



Ludwig van Beethoven - The Life of a Symphonic Revolutionary

by Dr. Paul-Elliott Cobbs

On May 7, 1824, in Vienna, Austria, Ludwig van Beethoven sat in the middle of the orchestra attempting to follow the score. It was the premiere performance of his *Ninth Symphony*. Fraülein Unger, the Alto soloist of that performance, remembered that amazing event. “The Master, though in the mist of this confluence of music, heard nothing...not hearing the applause, he continued standing with his back to the audience until encouraged to turn around to see the people still clapping. Realizing that Beethoven was completely deaf, there was a volcanic explosion of both sympathy and admiration.”

Beethoven was born in Bonn, Germany, December 1770, 6 years before the American Revolution. and 19 years before the French rebellion. In 1787 the aristocrats of Bonn paid for Beethoven’s trip to Vienna. The purpose was to meet Mozart and further his musical career as both a pianist and a composer. It is reported that

when Beethoven was introduced to Mozart Beethoven played a few of Mozart’s works. Mozart, however, was not terribly impressed. Then Mozart asked the young musician to play some of his own music. At that point Mozart was extremely impressed with Beethoven’s skill with theme and variations. He told Beethoven, “You will make it big on stage one day.” Beethoven was eventually called back home by his Father due to his Mother’s grave illness. The composer was very close to his mother and was devastated when she succumbed to tuberculosis. By the time Beethoven was able to return to Vienna in 1792 Mozart had already died. Fortunately, however, Josef Haydn agreed to take him on as a student.

In 1800, Beethoven’s *First Symphony* was premiered. In this work we see a conformity to convention. The symphony still had the traditional four movements; however, it was the 3rd movement that gave us a hint of the revolutionary composer who was yet to come. Instead of a stately minuet, traditionally danced by the aristocracy, the composer substitutes a “scherzo” (the Italian word for joke), at an incredibly quick speed. This was as if to say, “You can’t dance to this.” Beethoven’s extensive use of the brass and woodwind instruments was also apparent, much to the chagrin of Haydn, with his classical sensibilities.

By 1802, the time of the energetic, graceful and witty *Second Symphony*, Beethoven himself was in agony. This is the time when he was forced to face the probability that he might lose his hearing completely; deafness was all but certain. That summer he wrote a tragic letter to his brothers, which we now call “The Heiligenstadt Testament.” It begins with a great feeling of despair. “I was compelled early to keep apart, to live in loneliness; when at times I tried to surmount all this. O how harshly was I defeated by the doubly tragic experience of my bad hearing, and yet I could not bring myself to say to people “speak louder, shout, for I am deaf.” The Testament ended however, with a solemn resolve: “I shall, as much as possible defy my fate.”

At the time Beethoven was composing his *Third Symphony*, in 1803, he had his great hero, Napoleon Bonaparte, in mind. “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” was the message of the French Revolution represented by Bonaparte. A tremendously inspired Beethoven put all of his efforts into capturing this spirit in his *Symphony*, “*The Eroica*.” Although ultimately disillusioned when Napoleon made himself Emperor, Beethoven would nonetheless look back and call the “*Eroica*” his favorite.

The *Fifth Symphony* was written next and may have become the most recognized musical work in western culture. The “5th” was interrupted in fulfillment of a commissioned work that we now know as the “4th” and was therefore published first. The “5th” marked the beginning of the “Climax Symphony” where the tremendous struggle is presented at the beginning and through Herculean efforts, victory is achieved by the end. We also hear variations of the main theme throughout each movement. To achieve this victory the composer enlisted the help of a Piccolo, Contra Bassoon and 3 Trombones for

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the first time in history. Although symphonies 6 (*Pastorale*), 7 (*Apotheosis to the dance*), and 8 each have charming personalities, 3, 5 and 9 were the leaders in the symphonic revolution.

One of my favorite Beethoven stories was told by several people of the time. It is reported that one of his benefactors, Prince Lichnowsky, promised his visiting friends that Beethoven would entertain them with a concert. Each day the Prince would send word to the composer that his presence was requested at the palace. The following is Beethoven's response. "Prince! What you are, you are by birth. What I am, I am through myself. There have been and will be thousands of princes. There is only one Beethoven."

On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. Germany was united once again. As a result, musically historic cities were again open to the west. Six years later I was invited to guest conduct in Leipzig, the city of J. S. Bach and Felix Mendelssohn. The program concluded with Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*.

There was tremendous skepticism among the musicians and concert goers that an American conductor could truly understand Beethoven. What eventually became clear, however, first to the orchestra and eventually to the audience, was that I, as they would term it, am a "Beethoven Expert."

From early childhood through the present, Beethoven has been my favorite composer. Studying at the Academy of Music in Vienna, listening to the Vienna Philharmonic in rehearsal and working as the research assistant for H. C. Robbins Landon (the world authority on Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven) gave me unique insight into understanding both the composer and his works. In a radio interview I was asked, "How can an American understand the works of Beethoven?" My reply was simply, "The music of Beethoven has no borders, it is universal."

