

Arts and Leisure: Ode to Ludwig - Beethoven's greatness plays across time

by Valerie Scher

Back in 1956, Chuck Berry's hit song "Roll Over Beethoven" told the composer to get out of the way. But Beethoven still isn't budging.

ODE TO LUDWIG - Although he died 180 years ago, Beethoven lives on. Themes from his best-known works are heard everywhere from TV commercials to cell phone ring tones. His life is the subject of books and movies. And live concerts continue to showcase his achievements. CNS Illustration by Manny Franco. Themes from his best-known works are heard everywhere from TV commercials to cell phone ringtones. His life is the subject of books and movies. And live concerts continue to showcase his achievements.

It's all proof that, 180 years after his death, the German composer remains a cultural icon with remarkable clout.

Here's why Beethoven's so big:

The ultimate rebel: Hollywood could hardly have devised a more fascinatingly complex character. Beethoven was a romantic who never married. An idealist with a bad temper. A musician so distraught by his deafness that he considered suicide. And a towering genius that challenged traditional expectations.

"He was the ultimate rebel, like the Marlon Brando or James Dean of composers," says Russell Steinberg, the Los Angeles-based composer-author-educator.

"More than anyone, he defined the musician as an artist instead of as a servant. He felt that music was as elevated as philosophy - a search for truth and morality."

Can't get enough: If Beethoven had only written his nine symphonies, his reputation would be secure. But he composed so much more in genres ranging from sonata to song, concerto to opera.

"The guy knew how to write a tune - and people love him for it," says Christopher Beach, La Jolla Music Society's president and artistic director in San Diego.

Beethoven's themes can be magnificently tragic (think of the Allegretto of the Symphony No. 7) or irresistibly beguiling (as in the "Archduke" Trio). There's also humor and heartache, passion and playfulness.

"The reason we listen to him over and over is that we get hooked. We can't let the music go," says Steinberg. "Beethoven carries us along. His music grips us like the very best Shakespeare or the very best Dickens."

He's everywhere:

If you want to see how Beethoven has permeated popular culture, just go to YouTube, the video sharing Web site (www.youtube.com).

In addition to clips of historic performances by such legendary musicians as conductor Herbert von Karajan and cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, there's a vocal trio called the "Redneck Tenors" singing the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony on TV's "America's Got Talent," Chuck Berry performing "Roll Over Beethoven" and an anonymous, out-of-tune violinist who writes: "Dear Beethoven. Don't be angry ... I am just an adult beginner (learning) to play your Sonata No. 5 ('Spring')." A full 30 pages are devoted to mostly amateur renditions of Beethoven's "Fuir Elise," the wistful piano piece he wrote around 1810. On YouTube, it's played on everything from electric guitars to teacups.

HIS LIFE

Born in Bonn, Germany, in 1770, Beethoven had a difficult childhood. His musician father was an abusive alcoholic who sometimes hauled young Ludwig out of bed at night to entertain his pals with piano or violin playing. His mother, who was stricken with tuberculosis, died when Ludwig was 16, leaving him to care for his two younger brothers.

When he was 21, Beethoven moved to cosmopolitan Vienna, Austria, where he studied composing with the eminent Franz Joseph Haydn. Unlike Haydn, however, Beethoven didn't work for an aristocratic court. He became one of the first successful freelance musicians, earning his living as a composer, conductor and pianist.

HIS CRISIS

There has been considerable speculation - but no definitive diagnosis - of the hearing loss that began during Beethoven's 20s. In a letter written to his brothers - which has become known as the Heiligenstadt Testament - he confessed his frustration and despair yet also resolved to continue composing. In the years before his death, at age 56, Beethoven composed some of his most profound works, including the Ninth Symphony.

"He wrote it when he was deaf. How he did that is a mystery and a miracle," believes San Diego Symphony music director Jahja Ling. "To me, it's also Beethoven's greatest victory."

THE BEAT GOES ON

Beethoven's emotional gamut is so richly fulfilling that performers and audiences never seem to tire of his music.

BIG NAME

Beethoven's fame is also evidenced by movies (from Disney's 1940 "Fantasia" to last year's "Copying Beethoven"); TV (the Emmy-winning "Beethoven Lives Upstairs") and comics - remember the Beethoven-playing Schroeder in "Peanuts?"

"Beethoven is truly a great, huge celebrity," says Steinberg.

LISTEN UP

In terms of recordings, there are more performances of Beethoven's music than the most ardent audiophile could savor in a lifetime. Amazon lists 1,205 results for the Ninth Symphony, for instance, and 1,663 for the Fifth Symphony.

And let's not overlook the albums that capitalize on the composer with such titles as "Beethoven for Relaxation" or "Beethoven for Your Beloved."

There's even "Beethoven: Build Your Baby's Brain," which shows that you're never too young to appreciate

him.

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