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The Psychology of Beethoven and *The Eroica Symphony*

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Abstract

As a concert pianist and chapel organist, Beethoven rose to a fame in Vienna which allowed him patrons and friends who would support his compositions. One such patron was Count Waldstein, who claimed that Beethoven would inherit the spirit of Mozart in his famous prediction of Beethoven's success. To study composition Beethoven turned to two prominent Viennese composers: Haydn and Salieri. As his fame grew, his health decreased until he was diagnosed with deafness and moved to Heiligenstadt. Here Beethoven wrote a letter to his brothers called the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, which was never sent but expressed his troubled mental state. Beethoven composed his *Eroica Symphony* in a time in his life when, accepting the onset of his deafness, he also experienced the onset of depression. The *Eroica Symphony* has threads of Heroism running throughout it, and tells the story of life over death. But a question remains surrounding the work: Who is the Hero?

Over the course of ten years, Beethoven's career as a composer in conjunction with his personal life saw drastic changes. Despite Beethoven's success as a composer and performer in Vienna, he ultimately fell into a deep depression that influenced his ability to compose. From the prediction that Beethoven would do great things as the legacy of Haydn and Mozart, to what is viewed by many as Beethoven's suicide note in his *Heiligenstadt Testament*, Beethoven experienced one of the greatest struggles a composer could ever face: an ongoing fight with deafness. Due to the onset of his deafness, Beethoven went through psychological changes that influenced the way in which he composed, particularly in the *Eroica Symphony*.

From his childhood, Beethoven had a burdensome life. Because his father wanted him to be a musician, Ludwig had no say in his early life. His father, Johann van Beethoven, had knowledge of Mozart's success and how he was a prodigy by the age of six.¹ The success of Mozart led Johann to believe that he could shape his son into a prodigy as well. Beethoven's father started him on piano lessons and forced him to play at the court, in the home, and in town to perfect his skills and promote him as a performer. As Ludwig grew older, his father decided to find him a teacher who could teach him violin while also advancing his keyboard skills. He hired his friend, Tobias Friedrich Pfeiffer. Pfeiffer, along with being a skilled musician, was also an alcoholic.² Ludwig made a great deal of progress under Pfeiffer, but was physically and verbally abused by both his teacher and his father. The two men would often come home intoxicated late at night and force the young Beethoven to play piano until they requested that he stop. These difficult experiences as a child were just a precursor to the struggles Beethoven would face later in his life. Beethoven took lessons from Pfeiffer whenever Pfeiffer felt like teaching, but after only one year of lessons Pfeiffer decided to leave town. Ludwig's next teacher was Christian Gottlob Neefe, the father figure Beethoven lacked.³ By the age of ten Beethoven was an accomplished pianist and would perform for paying audiences. After he gained an audience he moved with his father from Bonn to Vienna.

Count Waldstein, one of Beethoven's patrons, predicted that Beethoven would have an illustrious career in Vienna when he claimed that Beethoven would acquire the spirit of Mozart from Haydn.⁴ To fulfill Waldstein's proclamation, Beethoven began lessons with Haydn in Vienna. From Haydn, Beethoven learned how to write

¹ Jan Swafford, *Beethoven* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004), 29.

² *Ibid.*, 30.

³ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴ Elaine Sisman, *The Cambridge Companion to Beethoven*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 51.

counterpoint, compose thematic material, and develop motives throughout a work.⁵ Due to the strained relationship between the two, their time as master and pupil did not last long. The lessons provided by Haydn, however, can be seen as the basis for much of Beethoven's work.⁶ Although Beethoven used the skills Haydn had taught him, the public did not initially accept Beethoven's music. Because of their initial skepticism, Beethoven's distinction among patrons was vital to his initial success as a composer in Vienna.

