not hear the music. He said that he felt as if a storm had burst inside of him and that he wanted to die. Although at another low point in his life, he said that he
would continue to live for his music. Although Beethoven’s ears did not work well, he could mentally hear his music in his mind, and with the use of ear trumpets he could hear slightly better (Greene 24) (See Appendix I).

By 1801, Beethoven could no longer hear high pitched sounds. He wrote to his friend Franz Wegeler, “My ears… hum and buzz day and night.” Along with his loss of hearing, Beethoven became disconnected from society (Autexier 42). He stopped going to parties and going out in public. He did, however, continue to write his thoughts in sketchbooks so that he would always be able to remember them. From 1798 to 1802, Beethoven had filled seven sketchbooks with his thoughts and ideas (Josephson 32) (See Appendix II).

Around 1810, many of Beethoven’s friends began to pass away. Beethoven began to experience trouble with his money, and he became ill. Beethoven’s hearing got worse, and he refused to perform any further piano concerts (Greene 30). Beethoven’s doctors prescribed strengthening medicines, herbs, and almond oils to help with the onset of deafness. Unfortunately, none of these remedies helped to improve his hearing. The music patrons still wanted to hear Beethoven’s music, but that only lasted for a short amount of time. Eventually, society decided that they wanted to hear new music by other composers. This angered Beethoven. The doctors had also suggested that he should rest his ears and take a break from music (Josephson 33-34). With the suggestions from the doctors and society’s dislike for his music, Beethoven took time off from musical composition and lived a quiet life for a short time (Greene 30-33).

On October 2, 1802, Beethoven began to compose again; his music was hard to play and sing, but it was beautiful. At this point in his life, Beethoven was starting to become slightly insane. He did not eat or bathe, and his hair and clothes were always dirty and in disarray. One night when
Beethoven was in town, he was arrested because he was thought to be a criminal. When officials realized that he was Beethoven, he was immediately sent home and apologized to (Greene 36-37).

After a short time, Beethoven dedicated his Third Symphony to Napoleon Bonaparte. However, as soon as Beethoven had heard that Bonaparte had crowned himself emperor, he immediately rescinded the dedication. Beethoven thought that the power would go to Napoleon's head and he would become a tyrant. Beethoven was right... Napoleon and his troops invaded Vienna and took over the city. Bombs exploded all over the streets, and people were begging for food (Josephson 41). In 1803, Beethoven began to write an opera, *Fidelio*. It was finished in April of 1805. Most of the audience was French officers as much of Vienna had fled the city due to the war. The opera was disliked, and it was not shown again (Josephson 39).

Beethoven was still desperate to hear his music. He continued to hold an ear horn to his head in order to hear music. He also rested his cheek on the piano in order to hear the vibrations, but this was all useless as Beethoven had gone almost completely deaf (Josephson 51). In 1822, Beethoven's opera, *Fidelio*, revised and shortened, was once again shown. This time, the opera was a huge success and many people greatly enjoyed the show (Autexier 88).

Finally, Beethoven began to compose his most famous musical piece, his ninth symphony. At that time, he lived in a house alone and had asked the landlord to put wooden planks over all of the windows. Beethoven used these boards as his notebooks. He worked on the music for quite a long time. Eventually, the date was set for its premier. It took place on May 7, 1824 (Autexier 90). Beethoven had insisted on conducting, but the choir and orchestra could not follow his insane madness. Without Beethoven knowing, the musicians had been instructed to follow the direction of a co-conductor. The song came to a conclusion with the well-known melody of “Ode to Joy.” The audience was ecstatic. His musical piece was a great success, although Beethoven was not even
aware of the audience’s response. Beethoven stood with his back to the audience in disappointment until one of the soloists physically turned him around. It was at that moment that Beethoven saw the great outcome of his piece (Josephson 53) (See Appendix III).

Several years after the concert, Beethoven knew that his time had come. Just before he died, he said to friends gathered around him, “I shall, no doubt, soon be going above.” Beethoven wrote his final will and passed away on the morning of March 26, 1827 (Josephson 57).

