

A transitional composer

Beethoven is firmly rooted in the Classical style, and he believed in its principles. But he also was affected by the changes that came with and after the French Revolution. It was a time of heroes and great ideas, and we can see Beethoven's response to them in the evolution of his compositional style. His music shows excitement, struggle and tension very different from the elegance of Haydn and Mozart.

His work has traditionally been divided into three periods. In the first he learned to use the elements of music that had been handed down to him by Haydn and Mozart. In the second period, often called his "heroic" period, he intensified these elements to produce another kind of music, full of power and emotion. At the end of his life, he composed works that explored brand new ideas and opened up possibilities for later musicians to build on. He was an innovator who brought change in both style and form to the musical traditions that had come before him.

Beethoven is probably the most famous composer in the Western world. Even people who know nothing about classical music have heard of him. In our time, his music has spread beyond the concert hall to popular culture in movie soundtracks, advertising jingles and pop renderings of his melodies.



Ludwig van Beethoven



Sketches of Beethoven by Johann Peter

Symphonies

Beethoven's compositions

Nine symphonies

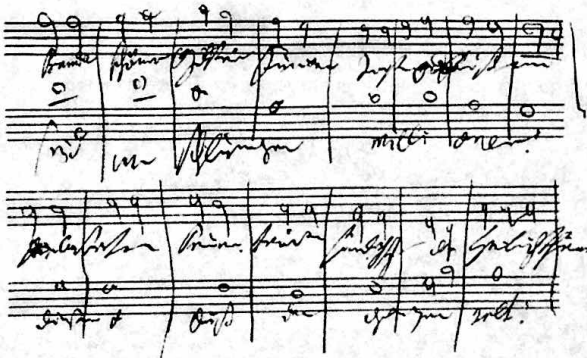
Works to remember:

- Symphony no. 3, *Eroica*
- Symphony no. 5 (with its famous four note motif)
- Symphony no. 6, *Pastoral*
- Symphony no. 9 (with the choral "Ode to Joy")



The theme from the first movement of the Symphony no. 5 in C minor, op. 67

The theme of the *Ode to Joy*



Beethoven's sketch for the finale of the Ninth Symphony

Beethoven wrote nine symphonies. The first two date from his early "Classical" period. It was not until the Third Symphony, the *Eroica*, that he showed his mature style: it had dramatic momentum with lots of contrast, and a powerful climax in the finale. Beethoven's Fifth is one of his most easily recognized — the four notes in the opening motif, three shorts and a long, are famous around the world. They were said to represent "fate knocking at the door." By the end of the symphony, the motif — which appears in all four movements — has changed from threat to jubilation.

The Sixth Symphony, the *Pastoral*, expresses Beethoven's ideas about the natural world, much more melodic and peaceful than the fifth. However, one of his strengths is the way he is able to include tender passages even in the most dramatic of his works. Perhaps his most enduringly popular work is the Ninth or *Choral* Symphony. In the last movement, a chorus and soloists join the orchestra and sing the words to the *Ode to Joy*, a poem by the great German poet Friederich von Schiller. In the Ninth, Beethoven expresses his feelings about the brotherhood of man, and the music has been inspirational to people all over the world.

Beethoven was the first composer to thoroughly link all the sections of his works, instead of writing entirely self-contained movements. His symphonies exerted such a strong influence that later composers were intimidated by them. Brahms waited until he was 40 to write his first symphony and Wagner stated that Beethoven had said all there was to say in symphony form. The nine symphonies are the basis of the repertoire of every modern orchestra in the Western world, and the ultimate test for a conductor.



Other orchestral works

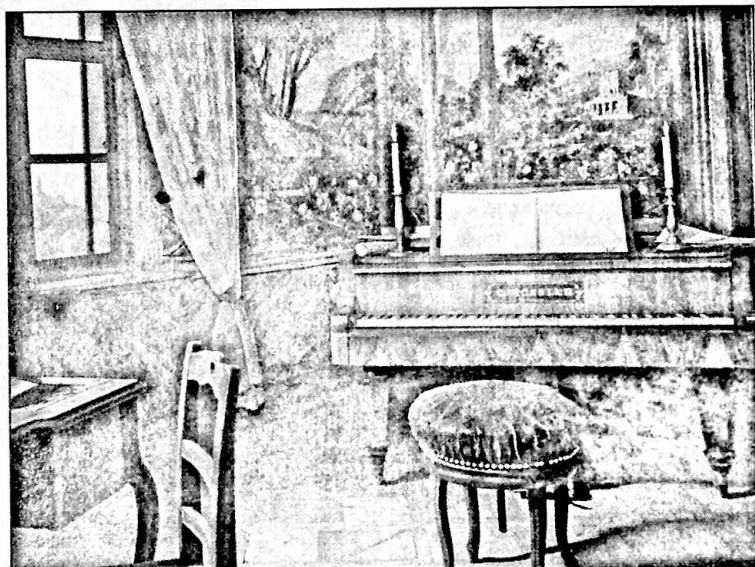
In addition to his symphonies, Beethoven wrote a number of concertos, five for piano, one for violin and a triple concerto for piano, violin and cello. They were on a larger scale than the usual Classical concerto, and allowed the soloist to display a great deal of virtuosity within a symphonic type of structure. Beethoven wrote out the cadenzas for his later concertos, telling the soloist exactly what to play. He neither expected nor encouraged soloists to improvise, as was more common earlier in the period.

