CHAPTER17

CHAPTER 17: LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Chapter Outline

Prelude. (CHWM 376–77)

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were a time of political and economic revolution, reflected in the career and highly individual compositions of *Ludwig van Beethoven*(1770–1827). He wrote music slowly and deliberately and was guided by what the Romantics called "inspiration." Beethoven’s career is usually divided into *three periods*: (1) 1770–1802, when he mastered the musical language and genres of his time; (2) 1802–1816, when he asserted his individualism; and (3) 1816–1827, when his music became more introspective.

I. First Period (CHWM 377–80, NAWM 118)

1. Patrons
During his first decade in Vienna, Beethoven made a living performing as a pianist, teaching, publishing, and receiving gifts from generous patrons.

**Biography: Ludwig van Beethoven**
Beethoven was born in Bonn where he studied piano and violin with his father and other musicians. In 1792, Beethoven moved to Vienna where he took lessons from Haydn and found aristocratic patrons. After overcoming a crisis in 1802 related to his gradual loss of [**hearing**](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/music/concise-history-western-music4/ch/17/outline.aspx), Beethoven wrote music of great depth and scope that soon made him the most popular composer alive. He devoted himself entirely to composition and wrote at his own pace. After 1815, Beethoven became increasingly withdrawn from society.

1. Piano sonatas
Beethoven often used contrasts of style in his piano sonatas to delineate the form and broaden the expressive range.
2. *Sonate pathétique*
Beethoven’s *Sonate Pathétique*(1799) includes a dramatic, fantasia-like slow introduction that recurs twice in the first movement and a serious and intense sonata-rondo finale with thematic and harmonic connections to the other two movements. **Music: NAWM 118**
3. Op. 18 string quartets
Beethoven’s first six string quartets (Op. 18) were published in 1800, and they demonstrate his individuality in their use of themes, surprising modulations and turns of phrase, and formal structure.
4. First Symphony
In his First Symphony in C Major (1800), Beethoven used the model of Haydn’s and Mozart’s late symphonies, yet he also distinguished his own style.

II. Second Period (CHWM 381–89, NAWM 119)

By his early thirties, Beethoven was renowned as a pianist and composer, had many generous patrons, and was sought after by publishers.

1. [**Notebooks**](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/music/concise-history-western-music4/ch/17/outline.aspx) and sketchbooks
Beethoven composed with great deliberation, keeping notebooks with sketches and creating music in which each part was related to the whole.
2. Personal crisis
One way of viewing Beethoven’s music after 1802 is as a narrative or drama, perhaps reflecting the struggle of his own life.
3. *Eroica*Symphony
Beethoven’s *Eroica*Symphony (1803–4), the first work to fully exemplify his new approach, is longer than any previous symphony and has a title celebrating a hero.
4. First movement
In the first movement of the *Eroica*symphony, transformations of the first theme’s main motive and the motive’s interaction with a leaping figure from later in the first theme group can be interpreted as a story of a hero’s challenge, struggle, and final victory. **Music: NAWM 119**
5. Dedication to Napoleon
Beethoven first titled the work "Bonaparte," but changed the title several months after Napoleon crowned himself emperor.
6. *Funeral March*
The *Eroica*symphony’s second movement is a funeral march that evokes the style of French Revolutionary processions.
7. *Fidelio*
*Fidelio,*Beethoven’s only opera, expresses the humanitarian ideals of the French Revolution and went through three revisions before it was a success.
8. *Rasumovsky*Quartets
Beethoven pushed the boundaries of chamber music conventions and tested the limits of amateur players in his *Rasumovsky*Quartets, Op. 59.
9. Middle symphonies
Beethoven composed his Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Symphonies between 1806 and 1808.
10. Fifth Symphony
Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony,*Op. 67, portrays struggle and ultimate triumph by moving from C minor to C major and developing the famous opening four-note figure that recurs in various guises in the other three movements.
11. *Pastoral*Symphony
Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony (*Pastoral*) has five movements, each with a title suggesting a scene from life in the country.