Beethoven was originally known as a pianist because of his ability to improvise. Since Beethoven was new to Vienna, patrons were interested in hearing his music. As stated above, he began writing in a style similar to Haydn. The pieces that caught his patrons' attention were his early symphonies and septets.⁷ Beethoven began to foster a more serious musical style that focused on the composer as a genius who wrote in an intellectual and original way. This new style was viewed by a skeptical public, while Beethoven's patrons showed continued support of his compositions. Soon after giving his initial concerts, musicians began to imitate Beethoven's serious music and performance.⁸ Beethoven quit taking lessons from Haydn as he grew as a technical and serious composer. He then took up lessons with Antonio Salieri, the Imperial Kapellmeister, who helped Beethoven develop his skills in placing text to music. Through these connections, Beethoven was able to firmly establish himself as a composer in Vienna.⁹

Many of Beethoven's connections were made through his father and other members of the Bonn court, giving him notoriety before even arriving in Vienna in 1792.¹⁰ In both the courts of Prince Joseph Franz Maximilian Lobkowitz and Count Waldstein, Beethoven had established himself in Vienna's music scene. His reputation as a composer was also strengthened by his apprenticeship with Haydn, who was already an acclaimed Viennese composer.¹¹ Having established himself, Beethoven was able to begin composing his *First Symphony*, which premiered in 1800. This work was his first public performance for self-benefit, and the Viennese audience received it with mixed opinions. Beethoven's active membership in Vienna's musical scene and the premiere of his *First*

⁵ Jan LaRue, "Multistage Variance: Haydn's Legacy to Beethoven," *The Journal of Musicology* 1, no. 3 (1982): 265-74, doi: 10.2307/763878.

⁶ George Marek, *Beethoven: Biography of a Genius* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1969), 100-101.

⁷ Katalin Komlós, "After Mozart: The Viennese Piano Scene in the 1790s," *Studia Musicologica* 49, no. 1/2 (2008): 35-48, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25598311>.

⁸ Tia DeNora, "Beethoven, the Viennese canon, and the sociology of identity," *Beethoven Forum* 2 (1993): 29-53, *RILM Abstracts of Music Literature (1967 to Present only)*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 14, 2016).

⁹ Dominique Lopiccolo, "The Man behind the Music: Beethoven's Critical Early Years," *The Kabod (Liberty University)* 2, no. 7 (October 2015), <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/kabdo/vol2/iss1/7>.

¹⁰ DeNora, "Beethoven, the Viennese canon, and the sociology of identity," 29-53.

¹¹ Joseph Kerman, Scott G. Burnham, and Alan Tyson, "Beethoven, Ludwig van, §3:1792-5," *Grove Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed December 14, 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40026pg3>.

Symphony brought light to Beethoven among the Viennese people, and in turn gave Beethoven confidence in his compositional abilities.¹²

In the midst of his compositional growth, Beethoven first reported hearing loss to physician Franz Wegeler in a letter from June 29, 1801. In this letter, Beethoven explained to Wegeler how he had noticed his hearing deteriorate during the three prior years, and he now struggled with hearing higher pitches.¹³ Beethoven's deafness did not happen at once; rather, his hearing loss was gradual and varied depending on his general health or the weather.¹⁴ This was difficult for Beethoven, who was embarrassed by his deafness and resorted to social isolation to hide his deafness from others. Although he showed great courage by continuing to produce a large output of compositions, Beethoven's disconnect from society and friends caused him to lead a miserable life.

Because of the health challenges Beethoven faced, he was advised in the summer of 1802 to go to Heiligenstadt, Austria as a retreat from the social pressures that caused him anxiety. It was here that Beethoven wrote his *Heiligenstadt Testament*, a striking account of the struggles he faced as a composer who was losing one of his most useful tools: his hearing. Beethoven wrote about the embarrassment he felt from his deafness and how it forced him into isolation. Scholars of Beethoven's life have always wondered why he did not simply end his life, considering all of the challenges brought about by the loss of his hearing. The struggles of overcoming deafness were not only physical but also mental, so Beethoven understandably experienced psychological distress as the result of his hearing loss. Beethoven stayed alive because he felt he had not yet produced all of the works he needed to compose.¹⁵ So while some consider Beethoven's *Heiligenstadt Testament* to be a despairing suicide letter, it instead could be viewed as a chance for Beethoven to express in words all of the mental and psychological challenges he faced in his deafness, and how he planned to overcome them through his music.