The piano sonatas

The piano sonatas that Beethoven wrote are very different from those of Mozart and Haydn. The earlier two composers generally adapted harpsichord technique to the new instrument, and the speed and dexterity needed to be a fine harpsichord player are hallmarks of their sonatas. By the time Beethoven was writing his sonatas, however, the piano had developed different characteristics—more resonance, and the ability to have much more variation in sound volume, which Beethoven used to great dramatic effect. The sonatas he wrote for piano demanded a whole new technique.

Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas are some of the most important works in all piano literature. Together with Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, they have been called the pianist's Bible—Bach's work being the Old Testament and Beethoven's the New. The best known are the *Pathétique*, the *Moonlight*, the *Appassionata* and the *Waldstein*.

The piano that Beethoven used when he stayed at his brother's house in the country



A silhouette of Beethoven at the piano

Beethoven's compositions

Five piano concertos
One violin concerto
One triple concerto for piano, violin and cello

32 piano sonatas

- *Pathétique* Sonata
- *Moonlight* Sonata
- *Appassionata* Sonata
- *Waldstein* Sonata

Beethoven's
compositions

17 string quartets
Other chamber music

Works to remember:
• *Razumovsky* quartets

One opera
Sacred choral works

Works to remember:
• *Fidelio*
• *Leonore* Overture
• *Missa solemnis*

Fidelio was not particularly well received at first. One reviewer wrote, "...never was anything as incoherent, shrill, chaotic, and ear-splitting produced in music."



Beethoven working on the *Missa solemnis*

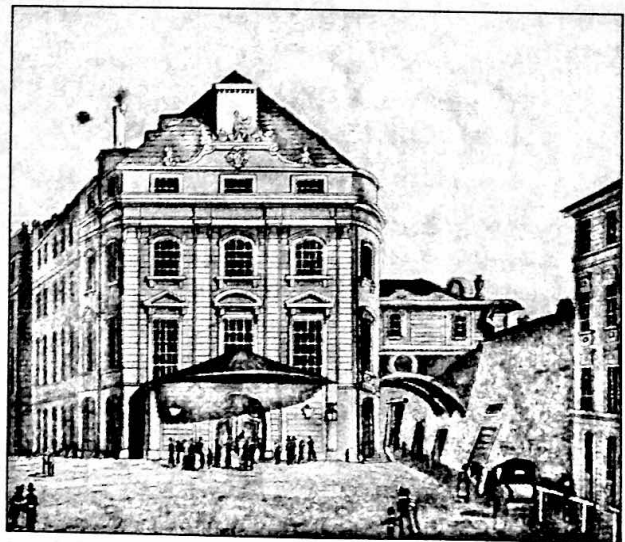
Chamber music

Beethoven wrote string quartets throughout his life, 17 all told. The earlier ones are classical in style, but some of the quartets he wrote later are almost as long as symphonies. The well-known *Razumovsky* Quartets, dedicated to the Russian ambassador to Vienna, are based on Russian folk melodies. The five quartets he wrote at the end of his life are more abstract, more inward-looking, and his major achievement in writing for string quartet. Beethoven composed other chamber music as well—violin and cello sonatas, piano trios and quartets, and chamber music for wind instruments.

Vocal music

Fidelio, Beethoven's only opera, sits firmly in his heroic mode, telling of freedom and justice, and triumph over adversity. It also describes his ideal woman, brave, loyal and full of lofty ideals. The opera is not often performed today, but there are three versions of the *Leonore* overture that Beethoven wrote for different productions of the opera, and *Leonore* Nos. 2 and 3 are heard quite often at symphony concerts.

Beethoven's other major vocal work is his great mass, the *Missa solemnis*. The work is complex and challenging, blending Beethoven's intensely emotional response to his God with the traditional form of the Roman Catholic service. The way the composer integrated the soloists, choir and orchestra broke new ground.



This is the theatre where parts of the *Missa solemnis* was first performed