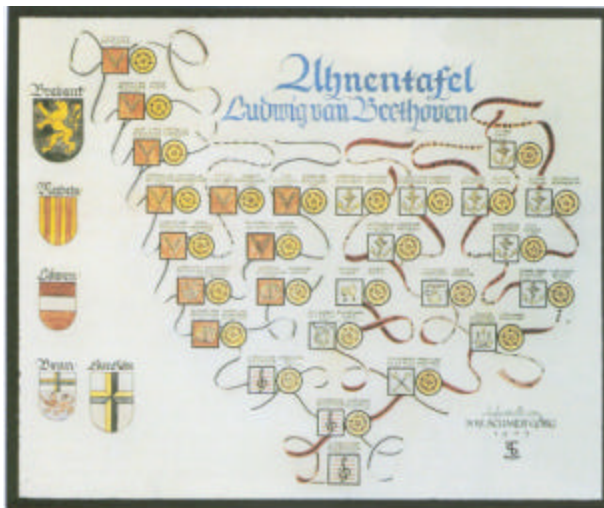


# Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony

*By Shannon Siemens*

## History of the Composer

Ludwig van Beethoven was born on December 16, 1770 in Bonn, Germany. He was the second child to Maria Magdalena and Johann van Beethoven. An older brother, Ludwig Maria, died six days after his birth on April 2, 1769. Beethoven had five younger siblings: Caspar Anton Carl, Nikolaus Johann, Anna-Maria Franziska, Franz Georg, and Maria Margaretha Josepha. However, Anna-Maria and Franz Georg died only a few days after their birth. There has been much research about the history of Beethoven's family, and while none of his siblings had similar musical genius, there were traces of it in his extended family.



*This is the van Beethoven family tree, put together in 1947 by Joseph Schmidt-Gorg, one of the most prominent researchers concerning the ancestors of Beethoven. This reproduction of the family tree is at the Beethovenhaus in Bonn, Germany.<sup>a</sup>*

Originally, the van Beethoven family came from Flanders. Ancestors of Beethoven held many different professions, including a baker (the composer's great-grandfather), a farmer (his great-great-great-great grandfather, whose wife was burnt as a witch in the market place at Brussels in 1595), and most importantly, his grandfather Louis, who lived much of his life as a musician (voice).

It is obvious that Beethoven received his musical talent from his grandfather. In 1725, Louis' father Michiel made an agreement with the local organist, Antoon Colfs. In exchange for 100 guilders (about \$50 today), Colfs was to teach the young Louis "to read organ music, organ-tablature, and thorough bass or to play accompaniments on the harpsichord or organ." At the age of 19, Louis became choir director at the St. Pieterskerk at Louvain (though he had been singing in the choir since the tender age of 6), and a year later was also found as a singer at the St. Lambertuskerk at Liege. However, he did not remain there for very long, and he left for Bonn in March of 1733, largely to flee from creditors.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, Louis van Beethoven passed away when Ludwig was only three, yet his memory remained with Beethoven--for a portrait of Louis was hung on the wall in the room that Beethoven took his last breath in. Beethoven's father, Johann, was the third son of Louis.

Johann van Beethoven was also musically talented. He was a tenor in the Electoral choir and was promoted to "Hofmusikus" in 1764, though he was poorly paid. However, as a teacher, he was very much in demand, and wealthy foreigners would send their children to him for piano lessons. This talent became both a blessing and a curse--once Beethoven's father discovered his talent, young Ludwig's life became very difficult. When Beethoven was only four or five years old, Johann would force him to practice the piano and violin for hours on end, planning on exploiting him as a child prodigy to become wealthy. Johann was a relentless and

cruel teacher, often said to have beaten his son repeatedly for not being dedicated enough.

Ludwig performed his first recital at the age of eight, however, he did not establish himself as a child prodigy as Mozart had, much to the dismay of his father.<sup>2</sup>

After three more years, Beethoven was able to take lessons outside of the family and began to study with the court organist, Christian Gottlob Neefe. Neefe became Beethoven's mentor and musical father, for he noticed that his young student was much more than talented--he was a genius. Early on, Neefe began to encourage Beethoven to compose, and assisted him in getting his first work published: "*Dressler*" *Variations for Piano, WoO 63*. He employed Beethoven as an assistant organist and violist in the court orchestra. This job did not necessarily mean much money, but it opened Beethoven up to a new world of standard musical repertoire.<sup>3</sup> Neefe allowed Beethoven to truly tap into his musical abilities and did not force him as his father had. Following his time spent with Neefe, Beethoven moved to the city of Vienna, Austria--the then-musical capital of the world, where most of his compositions were created.