The years between Beethoven's time in Heiligenstadt and the premiere of his *Eroica Symphony* included the completion in 1802 of his *Second Symphony*, a joyous symphony that demonstrates the caution that should be taken when assuming that a composer's mental state is always reflected in his works. This composition was considered to be a place where Beethoven could purge himself of the struggles he had been experiencing from his

¹² Marek, *Biography of a Genius*, 199-201.

¹³ Edoardo Saccenti, Age K Smilde, and Wim H M Saris, "Beethoven's Deafness and His Three Styles," *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 343 (7837): 1298-1300, doi:10.1136/bmj.d7589, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23066620>.

¹⁴ Marek, *Biography of a Genius*, 212.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 326.

deafness.¹⁶ Only a year later, Beethoven had already begun working on his *Third Symphony*, a work that occupied his every thought. During this symphony's composition, Emperor of the French and King of Italy Napoleon Bonaparte was still planning invasions throughout Europe. Napoleon's conquests in Europe were heavy on Beethoven's mind, as he truly believed that Napoleon would liberate Europe from its problems.¹⁷

Although Beethoven is now seen as the composer who was able to live independently, his early life was still spent fulfilling the desires of his patrons. As Beethoven was completing his *Eroica Symphony*, he traveled to the Lobkowitz palace to make the finishing touches on the symphony before rehearsals began. Prince Lobkowitz was a friend and patron of Beethoven, with dedications of the Third, Fifth, and Sixth symphonies in his name. Beethoven, still under the patronage of the nobility, tailored the last aspects of the symphony to be in line with the desires of his friend. After *Eroica's* composition was finished, rehearsals were conducted entirely at the palace. The premiere was a private showing for only a few close friends and patrons, after which the symphony was given its true premiere.¹⁸

Many different factors could have led Beethoven to write *The Eroica Symphony*. One known for certain, as discussed earlier, is the dedication of the piece to one of Beethoven's long-time Viennese patrons, Prince Lobkowitz. More specifically however, for whom the second movement funeral march was written can be debated. One possible theory is that Beethoven wrote the symphony in memoriam of the late Prussian prince, Louis Ferdinand, whom Napoleon is credited for killing in battle. Writing the funeral march for the prince would add to the lore of heroism exemplified by Napoleon which Beethoven featured in his works of this time.¹⁹ Another possible theory is that Beethoven wrote the symphony to identify with the mythological Prometheus, a Titan who rebelled against the gods of Mount Olympus to steal fire for humans.²⁰ Prometheus inspired Beethoven as a figure who was able to overcome obstacles in the pursuit of helping others.

In light of all possible figures who inspired Beethoven's composition of the *Eroica*, perhaps the most important consideration to make is that Beethoven composed his heroic symphony to display himself as the hero who overcame the struggles of his own life, both in his difficult childhood and through the gradual loss of his

¹⁶ Ibid., 328.

¹⁷ Ibid., 342.

¹⁸ Tomislav Volek and Jaroslav Macek, "Beethoven's Rehearsals at the Lobkowitz's," *The Musical Times* 127, no. 1716 (1986): 75-80, doi:10.2307/964559.

¹⁹ Rita Steblin, "Who Died? The Funeral March in Beethoven's 'Eroica' Symphony," *The Musical Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (2006): 62-79, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25172831>.

