



Ludwig von Beethoven



Bonn is a beautiful city on the banks of the Rhine River, in Germany. In 1770, it was a busy river port with sailboats carrying passengers and freight from one town to another, fishermen coming and going with their day's catch, barges being towed back and forth and all kinds of river-boat traffic with its hurrying, scurrying noise and bustle.

On the seventeenth of December, 1770, one of the arrivals on the old ferry was a musician named Beethoven. He played in the band at the court of a German prince -- the Elector of Cologne. Herr Beethoven was a lively little man dressed in a tricorne hat, flaring knee-length coat and knickers. His dark eyes flashed, and his wig, tied in back with a black bow in the custom of the times, bounced up and down as he hurried over the rough cobblestones.

He did not stop until he reached a tall old tenement house. Then he opened the gate, ran into the dark hall and fairly flew up the stairs to the small apartment at the top of the building.

"Where is my grandson?" he shouted. "Eh? Let me see my grandson! Where is the new member of the Beethoven family?"

He beamed happily at his daughter-in-law, and gazed intently at the tiny baby in her arms. The baby twisted up its face and began to cry.

"La, la, la! Listen to the strength of the lungs! Only a musician could cry like that," Grandfather said. "And his name, Maria? What is it to be?"

"His grandfather's name." Maria smiled affectionately at the proud musician as he admired his grandchild. "His name is to be Ludwig, after you. And we want you to go with his father for the christening."

So a new Ludwig von Beethoven was baptized the morning of December 17, 1770. Proudly Grandfather Ludwig looked on, and then took the baby in his arms. That was the beginning of a warm, happy companionship for the two Ludwigs.



Every moment he was not busy with the orchestra, the choir, or his music pupils, Grandfather came to play and sing with baby Ludwig. From the time he could walk, the little boy went across the narrow street to his grandfather's house. He went early in the morning and stayed most of the day.

"Breakfast, Grandpa?" Ludwig would ask eagerly "And then music?"

Grandfather was pleased at the boy's interest in music. He began to teach him when little Ludwig was very small. Other musicians often came to Grandfather's house to play, so the boy could hear all the music he wanted. He heard singing, violin, pianoforte, and all the instruments of the band.

In his own home he heard music, too. Johann, little Ludwig's father, was a singer and violinist. Like everyone else, the father took it for granted that the child would grow up to be a musician, too.

When Ludwig was just three, his grandfather died. There were no more long happy days of music with him, no more walks in the woods and fields outside the city or along the riverbank. The little boy missed his grandfather very much. But he still had music.

"He wanted to play and sing as his grandfather had done, and to play the violin as did his father. So he was glad when his father said, "Ludwig, we will start music lessons in earnest now. It is time you learned. You are old enough now."

The little boy was not yet four years old!

Father Johann was very stern about the lessons. He insisted that Ludwig must practice many hours a day. And he must practice exercises and scales, not singing melodies.

The Beethovens had moved to a small house with rooms on the street floor. One spring evening, Ludwig was practicing with the doors and windows open. From scales and exercises, he began to play some melodies of his own. Suddenly, a cheerful-looking stranger appeared at the window and began to applaud.

"Very nice, Baby Maestro. Very nice, indeed. Bravo!"

"Thank you, Sir," said Ludwig. "My name is Ludwig Beethoven. Who are you?"

"I am nobody," said the stranger. "Only Tobias Pfeiffer, a poor musician without a home. I have just arrived in Bonn to sing in your beautiful opera house."



Ludwig smiled. He had heard of Herr Pfeiffer, the new opera star.

Tobias Pfeiffer said, "Now, I was just thinking as I heard you play. I have long taught music. I would like to teach a fine young musician like you, Ludwig Beethoven. I would also like a place to live! Now I wonder . . . Could I stay here, in your home, and give you lessons to pay for my lodging?"

"Wait, Sir, if you please," said the boy. "I shall ask my father."

"That will not be necessary," said Johann from across the room. He had come in, and overheard Herr Pfeiffer's words. In his gruff, stern way, he was pleased.

"We shall try out this plan," he said. "From what I have heard, Herr Pfeiffer is a good musician. Perhaps he can improve your work in the writing of music. You must learn theory, harmony, all the things a composer must know."

Herr Pfeiffer bowed very low. He saw at a glance how stern the father was and how eager the boy was to please him.

After Johann had gone, Herr Pfeiffer bowed again to Ludwig and said with great warmth, "Ludwig Beethoven, I am delighted."

Ludwig replied with a lift of his spirits and a feeling of excitement. "Thank you, Professor. I am glad also, very glad."

"That is good, little Maestro," said Herr Pfeiffer happily. "Then let us begin at once. First of all, let me hear you improvise."

Ludwig's eyes shone. Imagine being asked to improvise!

