

MUSIC

A Social Experience

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No. 3 in Eb Major (1804) and the opera *Fidelio* (1805). Both made political statements, though arguably each focused most strongly on inner psychological victories. As for Symphony No. 3, Beethoven originally subtitled it “Bonaparte,” after Napoleon Bonaparte, the French general and people’s champion. When Napoleon proclaimed himself emperor and invaded Austria, Beethoven was infuriated. He took a knife to the original inscription and renamed the work *Sinfonia eroica*

(*Heroic Symphony*). Beethoven’s opera *Fidelio* was no less idealistic. It tells the story of the political prisoner Florestan and his wife Leonore, who is willing to sacrifice her own life to save his.

Universal brotherhood is the central theme of the Ninth Symphony. Setting this lofty ideal to music, however, proved no easy task. Beethoven made over 200 drafts of the “Ode to Joy” tune alone. The symphony took over eight years to complete.

MUSICAL LIVES

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)



Portrait bust of Ludwig van Beethoven by Hugo Hagen, based on life mask by Franz Klein from 1812.

German composer Ludwig van Beethoven lived by the principles of the Enlightenment, the late-eighteenth-century intellectual movement that produced the ideals of rationality, political freedom, and personal liberty. His philosophy was directly reflected in his music, which was grander yet more introspective, more heroic yet more abstract, than anything written previously in the Western tradition. Such was the originality of his work that it took generations for composers and audiences alike to digest its implications.

Little came easily for Beethoven, who often struggled to compose. His sketchbooks reveal years of working out even a single theme. While still a young man, Beethoven began to lose his hearing. So devastating was this realization that he contemplated suicide. Happily for posterity, he carried on and gave musical voice to the struggle within. Many of his compositions were written after he was completely deaf.

Beethoven was a prolific composer. He wrote one opera, five piano concertos, 16 string quartets, 32 piano sonatas, 10 violin sonatas, marches, songs, variations, and many other works. His nine symphonies are tours de force of the orchestral repertory. His stellar reputation as

a symphonic writer weighed heavily on later composers. Fellow German composer Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) avoided the genre until his 40s for fear of falling short; others approached the completion of their own ninth symphonies as an omen of death.

Beethoven’s compositional output has been divided into three creative stages. His first works (to 1802) are stylistically representative of the Classical period—clear tonalities, balanced phrases, and formal conformity. His second period (the “Heroic” period, 1803–1812) begins with the Third Symphony, a work twice as long and far more complex than any symphonies that preceded it. Here we see Beethoven departing from the traditions of the Classical style and ushering in a new era of extended forms and tonal expansion. The Third Symphony received mixed reviews. Some recognized its greatness, whereas others complained of its length. The middle period was also a time in Beethoven’s life that was plagued with anxiety: over his impending deafness, over Napoleon’s self-proclaimed emperorship, and over the French bombardment of his beloved Vienna (1809), as well as a failed love affair and poor health.

The beginning of the third stylistic period (1813–1827) was marked by months of depression and financial troubles. His compositions were uneven in quality with emotional foci ranging from intimate chamber works to the bombastic programmatic orchestral work *Wellington’s Victory* (*The Battle Symphony*, 1813). While the work is perhaps Beethoven’s weakest orchestral composition, it did much for his public appeal and led to financial stability.

The last three years of Beethoven’s life saw the completion of his Ninth Symphony—a communal expression of optimism and Enlightenment ideals—and his last five string quartets, intensely personal testaments to a life of genius and disquietude.