²⁰ Marek, *Biography of a Genius*, 318-319.

hearing.²¹ Perhaps Beethoven's heroic symphony was a means by which he could express the struggles he faced and the triumph he hoped to achieve through continuing his art. The symphony could also be viewed as a representation of his own hopeful triumph over his deafness, an idea which is supported by the third and fourth movements. These movements are often referred to as the "Resurrection" and "Apotheosis" movements, although Beethoven did not directly title them as such. They allude to the idea of Beethoven acting apart from God to overcome the physical limitations of his deafness. While it is difficult to definitively say for whom the composition was written, the theory that Beethoven wrote it about himself is supported by his relation to Prometheus and the physical and psychological struggles he faced while composing the symphony. Beethoven did ultimately overcome his struggles by composing a symphony still admired by listeners today.

Already having a troubled psyche from the abuse he suffered as a child, Beethoven's depression worsened because of the onset of his deafness. This mindset, in tandem with the heroic ideas which Napoleon and Beethoven embodied, show that his psyche had a large influence on the composition of the *Eroica Symphony*. The purpose behind Beethoven's *Eroica* is a question that can never truly be answered, but the theory behind Beethoven's composition of the symphony as a heroic triumph over the struggles he faced from his deafness fits in line with the other compositions Beethoven wrote during this period. His deafness could have been a stark interruption of the musical legacy proclaimed by Count Waldstein, as suggested by the message in the *Heiligenstadt Testament*. However, Beethoven's story is an example of the ways in which psychological distress can influence the actions of an individual in an overall positive way. Ultimately, Beethoven displayed his ability to triumph over the struggles he faced beginning with the successful composition and premiere of his *Eroica Symphony*.

²¹ Steblin, "Who Died?" 62-79.

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Annotated Bibliography

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The main idea DeNora discusses in this article is the importance of Beethoven's social status as a composer upon moving to Vienna. It is true he had talent upon moving to Vienna for the first time, but as DeNora points out, he would have had a very hard time making a living if he did not have the relationships he did with some key aristocrats. The social status angle this article takes presents a good addition to the understanding of Beethoven as a composer in his earlier years.

Kerman, Joseph, Scott G. Burnham, and Alan Tyson. "Beethoven, Ludwig van, §3:1792-5." *Grove Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed December 14, 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40026pg3>.

The authors describe Beethoven's first three years in Vienna, when he took lessons from Haydn, Albrechtsberger, and Salieri. The poor relationship between Haydn and Beethoven resulted in Beethoven's claim that he learned little to nothing from Haydn. Along with taking lessons with Haydn, Beethoven also began to establish himself as a composer and pianist during his first years in Vienna, relying both on aristocratic support and his own skills. Beethoven's op. 1 and op. 2 were composed and premiered during these years.

Komlós, Katalin. "After Mozart: The Viennese Piano Scene in the 1790s." *Studia Musicologica* 49, no. 1/2 (2008): 35-48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25598311>.

The author gives an overview of the culture and political shift at the end of the eighteenth century in Europe. Emperor Franz and his family promoted music at this time, which tended to occur in the home or in a private setting. The music that was programed was either solo improvisation or orchestral concertos. Beethoven disagreed with the music that Mozart composed and did not learn much from Haydn. Although he did not follow in their footsteps, he was admired for his ability to improvise his music on the spot. This article is useful because it provides cultural background and a deeper understanding of Beethoven's life.

LaRue, Jan. "Multistage Variance: Haydn's Legacy to Beethoven." *The Journal of Musicology* 1, no. 3 (1982): 265-74. doi:10.2307/763878.

In this article, the reader learns that Haydn taught Beethoven monothematicism. The author gives multiple examples of Haydn's music where he uses this technique. She then compares the two composers' work to show their similar characteristics. This is helpful in understanding how Beethoven used the skills Haydn passed down to him.

Lopiccolo, Dominique. "The Man behind the Music: Beethoven's Critical Early Years." *The Kabod (Liberty University)* 2, no. 7 (October 2015). <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/kabdo/vol2/iss1/7>.

