

Ludwig van Beethoven 1770 - 1827



Some people consider Ludwig van Beethoven to be the greatest composer who ever lived. Despite an unhappy, even tragic, life he wrote some of the most uplifting and inspiring music ever composed.

Beethoven was born in Bonn, Germany, in December 1770. His birthday is believed to be December 16, but this is not documented. His family was musical, and his father Johann was a singer in the royal choir in Bonn.

Beethoven's father was very impressed by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791). Mozart was a famous child prodigy. He had been composing and performing since he was six years old. Beethoven's father wanted to train Ludwig to be a child prodigy, too. He began giving him piano lessons at an early age. Beethoven also had to learn organ and clarinet. But Beethoven's father was not as good at teaching as Mozart's father. He often woke Ludwig in the middle of the night to show off his piano skills to his friends. This hurt Beethoven's school performance, because he was sleepy and could not concentrate in class. His father solved this problem by taking Beethoven out of school when he was eleven years old.

Beethoven did not have an easy childhood. His father was an alcoholic, and his mother – with whom he was very close – was often sick. Only two of his six brothers and sisters lived past childhood. When Beethoven was about five years old, he suffered an inner ear infection that never completely healed, and that caused him problems later on.

Friends of Beethoven's father recognized Ludwig's talent and persuaded his father to let other musicians teach him. When he was 14, Beethoven was given a paid position as organist at the royal court in Bonn. He also played viola and continued to study piano. He had also begun composing, although – unlike Mozart – few of his early compositions were ever published.

At this point in history, the city of Vienna was considered the musical heart of Europe, because so many great composers lived there, including Josef Haydn and Mozart. Beethoven went to Vienna in 1787, at the age of 17, to continue his studies. His dream was to study under Mozart himself. Mozart was very impressed by the young Beethoven, but unfortunately had no time to teach him, because he was busy working on his opera *Don Giovanni*, among other things.

Two weeks after arriving in Vienna, Beethoven returned home because his mother had fallen seriously ill. She died shortly after he arrived back in Bonn, in 1787. They had been very close – Beethoven called her his best friend – and Ludwig was crushed.

Two years later, in 1789, Beethoven began to study at the University of Bonn, where he was exposed to the philosophy of the French revolution, which impressed him and influenced his later compositions.

Ludwig van Beethoven, *continued*

Beethoven made a second trip to Vienna when he was 22, and he never returned to Bonn. Mozart had already died, but Josef Haydn and Antonio Salieri taught him composition. Beethoven's great talent gained him access to Vienna's high society, and members of royalty became his patrons.

Ludwig van Beethoven's professional career began in 1793, when he published three trios and a piano sonata dedicated to Haydn. Two years later he gave his first piano concert. He composed innovative chamber music, and also became famous as a master improviser. Once, just before he was to give a piano concert, he discovered that the piano was tuned a half-note too low. Since there was no time to tune the piano, he simply played the concert in C-sharp major instead of C major, and the audience never noticed the difference.

Beethoven's fame as an artist continued to grow in 1796, when he toured Prague, Dresden, and Berlin. Audiences in each city tried to convince him to stay, but he remained true to Vienna for the rest of his life.

Later, travel as a performer was made impossible by a tragic problem that had been growing worse for some time: deafness. Hearing troubles that were probably caused by Beethoven's inner ear infection as a child worsened when he was an adult, and around 1800 grew so bad that he was no longer able to perform, although he continued to work as a composer for the rest of his life.

Ludwig van Beethoven was completely deaf by 1819, when he was 49. He could not perform, and he could no longer conduct an orchestra. People could only communicate with him in writing. What a tragic fate for a musician of Beethoven's talent!

Beethoven was a very hard worker. He often spent years on a composition, changing notes and passages until it was perfect. His symphonies were performed to great acclaim and were praised by other famous composers. Despite his deafness, and other unhappy events in his personal life (or could it be because of them?), he went on to compose some of the most inspiring and exciting works of music that the world has ever experienced.

When Ludwig van Beethoven died in Vienna in 1827, about twenty thousand people attended his funeral. So many people wanted to pay their respects that the army had to maintain order. He is now buried in a grave of honor in the Vienna Central Cemetery.

Ludwig van Beethoven had a huge influence on the composers who followed him. Despite his unhappy life he created some of the most widely-recognized and inspiring music in the western world.

Name _____ Date _____

**CIRCLE THE BEST ANSWER TO THESE QUESTIONS ABOUT
BEETHOVEN**

1. When was Beethoven born?
 - a. in 1756
 - b. in 1770
 - c. in 1790
 - d. in 1827
2. When did Beethoven die?
 - a. in 1756
 - b. in 1770
 - c. in 1790
 - d. in 1827
3. Who was Beethoven's first music teacher?
 - a. Mozart
 - b. Haydn
 - c. his father
 - d. Antonio Salieri
4. What did Beethoven's father want his son to be?
 - a. a child prodigy like Mozart
 - b. a good student
 - c. a doctor
 - d. all of the above
5. What instruments did Beethoven learn?
 - a. piano
 - b. clarinet and organ
 - c. viola
 - d. all of the above
6. Why did Beethoven go to Vienna?
 - a. It was the musical heart of Europe.
 - b. He wanted to study with Mozart.
 - c. both a and b
 - d. neither a nor b
7. From whom did Beethoven learn composition in Vienna?
 - a. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
 - b. Josef Haydn
 - c. Antonio Salieri
 - d. B and C
8. What was Beethoven famous for in Vienna?
 - a. his innovative compositions
 - b. his skill as a pianist
 - c. his ability to improvise
 - d. all of the above

Name _____ Date _____

CIRCLE THE BEST ANSWER TO THESE QUESTIONS ABOUT BEETHOVEN

9. What was Beethoven's working style?
- a. He needed only a few hours to compose a piece of music.
 - b. Beethoven never really finished a composition.
 - c. Beethoven often worked on his compositions for years, until he felt they were perfect.
 - d. all of the above
10. What physical handicap made it hard for Beethoven to compose, and impossible for him to perform?
- a. blindness
 - b. deafness
 - c. senility
 - d. paralysis
11. Was Beethoven still popular when he died?
- a. No; he had been forgotten.
 - b. No; he had made many enemies.
 - c. Yes; 20,000 people attended his funeral.
 - d. all of the above
12. Which of the following statements about Beethoven is true?
- a. He was a dedicated and hard-working composer.
 - b. He had an unhappy and tragic life.
 - c. Despite his suffering, he wrote inspiring and beautiful music.
 - d. All of the above.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Ludwig van Beethoven had a life full of suffering and pain. As a child, he lost many of his brothers and sisters to sickness, his beloved mother was in poor health, and he had a troubled relationship with his alcoholic father. He had unhappy love affairs as a young man. He had hearing problems for years, and eventually went deaf – a tragic problem for a musician and composer. Many people would have given up, but Beethoven persisted and went on to compose some of the most beautiful and inspirational music there is.

What do you think might be the reason why Beethoven refused to give up? Describe how you would have felt in his situation, and what you would have done.

ANSWERS TO MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS ABOUT BEETHOVEN:

1. b
2. d
3. c
4. a
5. d
6. c
7. d
8. d
9. c
10. b
11. c
12. d