"My father does not like me to do so," he told his new teacher. "But I do. Music rings in my ears, all the time, and I want to play it -- my *own* music -- all the time, some day."

Then he played for Herr Pfeiffer a lovely melody of his own making. He sang softly as he improvised.

Professor Pfeiffer was silent for a moment after Ludwig had played. Slowly he nodded his hand. Then he spoke gently to the eager little boy with bright black eyes.

"Ludwig, as I listen to you play, I am very sure that your dreams will come true."





Ludwig studied with cheerful, gifted Tobias Pfeiffer for a year. Herr Pfeiffer understood the child, liked him, and gave him confidence. There was little time for anything but music in his life now. Lessons on the pianoforte and the violin. Hours of practice on these instruments. Lessons in composition, and hours of study for these lessons. Months and years went by in this way.

When Ludwig was only nine, he made his first concert tour. He went to Holland, a land his grandfather had often told him about. The Beethoven family had originally come from Holland, so young Ludwig was especially happy to perform there.

Later, when Ludwig was eleven, he made a long tour with his father. In his heart, he could not help wishing he were simply going to Vienna. But he enjoyed playing, now that he was allowed to play "real music." Everywhere his audiences loved hearing him. He had great talent and he was well prepared, thanks to his father and Herr Pfeiffer and his other teachers.

As the time went by, Ludwig learned that the city of Bonn, his home, was a good place for a musician to be, even if it was not Vienna. The people of Bonn were music-loving people. There were singing societies and orchestras, and fine organs in the churches with master organists to play them. There was work, and appreciation, in Bonn for any musician.

Tobias Pfeiffer really believed in Ludwig's genius. He tried to find ways to help him. He arranged for Ludwig to hear more and more organ music, which he knew the boy loved.

Ludwig began to take lessons on the organ, and soon he was allowed to play for church services. One day, the court organist heard him at the church and offered to teach him.

In this teacher Ludwig found someone else who understood his longing to write music. Herr Neefe was delighted with Ludwig's compositions. "Very good, very good," he often said. "Yes, Ludwig, your music is exceedingly promising."

One day the organist asked him to compose something special. "Let me see what you can do with this march," Herr Neefe said. "Bring me some variations of its music next week. Or sooner, if you finish before then."

Ludwig went to work with a will and a happy enthusiasm. In three days, he had written nine pieces based on the music of the march. He took the nine variations to his teacher, and the master looked at them carefully.



To Ludwig's dismay, Herr Neefe shook his head solemnly.

"Ludwig, you did not make your variations according to the rules I know you have learned. You must do this again."

Ludwig scowled.

"Herr Neefe, must one always follow the rules? I have made up new ones. I think the music is more beautiful this way -- *my way!* Will you let me play it for you and show you?"

"My boy, you must write according to the rules while you are learning," the master said. "Even if the music does sound better another way. After all, who are you? When you become a great master of music yourself, then -- and only then -- will you have the right to put your own rules first."

"Yes, Sir," said Ludwig, sadly. He had been so eager to show Herr Neefe his new ideas! He was even a little angry. But he rewrote the variations according to the rules, and his teacher was pleased.

"This is splendid, Ludwig. Now, I have a reward for you. From now on, you shall be my assistant organist. You have talent, my boy," Herr Neefe told him. "Better still, you work hard! Now, I shall send the music to be printed."

"What music, Herr Neefe?"

"These nine variations whose rules you frown upon."

"Herr Neefe!" shouted Ludwig. "I cannot wait!"

"It will be soon," Herr Neefe promised.

Sure enough, the music soon arrived. Ludwig's eyes sparkled as he read the words, "*Nine Variations on a March*, by Ludwig von Beethoven." It was a great honor for a twelve-year-old.

It was also a great honor to be assistant organist in Herr Neef's church. Ludwig practiced hour after hour so that he would be ready to play whenever Herr Neefe needed him. He did so well that he was asked to play for rehearsals at the opera house and to conduct the orchestra. He was proud of his jobs, and proud to be earning money for his family.





Twelve-year-old Ludwig played for Easter services in the great church when Herr Neefe had to be away.

"Look! A child is playing the organ!" someone in the congregation whispered. "Do you realize that is just a boy playing? Herr Neefe is not there!"

Soon everyone in the church realized that a young boy was taking Herr Neefe's place.

Ludwig could feel the warmth, excitement and interest of the people. He was not nervous. He thought only of the music. He was wrapped in the beauty of the Easter music, and he played better than he had ever played before.

When the services were over, he put his scarf around his neck and started to run. Suddenly he bumped into Herr Neefe himself! The master had return in time to hear part of Ludwig's playing.

"Maestro!" Ludwig said. "I - I hope you were not disappointed in me?"