Lopiccolo considers how the tenuous relationship between Beethoven and his father affected his career. Christopher Gottlob Neefe, his teacher, gave Beethoven the fatherly figure that he was missing and the skills and courage to be the musician and composer that he was. This source will contribute to our project because it gives us information on Beethoven's youth and how his childhood paved the way for his success.

Marek, George. *Beethoven: Biography of a Genius*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1969.

Beethoven's *Heiligenstadt Testament* was written in Heiligenstadt, Austria on October 6th, 1802. This letter portrays Beethoven's thoughts when he was becoming deaf. He wrestled to be at peace with his hearing loss, and this contributed to his social anxiety and depression. Marek argues that this testament cannot be representative of Beethoven's entire life and career. Instead, he asserts that its purpose was to allow Beethoven to articulate the difficult emotions and struggles he faced internally while becoming deaf. This testament will be helpful as we consider its implications on his compositions, particularly on the *Eroica Symphony* of 1804.

Saccetti, Edoardo, Age K Smilde, and Wim H M Saris. "Beethoven's Deafness and His Three Styles." *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 343 (7837): 1298-1300. doi:10.1136/bmj.d7589. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23066620>.

The authors explain Beethoven's deafness in biological terms and offer possible causes. Their study of Beethoven's early, middle, and late periods determined that he tended to use middle and lower frequency notes towards the end of his career, and he ultimately relied on his inner ear to compose when his hearing was completely lost. The study's findings are not conclusive and should be further researched to determine if Beethoven's hearing loss truly affected his musical style.

Sisman, Elaine. *The Cambridge Companion to Beethoven*. Edited by Glenn Stanley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Waldstein's letter to Beethoven predicts his excellence as a composer. Sisman examines how Beethoven modeled his work on his master Haydn's work. Beethoven was considered to be a genius of his era by Count Waldstein and others. Sisman asserts that Beethoven was the legacy of Mozart and Haydn. This source is useful when considering how Beethoven fulfilled this prediction of genius ability and talent in his composition of the *Eroica Symphony*.

Steblin, Rita. "Who Died? The Funeral March in Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony." *The Musical Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (2006): 62-79. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25172831>.

Steblin discusses mainly the second movement of the *Eroica* and the influences behind it. The article presents several theories regarding for whom the second movement funeral march was written, the belief being that he wrote it for Napoleon Bonaparte. The last paragraph of this research paper will discuss for whom the symphony was written, and this article presents many theories on that subject.

Swafford, Jan. *Beethoven*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004.

In this book, Swafford narrates the life of Beethoven. He includes background information on the people around him such as his parents, patrons, and teachers. The author is able to show how Beethoven never had a childhood, which influenced his behavior later in his life. It also included information on the mental and physical abuse he endured. This book is helpful for discussing the psychological aspect of his life.

Volek, Tomislav, and Jaroslav Macek. "Beethoven's Rehearsals at the Lobkowitz's." *The Musical Times* 127, no. 1716 (1986): 75-80. doi:10.2307/964559.

This source describes the historical information around the premiere of the *Eroica Symphony*. It discusses the relationship that Beethoven had with Lobkowitz, a friend and patron. This article also discusses the standard of premiering pieces for a court before the public premiere. Information from this source can be used to provide an insight into how composers and patrons had to work together to make the final drafts of a work, and specifically how that affected the *Eroica*.

Wainapel, Stanley F. "Ludwig Van Beethoven: The Influence of Hearing Loss on His Musical Development." *Medical Problems of Performing Artists* 10 (3): 90-93. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/740345070>.

Wainapel analyzes how Beethoven's hearing loss influenced his creative output. Beethoven's hearing loss prompted him to perform less of his piano works, but it did not decrease his ability to compose them. The author argues that although Beethoven composed with less frequency as his deafness worsened, his compositions were filled with richer expression. This article is useful to analyze how Beethoven's music changed during the process of his deafness.