Classical Music: Ludwig van Beethoven

Ludwig van Beethoven is known as one of the best composers of all time. Some of his most famous pieces are his Fifth and Ninth Symphonies, *Für Elise*, and the *Moonlight Sonata*.

It is believed Ludwig van Beethoven was born on December 16, 1770. Beethoven had a bad temper and unpredictable outbursts. He would explode at someone, and then he would ask forgiveness and be very generous. He was also very impulsive\(^1\). Sometimes Beethoven would not finish writing the piece of music he was working on until the day of the performance. In these cases, his accompanying musicians had very little time to practice.

Beethoven’s greatest passion in life was music. He poured his love into the notes he wrote. Some of his music falls into the category of *Romanticism*. This type of music, like Beethoven, is impulsive. It is based more on emotion than on structure and patterns.

Beethoven’s personality sometimes got in the way of his performances. Once, during a concert, he heard a nobleman start talking. Beethoven looked up and stopped playing. He said, “For such pigs I do not play!” and refused to start again. Back then, many wealthy people listened to music for entertainment. Some would even become patrons\(^2\) of the musicians. In Beethoven’s time, going to concerts was a hobby for many rich people as this was one of the few ways one could listen to music. There were no audio recordings of music. As his outburst proves, Beethoven took his music and his performances very seriously. This earned him the respect of other famous composers in his day, including Mozart.

When Beethoven was in his late twenties, he began to lose his hearing. This was a devastating experience for him. Incredibly, however, Beethoven’s hearing loss did not stop him from producing some of his finest musical works. He wrote his first and only opera and one of his most famous symphonies, Symphony no. 5 in C Minor, during this time. It is said that Beethoven described the symphony’s opening as “fate knocking at the door.” The idea of losing his

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\(^1\) impulsive – acting on sudden feelings rather than by thoughtful reasoning

\(^2\) patron – a person who gives money or other support to an artist, a group, or a cause
hearing horrified Beethoven. He did not want to admit to his *rival* musicians that he was losing his hearing. He thought that they might question his ability to write music.

In the last decade of his life, Beethoven lost his hearing completely. Even though he could not hear, Beethoven could feel the vibrations of music. Shut off from the world of sound, Beethoven isolated himself more and more into the world of notes in his head. All he wanted to do was compose and play music. He began to be careless about taking care of himself. Sometimes he wouldn't bathe or dress. If friends came to visit him while he was writing music, he would ignore them.

Beethoven's last symphony, Symphony no. 9 in D Minor, took six years to compose. He wrote it to accompany a German poem called “Ode to Joy.” When the symphony was finished, Beethoven was almost completely deaf. The story of the symphony’s premiere has been told many times, but its details vary from version to version. Some accounts state that while Beethoven was unable to conduct the piece because he was deaf, he did insist on keeping tempo by beating time on the stage. Other accounts note that Beethoven appeared onstage as the general director of the performance, and another musician was the conductor. At one point, the music stopped playing. Because Beethoven had his back turned to the audience, he was unable to see the audience applauding crazily with appreciation of his piece until one of the singers pointed him towards the audience. It became clear to everyone present that Beethoven’s musical genius was so profound that he was able to create a musical masterpiece without ever being able to hear it.

On March 26, 1827, Beethoven died at the age of 56. Three days later, 20,000 people lined the streets for his funeral to show their great admiration. He said once, “Composers do not cry. Composers are made of fire.” His songs still give this fire to his listeners today.

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3 *rival* – competitor; someone fighting for the same reward
1. According to the text, who was Ludwig van Beethoven?
   a. one of the best composers of all time
   b. one of the best singers of all time
   c. one of the best conductors of all time
   d. one of the best actors of all time

2. The text describes some major events in Beethoven’s life. What started to happen when Beethoven was in his late twenties?
   a. He started to write music.
   b. He started to lose his hearing.
   c. He started to write *Moonlight Sonata*.
   d. He started to have unpredictable outbursts.

3. Beethoven created one of his musical masterpieces, Symphony no. 9 in D Minor, when he was almost completely deaf.
   Which conclusion does this information support?
   a. Beethoven isolated himself more and more after he started to lose his hearing.
   b. Beethoven did not want to admit to his rival musicians that he was losing his hearing.
   c. Beethoven’s musical genius was incredibly deep and intense.
   d. Beethoven had a bad temper and unpredictable outbursts.

4. How might Beethoven best be described?
   a. passionate but difficult
   b. talented but lazy
   c. kind but confused
   d. shy but intense

5. What is a main idea of this text?
   a. Losing his hearing was a devastating experience for Beethoven.
   b. In Beethoven’s time, going to concerts was a hobby for many rich people as this was one of the few ways one could listen to music.
   c. Beethoven is one of the greatest composers ever who was able to create musical masterpieces even when he was deaf.
   d. Beethoven’s personality sometimes got in the way of his performances.
6. What did Beethoven’s hearing loss not stop him from doing?

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________________________________________________________________
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7. Explain why Beethoven’s musical career is especially impressive. Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

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8. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence.

In the last decade of his life, Beethoven lost his hearing completely. _______ he could not hear, Beethoven could feel the vibrations of music.

a. Therefore  
   b. Even though  
   c. Because  
   d. As a result

9. Read the following sentence.

Beethoven earned the respect of other famous composers in his day because he took his music and his performances very seriously.

Answer the questions below based on the information provided in the sentence you just read. One of the questions has already been answered for you.

1. Who? Beethoven

2. What did Beethoven do? _______________________________________

3. Why? ______________________________________________________


Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: ________________________________