In Vienna, Beethoven dreamed of studying with Mozart, however, Mozart had died just the year before, in 1791 (though many of Beethoven's works were influenced strongly by Mozart). Beethoven began lessons with Haydn, but they did not go well, due to personality clashes. Fortunately, the unproductive lessons with Haydn stopped in February of 1794 when Haydn left for an extended trip to England. Other subsequent teachers included Johann Schenk, Johann Georg Albrechtsberger and Antonio Salieri.<sup>4</sup> His fame began to grow in Vienna and he began to construct some significant acquaintances with the Viennese nobility. He was even sponsored by the Prince Karl Lichnowsky and Prince Franz Maximilian

Lobkowitz to further his playing with his only widespread concert tour to Prague, Dresden, Leipzig, and Berlin.<sup>5</sup>

This was about all of the formal education that Beethoven received. A "backward student," according to his teachers, he did not go to school, although he occasionally sat in on University lectures. His vocabulary was small and his grammar was poor. Though he was "tied up with his thirst for culture,"<sup>6</sup> and despite his devotion to Goethe and his contemporaries, he had no apparent interest in his present philosophy, and this severely limited his abstract thought (though his music does not reflect this).<sup>7</sup> For such a great musician, he had little else in his life to back up the genius.

What little Beethoven did have began to slip away from him in the latter years of his life. In 1801, his hearing began to diminish noticeably, and his depression worsened. He was determined to survive this hard period in his life ("I will take fate by the throat; it shall not overcome me"), and in the summer of 1802, his notebooks were overflowing with creative thoughts; producing piano sonatas, three violin sonatas, and his Second Symphony.<sup>8</sup>

This happy mood did not remain, and with the winter season approaching came a more bleak Beethoven. In October of 1802, Beethoven became increasingly unhappy, and wrote a letter to his brothers about contemplating suicide. He confessed in this document, known as the Heiligenstadt Testament, that "...a little more of my deafness and I would have ended my life-- it was only my art that held me back. Ah, it seemed impossible to leave the world until I had brought forth all that I felt was within me."<sup>9</sup> He expressed extreme dissatisfaction with his previous compositions, and during this depressed stage in his life he composed his heroic Third Symphony.

Life continued to spiral downward for Beethoven. He took an interest in the sister of a friend, her name being Antoine Brentano. Around the year 1812, Beethoven wrote three letters to an "Immortal Beloved," and there has been some speculation as to if it was Brentano. These letters have been one of the greatest mysteries surrounding Beethoven's life. At this point in his life, Beethoven had been receiving a regular income for some time, and he longed for permanent companionship with someone. "He craved the permanent affection of a sympathetic woman, her tact, her ministering touch, her companionship, which, in his bachelorhood, he could only have in snatches."<sup>10</sup> His deafness also continued to worsen.

In 1818, Beethoven's deafness finally overcame him completely. For the last nine years of his life, he remained ill with many different ailments, including inflammation of the lungs, dropsy and pneumonia. Amazingly, it was during this rough time in his life that his Ninth Symphony was composed.<sup>11</sup> This just proves that Beethoven truly did hear his music with his "inner ear" and was truly the genius that Neefe first nurtured.

Beethoven died at age 56 on March 26, 1827. Even his death was legendary, the story being told of him lying in bed during a terrible thunderstorm, shaking his fist as a lightning bolt hit the earth, and then his death immediately following those successive chain of events. "An estimated 50,000 people attended his funeral and Währinger's leading musicians acted as pallbearers."<sup>12</sup> He lived from the Classical to the Romantic ages, from hearing to deafness, from poverty to success. From the glory of being a famed composer to the absolute agony of being a worthless human being, Beethoven explored the entire spectrum that there was to offer in music... and in life.

## Europe During the Time of Eroica / Dedication to Napoleon

*"I am not contented with my works so far. Henceforth I shall take a new path."*

*-Beethoven in 1802*

Bonn was the seat of the archbishop of Cologne, one of the "ecclesiastical states" of the Holy Roman Empire, or the *Reich*. The rulers of these states had both secular and sacred privileges, and were able to elect the Holy Roman Emperor, even though he would reside in Vienna. Emperor Joseph II (1780 - 90) was one of the foremost advocates of the German Enlightenment, a huge supporter of religious, social, and political reforms. His brother, Maximilian Franz, was the Elector of Cologne. They gave refuge to "aristocratic immigrants," but forbade them from gathering troops, for fear that they would threaten the new regime in Paris. Upon his ascension to the throne, Emperor Leopold II (1790 - 1792) practiced the same policy, though tensions became increasingly pressing, due to paranoia from the French Republic about invasions.<sup>13</sup>

By this time, enlightened reform in the Reich had finished. In 1792, Franz II succeeded Leopold II at 24, and due to this young age, his political insecurity and naiveté caused him to appoint inflexible, right-wing cabinet members such as, of whom he relied on heavily. This influenced his decision to attempt to make Austria anti-revolutionary. Sensing this, Paris declared war on Austria on April 20, 1792. Within five days was the first death by guillotine, marking the beginning of violence and bloodshed.<sup>14</sup>

Following the execution of Robespierre, disorganization and confusion continued to hover about Austria. A campaign began in Italy on March 27, 1796, designed to inflict heavy

penalties on Austria for supporting counter-revolutionaries, and to gain new riches to sustain the war. The general appointed to lead the "Army of Italy" was Napoleon Bonaparte. A talented military man, this was his chance to prove his genius to the world and crush Austria.

