

Biographies of Beethoven and Haydn

As written for Aural Skills, MUS 213, Spring 2006

Beethoven

Beethoven was clearly a musical mastermind, yet he is given very little credit today by the masses. It is important to know where music evolved from, because even listening to the music of today can take you back to classical roots if you know what to look for, with the exception of rap¹. Alas, the only true recognition the masses have about the name Beethoven is a reference to a delightfully charming motion picture about a gargantuan slobbering dog.

Ludwig Van Beethoven was born in 1770 to an incredibly musical buffoon. His father, a musician at the Electoral court at Bonn, taught him the beginnings of musicianship, but himself struggled with alcoholism. At times he would drag his son out of bed to play the piano for his friends. His first formal teacher aside from his father was Christian Gottlob Neefe, whom he began taking lessons from in 1787, but he also took lessons from Johann Georg Albrechtsberger and Antonio Salieri. Through this training Beethoven wrote his first opus numbers and a set of three piano trios. For a time, he found it difficult to compose, which may have stemmed from his realization that he would never marry. He found it very difficult to function within society and often quarreled with relatives, neighbors, and friends. He was obsessively compulsive about grooming and washing and had a range of other strange personal habits.

Although he became almost completely deaf in his mid-twenties, Beethoven continued to write graceful masterpieces, showing that he must have had an adept grasp

¹ This is probably attributed to the fact that it is very difficult, even with sensitive laboratory instruments, to distinguish one rap song from another.

on the mathematics of music theory². As a result of this³, he became incredibly depressed and for a time contemplated suicide⁴. Only through his composition did he decide to persevere and he eventually became one of the chief composers to commandeer the musical world into romanticism. This is most likely attributed to his passion for the ideals of the Enlightenment. His third symphony was originally dedicated to Napoleon, but after finding out that Napoleon had more imperialistic notions in mind, he scratched the name off the page and entitled it, *Eroica*.

The content of his music is most intriguing, oftentimes reflecting views of several different religions. His own religious views could never be determined, although Franz Haydn considered him an atheist. He distrusted priests and wrote about paganism in several of his works. He became increasingly devoted to Pantheism and was noted to have been a man searching for God. Fragments of Indian texts can be found in his diary, showing an interest in Hinduism and occasionally concepts of deism.

Rumors surround the events around his deathbed, his actual death being in 1827 at the age of 57, although he did allow a priest to administer his last rites. After this, he is said to have cried out, “Applaud, my friends, the comedy is over,” but no one could say for sure whether he was referring to his life, or the rites. Recently scientists have uncovered that lead poisoning could have been a key component to his death, but it also could have been contributed to syphilis, abuse, typhus, or his bad habit of sticking his head in a bucket of water to keep himself awake⁵. During his lifetime he composed nine

² He probably understood the cosine, imaginary numbers and how to tip at restaurants too.

³ “this” meaning his knowledge of mathematics, not being deaf.

⁴ The first evidence of “emo.”

⁵ This led to the invention of the Caffeine Pill.

symphonies, eight concertos, countless piano works and a plethora of string quartet pieces.

Haydn

If you ask the average layperson who Mozart is, they will most likely respond with something like, “He was a musical prodigy!” Or, at very least, perhaps, “He was some composer guy, right?” Similar responses may occur when asked about Beethoven, or Bach, or Handel. But ask someone to tell you who Haydn is, and you will get a “Bless you,” at best⁶. This reaction is stifling, considering the chief contributions Gregor Haydn brought to the musical world (Joke).

Despite the fact that his portrait bears a strong resemblance to Captain Picard, *Franz Joseph Haydn*, born in 1732, composed near 750 works and arranged at least 330 more. Surprisingly enough, he did not have the same illustrious childhood as that of Mozart, he was not immediately recognized as a child prodigy, in fact, many a time in his early youth he went hungry. His parents at least had the common sense to notice that he was gifted and sent him to live with Johann Matthias Franck, ten miles away, to develop his talents. At this residence Haydn was trained primarily as a vocalist, working as a chorister until the age of 17 when he became too mature to sing like a pre-pubescent boy. Thank God too, otherwise he may never have become a composer. So to sum up, if Haydn had never gone through puberty, he probably never would have composed, creating a serious gap for composers who used his work for their own studies⁷ and therefore negating existence as we know it.

⁶ Or: “Maybe a hockey team.”

⁷ Mozart, Beethoven, the Captain and Tennille and whatever group sang “Muskrat Love.”

With the desire to make his own music instilled in him, Haydn saw his lack of knowledge in theory and composition as a serious setback (I can relate), so he meticulously worked his way through Fux's Study of Counterpoint, and studied the works of other composers before him. His first work for which he was publically recognized was an opera entitled "Der krumme Teufel" *The Limping Devil*, that received a warm reception yet only ran for a few performances before it was closed down.

Haydn began work as a kappellmeister in 1766, and it was at this job that he married Maria Anna Aloysia Apollonia Keller, perhaps out of pity to save her from having to tell people her full name. Nonetheless, Haydn and his wife were not happy together, which resulted in his long term affair with Luigia Polzelli. Haydn also developed a fast friendship with Mozart (but did not have an affair with him), as the two played together at many concerts. He would later go on to teach Beethoven, although not for very long. Beethoven found him to be inadequate as a teacher. He probably wished he could look as much like Captain Picard as Haydn did, and jealousy is never a good ingredient to a teacher-student relationship.

During the home-stretch of his life, Haydn composed two of his most famous Oratorio's, The Creation and The Seasons. The Creation in particular is exceptionally fantastic, especially No. 10 *Awake the Harp* (one of my favorite oratorio choir pieces). Around this time in 1802, Haydn was found extremely ill, so ill in fact that he could not longer physically compose. He died in 1809 at the ripe old age of 77, shortly after

Napolean began the first attack on Vienna⁸. His last words were an attempt to calm and reassure his servants⁹.

~Shelley Withee

⁸ Literally *minutes* after the attack started, how convenient.

⁹ Although he was probably thinking, “There’s going to be a war? Heck, I’m getting out of here. So long suckers!”