"It could not have been more beautiful, Ludwig. No one could have done better. You are already a better pianist and organist than I! Indeed, as I listened I could not help feeling you are right about going to Vienna. I think the time has come. Let us hope you can go soon, and study with Mozart."

"Oh, Maestro, you know that is my dream. But you know also there is no hope. There is no money for me to make such a trip. I try to save what I am able to earn, but it is always needed. Somehow, I must find a way to earn the money. Oh, I must!"

Ludwig worked harder than ever. He did earn extra fees, but as before, the money was always needed at home. His mother was ill, and growing worse. Money had to be found for doctors and medicine, too. Sometimes Ludwig was sure he would never go to Vienna.

Five long years went by. The boy was nearly a young man, and still his great dream seemed far away. But he was a better musician and a harder worker than he had ever been.

Then one day Herr Neefe, his face beaming with smiles, hurried to the Beethoven home with glorious news.

"Listen, everybody! The Elector has decided to provide the money for Ludwig to travel to Vienna. He has arranged for him to study with Mozart as well, at his expense!"



In a few days, young Beethoven stood in the home of Mozart. He looked awkward in his homespun clothes; his dark bushy hair was ruffled. He felt shy and embarrassed. But he was determined to do his best.

And he did. He played the pianoforte and he played it well.

But Mozart seemed uninterested, as if this was nothing unusual -- just a prepared piece, played well enough. But still, it was something any number of young students might do.

Ludwig sensed how the great master felt. He thought very quickly. He must gain another chance before Mozart spoke. The master was about to dismiss him.

"Maestro, please!" said Ludwig. "Will you give me a melody, a theme? Let me improvise for you."

For the first time since Ludwig had arrived, Mozart became interested. The boy was so excited! So intense! Asking for a melody -- any melody -- was what the Maestro liked. He went at once to the pianoforte, thought for a moment. Then he played a melody so difficult that no ordinary student could improve upon it.

The Maestro went to his music stand, prepared to work on his own manuscript as the boy played.

Ludwig von Beethoven was more excited than he had been in all his life. He was desperately hoping to please this man. Over and over he had said to himself, on the way to Vienna, "This is your chance. This is what you have dreamed of all your life."

Now he was frightened, and trying not to be. He must remember that he was a musician. He must remember all the people who had taught him and believed in him, beginning with his grandfather, long ago. Mozart was a master -- the master he most admired. But the Beethovens were musicians, too!

Ludwig was pale, and he felt faint. But in his ears was the melody Mozart had just played for him. It was a beautiful melody, a theme he would love to improvise upon.

He touched the keys gently, silently fingering the scales. Suddenly, he took a deep breath and lifted his head high, closed his eyes and began to play. In his mind, in his heart, his head, and on the pianoforte the melody Mozart had given him sang. It soared. It filled the air with beauty.



The Maestro turned from his manuscript, forgetting all about it. He looked in wonder at the youth and saw how lost he was in the music. Mozart sat down and listened with eyes closed. Again he looked at the boy, still playing, still lost in the music.

At just that moment, some friends arrived to visit Mozart. The Maestro, seeing them in the doorway, spoke. His words have gone down in the history of music: "You hear! Then listen to me, my friends. Keep your eyes on this lad. He is going to make a noise in the world!"

Ludwig's black eyes burned with excitement and joy. Mozart was pleased with his music!

The days that followed were the happiest Ludwig could remember. He was in Vienna, and he was studying with the greatest maestro of all.

Beethoven's life was a hard one, often filled with disappointments and heartbreak. His mother died when he was eighteen, and the young man spent five more long years back in Bonn, working to support his family, before he returned to Vienna to live.

Deafness began in his late twenties, and finally he was totally deaf. Then he could do no more performing and conducting. But though he could not hear it from the outside, he still heard music in his mind and heart. He composed more and more as his deafness increased.

He wrote: "I live only in my music, and no sooner is one thing done than another is begun. Often I must work on three or four things at once if I am to come near to the aim that I can feel. I will defy my fate of deafness insofar as possible, and when it makes me at times the most miserable of God's creatures, I will grapple with fate. It shall never drag me down."

It never did. Ludwig von Beethoven achieved fame for his music in his lifetime. He wrote by his own rules, as he had long wanted to do, and made the world take notice of his rules.

Today he is considered one of the great composers the world has had. The world is a better, more beautiful one because of the music Beethoven gave to it, and because of the strength, power, and mighty spirit he showed in giving it.

~Wicker, Irene. Young Music Makers. E.M. Hale and Company, 1961





Music of Ludwig von Beethoven to listen to:

- 2nd Movement, Symphony #6 in F Major (Pastoral)
- Bagatelle in A flat Major; 1st Movement, Symphony #5
- Final Movement, Ninth Symphony
- Moonlight Sonata, 1st movement
- Beethoven Lives Upstairs

