

Beethoven and the *Leonore Overture #3*: A Brief Introduction

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Early life:

Ludwig von Beethoven was born in Bonn, Germany in 1770. He was the oldest of 3 children. He had an unhappy childhood: He loved his mother, but his father was an unsuccessful musician who drank heavily. The father was the boy's first music teacher. Beethoven's father and his subsequent teacher made him practice day and night, often standing to reach the keyboard. Father frequently woke him at night to play for drinking buddies and beat him if he refused. He inherited his musical talent from his grandfather. He gave his first performance at age of 6 with father presenting him as a child prodigy

By age of 12, Beethoven was a promising keyboard player, a talented pupil in composition, and an accomplished church organist. He also had published a set of keyboard pieces and was actually earning money to help support his family.

In 1787, he went to Vienna, hoping to study with Mozart but was forced to return home to care for his mother, who was dying. He remained in Bonn until his mother and then his father died and stayed still longer to care for younger siblings

Finally in 1792 he was able to return to Vienna, but by then Mozart had died. He was, however, able to study with Haydn and his life at that time was devoted to study and performance. He began playing for nobility in salons, quickly establishing himself as a piano virtuoso.

The first performance of his own work came a few years later (1795). By the end of the century he and his music were much in demand. His compositions to this point were in the style of Viennese classicism and are usually viewed as his Early Period.

Loss of Hearing

Beethoven dates the beginning of his hearing loss to a fall from a, "Fit induced by an interruption of his work" in 1798, "having fallen over to get up deaf". His hearing only partially recovered and he always had ringing in his ears after this. In 1801 wrote to friends describing his poor hearing that was causing him problems both professionally and personally. By 1801 he is about 60% deaf. Most of his compositions were written when he was partially or completely deaf.

Beethoven struggled to cope with his deafness throughout most of his life. The *Heiligenstadt Testament* is a letter written by **Ludwig van Beethoven** to his brothers Carl and Johann at **Heiligenstadt** (today part of Vienna) on 6 October 1802. It reflects his great despair over his increasing **deafness** and his desire to overcome his physical and emotional ailments to complete his artistic destiny.... feeling he had much more to compose. Beethoven kept the document hidden among his private papers for the rest of his life, and probably never showed it to anyone. It was discovered in March 1827, many years after death.

It is reported that Beethoven, during **Napoleon's** bombardment of Vienna, was very worried that the noise would destroy what remained of his hearing that he hid in the basement of his brother's house, covering his ears with pillows.

Beethoven's deafness impeded his financial success. His increasing deafness made things more difficult socially. In Vienna, his income came from publishing his works, from the performances of them, and from his patrons. His deafness added to his lack of social skills and probably precipitated his near-total social isolation, making it difficult to maintain social and professional connections in an age without copyright protection, and he was not paid when others performed his compositions.

Leonore Overture No 3

The *Leonore Overture No 3* was written during Beethoven's "Middle Period" (1802-1812), during which he composed with a more individual style, different from the classical conventions of writing that were common at his time. This period is sometimes called his "heroic" period, and it was a very productive time for Beethoven.

The *Leonore Overture No. 3* was one of four versions that Beethoven composed for his opera *Fidelio*, an opera that takes its cue from the current events of the day. According to his biographers, Beethoven was very concerned with the current events and ideas, especially with the then radical ideas of liberty and the brotherhood of man generated by the French Revolution. For Beethoven, Napoleon was a force the triumph of such ideas, that is until he learned that Napoleon made himself the emperor. Then Beethoven made every effort to separate his works from any ties to Napoleon, but the plot of the opera is, nevertheless, linked to themes of liberty and equality.

Fidelio (originally titled *Leonore, oder Der Triumph der ehelichen Liebe*; English: *Leonore, or The Triumph of Marital Love*), is Beethoven's only opera. Its name was changed from *Leonore* to *Fidelio* at the insistence of theater in which it was first performed because there already were two *Leonores* by other composers. Beethoven's *Fidelio* was greatly admired in Germany and was the first opera played in Germany after World War 2 and the opera has been described as "an appeal to our conscience."

Beethoven began this work in 1803 and it finally premiered in November 1805 to an opera house that was nearly empty because of the [French occupation of the city](#). The opera was a critical and financial failure. Beethoven found work on this opera upsetting and commented to a friend "this opera will win me a martyr's crown."

He revised the overture to the opera three times. It took 8 years for the final version to be written. In 1814 a rewritten opera, now with a new overture was produced. The new overture was bright and less dramatic than *No 3*. In the end Beethoven wrote 4 different overtures for this opera.

The plot of the opera centers around the dramatic themes of love and liberty. The heroine, Leonore, disguises herself as a male guard, Fidelio, in order to rescue her husband from death in prison. *Leonore Overture No 3* transmits the range of emotions and the twists in the plot of the opera so thoroughly that it was deemed too powerful a piece to serve as a prelude to an opera. This is why it was rejected for use in the final writing of *Fidelio*. Eventually, *No. 3* became a concert piece on its own, a performance tradition attributed to Gustav Mahler.

The *Leonore Overture No. 3* follows a simple line: It begins in gloom that gradually leads to hope and resolution. The opening tone of the overture leads us down into the depths (of the dungeon), with the musical score descending downward. The flute with the orchestra sets a tonal quality for imprisonment. The dramatic quality continues in the prison, but we know it is beginning to resolve when we hear the trumpet, which is often played offstage. The overture ends in a hectic euphoria. Along the way, the two main solo instruments, the flute and the trumpet, stand out. I have read that the flute solos in this overture are used for flute auditions all over the world.

On the Resources page of our class website, there are a few brief passages to listen to in the performance of *Leonore No 3* that Kurt Mazur conducts:

Flute solo leading down into dungeon. 2:25

Trumpet solo suggesting help in the way 9:10

Flute solo that is happier as things begin to resolve 10:20

Although *Leonore No 3* is not played with performances of *Fidelio* it remains a grand symphonic work!