**In Performance: Beethoven’s Tempo**
Beginning with Beethoven, performers began to subordinate their interpretations of music to the composer’s vision and score indications, including indications of tempo. In the eighteenth century, tempo was decided by the conventions of courtly dance. As these dances disappeared from the repertory, many composers, including Beethoven, turned to the metronome (invented around 1815) to specify tempo. Today’s musicians follow Beethoven’s markings but also modify them, taking into account acoustics, performing conditions, and instruments.

1. Symphonies No. 7 and 8
Beethoven completed his next two symphonies in 1812. The Seventh is expansive, and the Eighth is much more condensed.
2. Overtures
Beethoven also wrote several overtures, with forms that resemble the first movement of a symphony.
3. Piano sonatas
Beethoven composed ten piano sonatas between 1800 and 1805, and each has individual features.
4. *Waldstein*and *Appassionata*sonatas
The *Waldstein*Sonata (1804) and the *Appassionata*Sonata (1805) challenge traditional forms with evocative themes and strongly contrasting textures.
5. Piano concertos
The concertos from Beethoven’s middle period are composed on a grand scale with the soloist often coequal with the orchestra.

III. Third Period (CHWM 390–96, NAWM 120)

At the height of his renown, Beethoven’s deafness, family problems, and ill health forced him into greater isolation.

1. Climate in Vienna
Larger political and economic changes in Vienna slowed the pace of Beethoven’s composition and prompted a change in his focus and style.
2. Characteristics of late style
Most of Beethoven’s late works were addressed to connoisseurs, were introspective and concentrated, had extremes from the sublime to the grotesque, and invoked but altered classical conventions.
3. Variations
In his late variations, Beethoven preserved only a few basic elements of his themes through very diverse variations.
4. Continuity
In his late style, Beethoven emphasized continuity by blurring divisions between phrases and movements.
5. Improvisatory passages
Many late works include passages that have an improvisatory character or resemble recitative; these suggest how Beethoven’s improvisations might have sounded.
6. New sonorities
Beethoven’s search for new expressive means in his late works gave rise to new sonorities, which insisted on the composer’s vision at the expense of performer freedom and audience comfort.

**In Context: The Immortal Beloved**
The woman Beethoven referred to as his "Immortal Beloved" in an impassioned love letter discovered after his death may have been Antonie Brentano.

1. Fugal texture
Beethoven frequently used imitative counterpoint, and especially fugue, in his late works.
2. Form
Beethoven reconceived the number and arrangement of movements in his late works.
3. Quartet Op. 131
The arrangement of forms, keys, and tempos in the String Quartet in C-sharp Minor, Op. 131, illustrates how Beethoven simultaneously invokes and departs from tradition in his late works. While Beethoven varied the traditional sequence of movements, he sought ways to integrate movements more closely. His late sonatas and quartets were written for connoisseurs who were likely to appreciate complex compositional techniques and intertwining of tradition and innovation.**Music: NAWM 120**
4. *Missa solemnis*
Like his late private works, Beethoven’s last two large public works reexamine the traditions of their respective genres. Beethoven’s *Missa solemnis*was not a liturgical work, but a mass for concert performance shaped as a unified five-movement symphony.
5. Ninth Symphony
Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*(1824) was a popular, but not financial, success. Beethoven combined tradition and innovation, disparate styles, and profound emotional expression in this work. The extended finale refers back to the previous three movements and includes solo voices and chorus in music that draws on tradition yet is unprecedented in shape and scope.

Postlude (CHWM 396–97)

Beethoven became a cultural hero, and his life story helped to define the Romantic view of the creative artist as social outsider. Many of his compositions, especially those from his middle period, were immediately popular for their revolutionary elements and have remained so ever since. Beethoven was one of the great disruptive forces in the history of music and had an impact on later composers of instrumental music.