Napoleon was known for leading his troops personally across the battlefield, and his appetite for power continually grew. After treaty negotiations ended, he returned to Paris for some behind-the-scenes work with the revolutionary elites. Seeing that Napoleon was working elsewhere, Louis-Alexandre Berthier was chosen to replace Napoleon as commander of the Italian Army. However, this position had been originally offered to General Jean-Baptiste-Jules Bernadotte. When Bernadotte discovered that he had been passed over for the position (which was rightfully his) and given the position of French ambassador to the Imperial Court instead, he became furious and insulted with Napoleon & company, and therefore moved to Vienna, where he occasionally met with Beethoven.<sup>15</sup>

*A painting of Napoleon Bonaparte as "Master of Europe." Painted by Appiani the Elder.<sup>b</sup>*



During this time, Napoleon continued to rise in power. He continued to lead the Army of Italy, but also became very immersed with political matters. On August 2, 1802, after a bitter struggle with the Senate, Napoleon Bonaparte was proclaimed First Consul for life. Then, on May 18, 1804, a worn-down Senate ratified another constitution under Napoleon's command. In it, the "government

of the Republic" was passed down through a hereditary line of emperors. On that date, Beethoven's Third Symphony was complete, and it simply held the title "Bonaparte."<sup>16</sup>

However, there is some controversy as to how Beethoven received his inspiration for the Eroica Symphony. Some scholars, such as Anton Schindler, believe that it was actually Bernadotte that gave Beethoven the inspiration. However, since Bernadotte and Bonaparte were such fierce enemies, that seems unlikely. According to Dr. Bertolini, a long-time friend of Beethoven, the death of the English General Abercromby gave Beethoven the first idea for the Eroica Symphony. Again, Otto Jahn stated that, "Bonaparte's journey to Egypt gave Beethoven the idea, and the rumor of Nelson's death in the battle of Abukir created the funeral march."<sup>17</sup> Even though parts of this symphony are shrouded in mystery, that does not remove any of its grandeur.

In the year 1803, *The Peace Almanac* (journal of the war) described Napoleon as the "lion of the valley" and the "tiger of the mountains." It compared Napoleon to Alexander the Great and stated that he had the unconditional protection of the Gods.<sup>19</sup> During this time, Beethoven had been asked to dedicate a symphony (or at least the title) to Napoleon. Such a symphony would certainly bring him great fame and wealth, for Napoleon was currently on good terms with the rest of the Senate. He had been sent a new pianoforte and was getting public notice, so naturally he would compose a symphony for the man responsible for getting him so much attention!<sup>20</sup> However, Napoleon's haughty attitude would not keep "his" symphony to himself for long.

Over the next few years, Napoleon continued to take more and more power until finally he was crowned the Emperor of Austria. Beethoven began to see the "republican tragedy" be played in society, and as Napoleon's domination grew, Beethoven became more and more

disillusioned with the tyrant. Finally, Napoleon crowned himself King of Italy in May of 1805 and made it clear to Europe that he considered himself the heir to the Roman Emperors.

Emperor Franz II was quite justifiably threatened by this statement, and reacted accordingly by attacking France with Russia, Britain, and Sweden on August 9, 1805.<sup>21</sup>

This move proved to be disastrous for Franz. Not even four months later, he signed the humiliating Treaty of Pressburg, meaning the end of the Holy Roman Empire. Sixteen princes separated from the Empire in June of 1806, forming the "Confederation of the Rhine" and promising to supply Napoleon with 63,000 men. On August 6, Franz renounced his title, the old empire completely collapsed and the new order rested entirely in the hands of Napoleon. Beethoven, having the entire political world around him shattered, crossed out Napoleon's name on the title page (so much that it tore the paper), then literally tore the page in half in a fit of rage and simply stated "to celebrate the memory of a great man." The Symphony was then officially dedicated to Prince Lobkowitz.<sup>21</sup>

### **History/Analysis of the Symphony & Finale**

One of the most fascinating things about Beethoven's Third Symphony is that he actually quotes one of his own compositions literally in the finale. Not only that, but he uses that same theme in three different pieces:

- 1) *As the main part of the finale to his ballet Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus (The Creatures of Prometheus)*
- 2) *The theme alone as a "country dance" (No. 7 in the Twelve Contredanses, WoO #14)*
- 3) *The theme as the finale of the "Eroica" Symphony<sup>18</sup>*



## The "Eroica"

Symphony was composed during Beethoven's Second period. It set the standard and the model for all composers of large-scale instrumental pieces for the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

The first movement, *Allegro con brio*, is written in traditional form, yet it is uncharacteristically long for an opening movement, being

591 measures in length.<sup>c</sup> The second movement, *Marcia funebris* (Funeral March), is based on the somber dirges played after grand funerals for revolutionary heroes. The third movement is a light Scherzo and Trio (in duple meter). The finale is 475 measures in length.<sup>22</sup>

The webpage for Arizona State University had a very thorough write-up on the finale of Beethoven's Third Symphony: "After a short introduction that is an outraged flurry in the strings, it comes to a dead stop on a series of dominant chords. You then hear not the theme itself, but the bass line of the theme from m. 12, the theme (in rounded binary form) at m. 44.

Variation 2, m. 62, is the theme plus counterpoint, a traditional technique of variation form. Variation 3 adds the woodwinds, playing the theme, from m. 78. So far, the usual variations techniques apply: sections of about the same length, same harmonic functions, and same or closely related keys, varying the notes of the theme or adding counterpoints. But from here on, there are no more repeat signs and there is an interpolated transition to Variation 4, which is a fugato, free from the usual constraints of variation form. Variation 5 has the melody in flutes and violins in the key of D. Variation 6; m. 213 has a dotted rhythm like a march over the original bass line, sort of Beethoven's Turkish march, in g minor. Variation 7, m. 260, returns to c minor and the main theme with a sudden change and an incomplete variation that functions something like a transition or phony variation to the next section, a new variation over the inverted bass theme (m. 279). Variation 8, a double fugato (bass theme plus counterpoint of the violins) is also not in the binary structure of the original theme. The variations halt with another fermata, m. 350, and a change of tempo to Poco Andante. The main theme is now heard in the woodwinds in this Variation 9. Variation 10, m. 382, has the theme in the bass again and lasts until p. 212-A where there is a coda-like extension that lasts until m. 433, when the tempo changes to Presto. Despite the change of tempo, the music is like the beginning of the movement, although this sounds somewhat like a coda to the coda (it is full of typical coda business and noisy) and is followed by one of many Beethoven cadences that are extended emphases on the tonic. An energetic movement, the finale combines elements of theme-and-variations and rondo, and makes a fittingly forceful conclusion to this unique symphony."<sup>22</sup>

Beethoven's heroic ideals for his political leaders were quite evident through his Third, "Heroic" Symphony. Unfortunately, Napoleon Bonaparte did not live up to these expectations, but the beauty and magnificence of the Symphony will always live on.

## Text Citations

- <sup>1</sup>Wouter Paap, Ludwig van Beethoven, 9
- <sup>2</sup>Glenn Stanley, *The Cambridge Companion to Beethoven*, 7
- <sup>3</sup>Stanley, 8
- <sup>4</sup>Stanley, 20
- <sup>5</sup>William Kinderman, *Beethoven*, 34
- <sup>6</sup>Giorgio Pestelli, *The Age of Mozart and Beethoven*, 222
- <sup>7</sup>Stanley, 25
- <sup>8</sup>Stanley, 26
- <sup>9</sup>Stanley, 27
- <sup>10</sup>John N. Burk, *The Life and Works of Beethoven*, 155
- <sup>11</sup>Stanley, 13
- <sup>12</sup>Peter Gammond, *Classical Composers*, 17
- <sup>13</sup>Thomas Sipe, *Beethoven: Eroica Symphony*, 2
- <sup>14</sup>Sipe, 4
- <sup>15</sup>Sipe, 7
- <sup>16</sup>Sipe, 10
- <sup>17</sup>Sipe, 33
- <sup>18</sup>Sipe, 11
- <sup>19</sup>Sipe, 46
- <sup>20</sup>Sipe, 47
- <sup>21</sup>Sipe, 51
- <sup>22</sup><http://www.asu.edu/cfa/classnotes/music/reynolds/MHL342/cla/Beethoven.symphony.html>

## Picture Citations

- <sup>a</sup>The Beethoven Family Tree, <http://www.lvbeethoven.com/Famille/FamilyTreeBeethoven.html>
- <sup>b</sup>Napoleon Bonaparte I net Guide, [http://www.napoleonbonaparte.nl/html/body\\_paintings.html](http://www.napoleonbonaparte.nl/html/body_paintings.html)
- <sup>c</sup>Ludwig van Beethoven, *First, Second, and Third Symphonies in Full Orchestral Score*, 323

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