Classical Music: Ludwig van Beethoven

Ludwig van Beethoven is known as one of the best composers of all time. A composer writes musical pieces. Some of Beethoven's most famous pieces are his Fifth Symphony and his Ninth Symphony. His pieces Für Elise and the Moonlight Sonata are also famous.

Ludwig van Beethoven was born in December 1770. He had a strong personality. He would get angry easily. It was hard to know exactly how Beethoven would act. Sometimes he would get very angry at someone. But then he would ask for forgiveness and be very kind. Beethoven was also very impulsive. That means he acted based on his sudden feelings, instead of thinking things through carefully. For example, sometimes he would not finish writing a piece of music until the day it was going to be performed. When this happened, the people playing the music had very little time to practice.

Beethoven cared more about music than about anything else. He poured love into the compositions he wrote. Some of his pieces fit into the type of music called Romanticism. Just like Beethoven, this type of music is impulsive. It is based more on feelings than on structure and patterns.

In Beethoven's time, many rich people listened to music for fun. Some even became patrons of the musicians. These people gave money or other support to an artist. Going to concerts was a hobby for many rich people. It was one of the few ways people could listen to music. There were no recordings of music to listen to. Beethoven gave concerts. But his personality sometimes affected his performances. Once, during a performance, he heard someone start talking. Beethoven stopped playing. He said, “For such pigs I do not play!” And he would not start again. This story shows that he took his music and his performances very seriously. Because of this, other famous composers of his time respected him.

When Beethoven was in his late twenties, he began to lose his ability to hear. This was terrible for him. But even after he started losing his hearing, Beethoven created some of his best musical pieces. He wrote an opera and his Fifth Symphony during this time. People believe that Beethoven said the beginning
of the symphony sounded like “fate knocking at the door.” This was probably what
he felt losing his hearing was like. Beethoven was horrified about losing his
hearing. He did not want other musicians to know that he was losing his hearing.
He was worried that they might think he would not be able to write music.

Beethoven lost his hearing completely over the last ten years of his life.
Beethoven could feel the vibrations of sound. But he could not hear. He became
more and more alone within the world of music notes in his head. All he wanted
to do was compose and play music. He became careless about taking care of
himself. Sometimes he wouldn’t bathe or get dressed. If friends came to visit him
while he was writing music, he would ignore them.

Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was the last one he wrote. He took six years
to compose it. He wrote it to go with a poem called “Ode to Joy.” By the time it
was done, Beethoven had almost completely lost his hearing. The story of how
the symphony was first performed has been told many times. But there are
different versions of the story. Some versions say that Beethoven could not lead
the musicians playing the piece because he was deaf, but he did keep track of
the beat by hitting the stage. Other versions say that Beethoven was on the
stage as the director of the performance, but a different musician led the rest of
the musicians. At one point, the music stopped. The audience started clapping
loudly and excitedly about the piece. But Beethoven did not know they were
applauding because he was not facing the audience. One of the singers had to
show him that the audience was clapping. After this, people at the performance
knew that Beethoven was such a genius that he could create a musical
masterpiece without ever being able to hear it.

On March 26, 1827, Beethoven died. He was 56 years old. Three days
later, 20,000 people went out into the streets for his funeral. They went to show
how much they had admired Beethoven. He said once, “Composers do not cry.
Composers are made of fire.” His songs still give this fire to his listeners today.