The concert was sold out. We received 4 standing ovations, one at the conclusion of the concert and one after each of the 3 encores. I also received an invitation to return on New Years to conduct the *Ninth Symphony*. Its performance was met with tremendous success as well. Whether it is the explosive rhythmic energy, intensive thematic development or the deep spirituality felt in his slow movements, Beethoven's message is timeless.

More recently, I took Loma (my wife Dr. Loma Cobbs) to Vienna to show her the places I would often visit in my youth. I took her to the house in Heiligenstadt where Beethoven stayed, and we sat in the room where he wrote his famous "Testament." We took a hike in Baden along the stream that inspired the "*Pastoral Symphony*." The brook still babbles and both Cuckoos and Nightingales still sing. We also visited the countryside and ate at a family restaurant in Grinsing where Beethoven visited to get away from frantic city life. It is all still there, relatively unchanged. One can easily experience the same feelings the composer felt when inspired to write his works.

This is Beethoven's 250th birthday year and yet we are still inspired by the same message today as he was two and a half centuries ago. "All men (and women) will become brothers (and sisters)."

Join the Tacoma Youth Symphony Association for these upcoming winter concerts!



February 22, 2020 7:00 P.M. Urban Grace Church

The Tacoma Youth Symphony presents "The Giants of German Romanticism"

Featuring Johannes Brahms' *Symphony No. 2* and Student Soloist

Bethany Olson in Saint-Saëns' *Introduction et Rondo Capriccioso*

Tickets: \$16 main level and \$27 balcony.

Sponsored by the Florence B. Kilworth Family Foundation

February 29, 2020 7:00 P.M. Urban Grace Church

The Tacoma Young Artists Orchestra presents "Overture"

Featuring Brahms' *Tragic Overture*, César Frank's *Symphony in d minor* and

Denise Dillenbeck in the Bruch *Violin Concerto*

Tickets: \$16 main level and \$26 balcony.

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Evergreen Music Festival

Session I: July 13-July 17, 2020
Pacific Lutheran University

Session II: August 2 - 8, 2020
Central Washington University



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TYSA in the Community

Each season, everyone of the TYSA ensembles does some sort of runout or performance for the larger community. TYAO did a school tour in October, TJYS played for Victorian Country Christmas in December and TYS performed 2 very successful education concerts for fourth graders from around the Puget Sound region. There are two runouts remaining this season.

TSS Runout

Saturday, April 18, 2020

TSP Runout

Friday, April 24, 2020

Stay Tuned!

Dr. Cobbs recently recorded a podcast for the Washington State Combined Fund Drive's "Podcasts for Good." We will post details about how to listen to the podcast once it has been posted.

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The following students auditioned last fall and were chosen to perform with one of the orchestras this season. Everyone who auditioned should be proud of the quality of music that was presented to the conductors; it was obvious that a lot of hard work and time was exerted by each individual. Congratulations on a job well done!



Katherine Filiss
8th Grade
North Tapps MS
Ava Filiss
11th Grade
Annie Wright

December 14, 2019
TJYS Concert



Bethany Olson
12th Grade
Bethel High School

February 22, 2020
TYS Concert



Yukino Sokolik
5th Grade
South Bay Elementary

April 25, 2020
TSS/TSP Concert



Eliana Cobbs
9th Grade
Homeschool

April 25, 2020
TJYS Concert



Pengu (Frank) Bao
9th Grade
Kalles Junior High

May 9, 2020
TYAO Concert



Michael Gribbon
12th Grade
Foss High School

May 9, 2020
TYAO Concert



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Mark Your Calendars

2019-2020 Season

Saturday, February 22, 2020 7:00 P.M.

Tacoma Youth Symphony

Sponsored by:

The Florence B. Kilworth Family Foundation

Saturday, February 29, 2020 7:00 P.M.

Tacoma Young Artists Orchestra

Sponsored by: An Anonymous Donor

Saturday, April 25, 2020 1:00 P.M.

Tacoma String Symphony and Tacoma String Philharmonia

Sponsored by: The Hoffmeister Foundation

Saturday, April 25, 2020 7:00 P.M.

Tacoma Junior Youth Symphony and
South Sound Strings Harp Ensemble

Sponsored by: The Dimmer Family Foundation



Saturday, May 9, 2020 7:00 P.M.

Tacoma Young Artists Orchestra and Tacoma Youth Brass Ensemble

Sponsored by: The William W. Kilworth Foundation

Saturday, May 16, 2020 7:00 P.M.

Tacoma Youth Symphony

Sponsored by: The Gottfried and Mary Fuchs Foundation
and the City of Tacoma

Concerts are at Urban Grace Church unless.

Tickets can be purchased by calling (253) 627-2792 or
through the TYSA website, www.tysamusic.org.

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