

L U D W I G V A N B E E T H O V E N

Born: approx. Dec. 16, 1770

Died: March 26, 1827 at age 56

Birthplace: Bonn, Germany

MATB Songs: Ode to Joy/Symphony No. 9 (Books 1 & 3),
Für Elise (Book 3), Symphony No. 7 (Book 3)



Ludwig's parents were Johann van Beethoven and Maria Magdalena. His father, and strict man, His father was a musician and gave him music lessons. His mother bore seven children but only Beethoven and two brothers survived infancy.

Though a piano virtuoso, Beethoven wasn't a great student in his youth. He said "Music comes to me more readily than words." He published his first composition (piano variations) at age 12 and helped support the family with his playing. At age 16, Beethoven was sent to Vienna to study with Haydn and to play for Mozart who said, "Keep your eyes on him; some day he will give the world something to talk about." Weeks into his studies with Mozart, he learned that his mother and baby sister died and that his father had lost his job. Beethoven returned to support his family. He moved to Vienna in 1792 one month before his father died. In Vienna, Beethoven crossed paths with Haydn, Cherubini and Hummel, Liszt and Schubert.

Beethoven started losing his hearing at age 26 and became increasingly deaf over the remaining 31 years of his life. The last decade of his life he could hear nothing. (It is said he sawed off the legs of the piano to better feel the vibrations as he played while sitting on the floor.)

Ludwig had a troubled personal life and was considered short-tempered. He never married, moved frequently and was not a good housekeeper. He argued with his brothers, his publishers, housekeepers, pupils and patrons. Beethoven began to withdraw from social events. It was recently discovered that he suffered and eventually died from lead poisoning, the side effects of which include irritability, abdominal pain and loss of hearing.

Beethoven was an accomplished composer writing 9 symphonies (plus an unfinished 10th), 5 piano concerti (plus an unfinished 6th), 1 opera, 1 mass, 32 piano sonatas, 12 piano trios, 6 piano concerti, 16 string quartets, 150 arrangements of popular/folk songs, plus misc. works for piano, woodwinds and strings. Beethoven took a lot of time with his compositions and expressed in letters that he liked to work out all the details in his head before writing them down – and this could take years. His many sketchbooks provide proof of this.

In 1817, The Philharmonic Society of London commissioned Beethoven to write his Symphony 9, and he completed it in 1824. "Ode to Joy" (set to a poem by Schiller) originally sketched out by Beethoven in 1793, is the centerpiece of the 4th movement of this symphony, and one of the best known melodies in all of music. This symphony came to be known as the "Chorale" and is scored for a large chorus and soloists in the 4th movement. (Beethoven wrote about the struggle to introduce the voice after three instrumental movements.) This great work was the very first to use voices in a symphony.

He is widely considered one of the greatest composers of all time. It is estimated that his funeral was attended by ten to thirty thousand people.