Even though Beethoven hit many tragically low periods in his life, he always rose from them and tried his best to remain positive, creating a great triumph in musical history. Beethoven served as a key element in the Classical Period in which he composed. He was one of the most famous musical composers of the Classical Period, and in fact, of all time. Since the time that Beethoven lived, there have been two more musical periods added to the timeline of musical history, the Romantic Period and the Modern Period (Musical Eras). As music has evolved, styles and composition have changed considerably over the past centuries. Even in the present-day Modern Period, in which music can be digitally generated with the use of computers (Computer Music), Beethoven’s life, music, and death have left an everlasting impact on musical history.
As Beethoven’s hearing became worse, he became desperate to hear the sounds around him and his music. Beethoven had hearing devices made for him so that he could try to hear his music. They were long, horn-shaped trumpets that he held to his ear. The larger opening on the end was intended to allow Beethoven to hear better, but these instruments did not prove very useful. Beethoven also tried to rest his cheek on the piano so that he could feel the vibrations and hopefully hear the sounds that were created by the piano. None of these methods worked and Beethoven resulted to mentally hearing the music in his mind.
Ludwig van Beethoven’s head was constantly filled with ideas for his musical pieces. Whenever Beethoven had a new idea, he would write it in his notebook or his sketchbook. If Beethoven did not have his notebook near him, he would grab the closest piece of paper on which to jot his ideas. When Beethoven was working on his compositions, he did not take the time to throw his musical mistakes into the trash; Beethoven would madly crumple up the error filled papers and throw them on the floor. His workspace was often a mess and filled with scattered papers.
Beethoven put a great deal of work and effort into composing his Symphony No. 9. At the height of his career, in a maddened state of mind, he desired to conduct this masterpiece. However, the musicians could not follow his wild conducting, as Beethoven could not hear the music at all; he could only hear the musical story in his own mind. Without Beethoven knowing, the musicians had been instructed to follow the main conductor and not Beethoven. Beethoven dressed nicely for the occasion. He even tied back his wild and messy hair. When the performance concluded the audience burst into applause. Beethoven did not know that the audience had loved his music because, of course, he could not hear their ovation. It was only when one of the musicians turned Beethoven around so that he could see the crowd, that he truly understood the greatness of his masterpiece.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


The quote that I received from this book was about how Beethoven felt that he did not fulfill his destiny. He felt that he did not produce the greatest music he could. He also thought that he could have done more in the world if he had had the chance to live longer.


The letter that Beethoven wrote to Baroness von Drossdick was about how happy he was in the country. It provided me with more information on what Beethoven was doing when he wasn't composing his musical pieces.


The letter that Beethoven wrote to Herr von Wegeler was about his hearing and how he really hoped that it would get better. This letter provided me with more information about Beethoven and how much he really hated his deafness.


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closest piece of paper on which to jot his ideas. When Beethoven was working on his compositions, he did not take the time to throw his musical mistakes into the trash; Beethoven would madly crumple up the errored papers and throw them on the floor. His workspace was often a mess and filled with scattered papers.

*Beethoven Conducting his Ninth Symphony*. 1800. *The Cleveland Orchestra*,

www.clevelandorchestra.com/from-the-archives/prometheus-project/symphony-9/.


Beethoven put a great deal of work and effort into composing his Symphony No. 9. At the height of his career, in a maddened state of mind, he desired to conduct this masterpiece. However, the musicians could not follow his wild conducting, as Beethoven could not hear the music at all; he could only hear the musical story in his own mind. Without Beethoven knowing, the musicians had been instructed to follow the main conductor and not Beethoven. Beethoven dressed nicely for the occasion. He even tied back his wild and messy hair. When the performance concluded the audience burst into applause. Beethoven did not know that the audience had loved his music because, of course, he could not hear their ovation. It was only when one of the musicians turned Beethoven around so that he could see the crowd, that he truly understood the greatness of his masterpiece.

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This book provided me with several quotes from Beethoven and his mentors. It was important because I was able to learn what other people thought about Beethoven.


This web site showed me a portion of the translated copy of Beethoven’s diary. The quote that I got from Beethoven showed me how much he loved his mother. It also showed me how much he missed her when she passed away.

**Secondary Sources**


This book provided me with many quotes from people during Beethoven's era, and it gave me another view on his life.

This article helped me to learn about the musical period in which Beethoven grew up in. I learned a lot about the Classical Period.


This book was one of my most important secondary sources. It provided me with a lot of detail about Beethoven's life and really gave me an in-depth view on the triumphs and tragedies in his life.


This web site helped me to learn about the Holy Roman Empire. It also helped me to learn more about who Emperor Joseph II was.


This book was my most important secondary source. It really helped me to learn about Beethoven's life. It also helped me learn about some of the other people that were a major part of Beethoven's life.

The website helped me to see how music has changed compared to the Classical Period. It allowed me to learn that a lot of music can now be generated from computers and other electronics.


This website taught me about the different musical eras over the past couple of centuries. I learned many characteristics of the eras and what defined them.


This article helped me to learn about Prince Lichnowsky and who he was. It also helped me to learn more about Prince Lichnowsky's relationship with Ludwig van Beethoven.