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Ludwig van Beethoven

Lood'-vig fahn Bay'-toh-vn

born December 16, 1770, Bonn, Germany
died March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria



A Composer of the Classical and Romantic Eras

Ludwig van Beethoven had a very poor and unhappy childhood. He began piano lessons at age four. When Ludwig turned eight, his father decided to make money from his son's talent. He presented Ludwig as a concert pianist and advertised that the eight year old Ludwig was only six years old.

Although Ludwig was never a successful child performer, as his father had hoped, by fourteen he was quite a good musician and became the assistant organist at a local church. At seventeen, he met composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who predicted a great career in music for Ludwig. By age nineteen, he was playing violin in local orchestras and giving music lessons to help support his family.

In his early twenties, Beethoven moved to Vienna, Austria, and began composing and performing as a concert pianist. Here, he took composition lessons from composer George Frideric Handel. Beethoven knew that to earn a living as a composer, he needed wealthy patrons who would help him financially. He began making friends with wealthy supporters of music. By 1795 (age twenty-five) he abandoned teaching and began composing and performing full-time.

The period 1800–1815 was prolific for Beethoven. By 1815 (age forty-five) he had completed eight symphonies, twenty-seven piano sonatas, numerous sonatas for various string instruments, ten piano trios, eleven string quartets, dozens of orchestral works, and many vocal solos and choral works.

Composing was difficult for Beethoven. He anguished over every piece. He had begun losing his hearing as a young man. By his mid-forties he gave up his performing career, devoting as much time as possible to composing. The last twelve years of his life were spent composing while he slowly but steadily became deaf.

Beethoven spent his life seeking financial support from wealthy patrons of the arts. He fell in love several times but never married; his poor origins prevented him from marrying the upper-class women he desired. In practical matters such as renting an apartment, organizing performances of his music, or publishing his music, he was a disaster.

Beethoven was short, stocky, and muscular. He dressed carelessly. He was often restless and moody, and worked at composing every morning with intense concentration. He would fly into a rage at small matters which upset him, yet he was always loyal to his friends and supporters. Those friends and supporters helped to give Beethoven the freedom to compose some of the greatest European music of the nineteenth century.

Famous Works:

His nine symphonies — for orchestra

Fidelio — an opera

Missa Solemnis — for orchestra and chorus

His twelve piano sonatas — for piano

Violin Concerto — for violin and orchestra

*"Music is the electrical soil
in which the spirit lives."*

Ludwig van Beethoven

Romantic Era (1825–1900)

The term Romantic, when applied to this era (1825–1900), pertains to music with an imaginative emotional appeal. Romantic era music emphasizes personal feelings and emotions. Composers who wrote during this period wanted to express their innermost thoughts and feelings through their music.

The emotional music of the Romantic era greatly contrasts with the music of the Classical era, which can best be described as elegant, formal, and restrained. Classical composers wrote very structured music. Romantic era composers were much more free with their music, using it to express themselves. The music of the Classical era sounded essentially the same throughout Europe. But Romantic era composers began to compose in nationalistic styles as a way to show their patriotism and love of country. For example, a German composer might use German folk tales as the basis for his music, or a Russian composer might incorporate Russian folk music in his compositions.

Composers were not only more free musically, they were also more free as individuals. Many, though certainly not all, were celebrities, like today's rock stars. Some were quite wealthy. A composer might earn income from the sale of printed copies of his music, or he might tour as a conductor throughout Europe and North America. Or he might produce performances of his music or operas, like today's concert promoters. Others were supported by wealthy patrons and a few were supported by their governments.

Music in the Romantic era frequently represented something (such as an element of nature, like a sunrise), or expressed something (such as love of country or patriotism), or described something (such as a poem). The orchestra truly became the composer's "instrument" during this era. Orchestras grew in size, and the skill of orchestration (scoring music for the various instruments of the orchestra) became an important part of the composer's craft. Composers began to use the instruments of the orchestra in much the same way that an artist uses colors—for effect, contrast, and beauty.

Great conservatories (schools which trained musicians) grew during the Romantic era, and this resulted in many more skilled performers than in previous eras. As orchestras employed more skilled performers, composers were able to write music that was more difficult.

New forms developed. The symphonic poem was a fairly long (as long as an hour) work for orchestra in one movement. Often a symphonic poem attempted to tell a

story or paint a musical picture. Descriptive music such as this is called program music. Not all the new forms were orchestral. Composers also wrote short piano pieces, and songs for solo voice with piano accompaniment using expressive poems as the song lyrics. German composers, in particular, excelled at composing songs.

Perhaps the most grandiose new form of the Romantic era was the music drama, a kind of grandiose opera using an enormous cast and a large orchestra. The operas of Richard Wagner and Giuseppe Verdi were the best examples of music drama. Both Wagner and Verdi considered their operas to be a kind of super-art, combining music, drama, theater, and the visual arts of scenery and costuming.

By 1900, the great, emotional music of the Romantic era gave way to the composers of the twentieth century, who looked at music, and the art of composing, much differently than their predecessors in the nineteenth century.

Some Composers of the Romantic Era

Hector Berlioz (1803–1869)
 Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (1805–1847)
 Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)
 Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849)
 Robert Schumann (1810–1856)
 Franz Liszt (1811–1886)
 Richard Wagner (1813–1883)
 Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901)
 Clara Schumann (1819–1896)
 César Franck (1822–1890)
 Anton Bruckner (1824–1869)
 Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)
 Modest Mussorgsky (1839–1881)
 Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)
 Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)
 Edvard Grieg (1843–1907)
 John Philip Sousa (1854–1932)
 Edward Elgar (1857–1934)
 Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924)
 Gustav Mahler (1860–1911)
 Claude Debussy (1862–1918)
 Richard Strauss (1864–1949)

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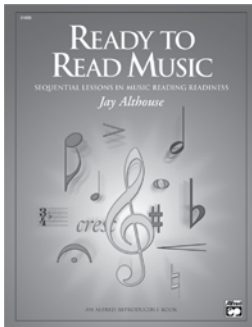


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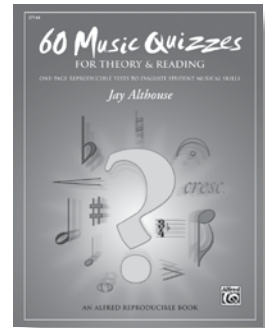
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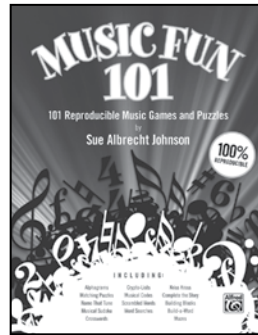
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