



CSI: Beethoven – Inside Ludwig’s Head

**Highlights from the three
Leonore Overtures**

**Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)**

***Fidelio* Overture**

Ludwig van Beethoven

Symphony No. 4

Ludwig van Beethoven

Adagio. Allegro vivace

Adagio

Allegro vivace

Allegro ma non troppo

On Monday, March 26, 1827, Ludwig van Beethoven died at the age of 56 in Vienna.

Melody to malady

Beethoven’s health was quite normal as a boy. However, in his early 20s, he developed chronic illnesses that plagued him throughout his adult life. His primary complaint was abdominal pain which was referred to as “colic.”

His personality also transformed during these years of illness. The friendly and charming young man gradually became irritable, hot-tempered and socially isolated.

At the age of 31, Beethoven reported that he was losing his hearing and he was nearly completely deaf by the age of 42.

He experienced a prolonged and painful death after developing pneumonia. His death was witnessed by his sister-in-law and his close friend Anselm Hüttenbrenner, who provided a vivid description of the event.

“When I am dead, request on my behalf Professor Schmidt, if he is still living, to describe my disease, and attach this written document to his record, so that after my death at any rate the world and I may be reconciled...” **Beethoven to brothers Karl and Johann in 1802.**

It was just a snip of hair – but what a story!

The day after Beethoven’s death, a 15-year-old Jewish musician named Ferdinand Hiller snipped a large lock of the composer’s hair as a keepsake. For a century, the lock of hair was a treasured family keepsake.

During the Holocaust in Nazi Germany, the lock of hair was given to Kay Fremming, a Danish doctor who was secretly involved in efforts to save hundreds of hunted and



frightened Jews. After Fremming's death, his daughter consigned the lock of hair for auction at Sotheby's in London.

The successful bidders were four Americans, including Ira Brilliant, founder of the Beethoven Center in San Jose, California. The new owners selected the Health Research Institute to derive scientific information from the hair.

The mystery is solved – or is it?

Non-destructive chemical testing of the hair was performed by two separate laboratories with the greatest technological capability for chemical analysis of tiny objects.

Results of the scientific analysis of the hair samples:

- High concentrations of lead, indicating lead poisoning
- Very low (undetectable) mercury levels, evidence that Beethoven did not receive medical treatment for syphilis, usually treated in the 1820s with mercury compounds
 - This supports the consensus of Beethoven scholars who believe that Beethoven never had syphilis
- Absence of drug metabolites, indicating that Beethoven avoided opiate pain-killers during his long and painful death
 - History records that he continued working on his music until the day he died, implying that he decided to keep his mind clear for his music.

So, lead poisoning was responsible for Beethoven's miserable illnesses, but how did the poison get into his body? No one knows for certain, of course, but water flowed through lead pipes in Vienna and most drinking containers were made of lead during that time. And Beethoven did love wine.

However, lead poisoning isn't usually associated with deafness – so the mystery continues.

Then there was the skull

Beethoven's body was exhumed in 1863 for an autopsy, but two bone fragments from his skull (1.75 inch pieces) didn't make it back into the grave. They were eventually passed down through generations to Paul Kaufmann in Danville, California, who has loaned them to the Beethoven Center.

Those bones were studied and determined to be Beethoven's after the DNA matched the DNA from his lock of hair.

And the mystery continues

A small sample of the skull bone has been set aside for future tests as scientists continue their work toward identifying a gene, nicknamed "the Beethoven gene," that might cause deafness.

During the original autopsy one day after his death, his inner ears were removed from his body and have never been recovered.

The *Leonore* Overtures

What's going on inside the brain of a Beethoven?

Why can one person produce music masterpiece after masterpiece while another cannot create a simple song? There have been many speculative answers to that question through the years, but no one has really known why. However, scientists are working hard on finding those answers as more advanced technology becomes available.

We may soon have an answer

With the aid of sensitive imaging equipment, scientists are now literally mapping creative juices as they flow through the brain. For example, two researchers at the National Institutes of Health, Charles Limb and Allen Braun, have recently shown that when jazz musicians improvise, their brains turn off areas linked to self-censoring and inhibition – and turn on those that let self-expression flow.

Originally, they tested if musical training affected the brain's architecture by presenting both musicians and non-musicians with a series of rhythmic patterns. Only the musicians activated a portion of the left side of the brain when they heard them. Musicians, it seems, do indeed “hear” music differently than others – almost like a second language.

What about the impact of external forces?

Beethoven was a political composer. He was dedicated to the ideals of human dignity, freedom and heroism. It was the first decade of the 1800s. These were the years of the “Heroic” style of music, a pivotal point for music of this period.

His music, more than that of any composer before him, gives the impression of being a direct outpouring of his personality.

Europe was in turmoil

The French Revolution had erupted. Bonaparte was leading the charge to become Emperor, much to the disappointment of Beethoven and others who had seen him as the champion of the common man. As his army bombarded Vienna for the second time in 1809, Beethoven hid in a cellar with mufflers around his ear, frightened that the dreadful noise of war would remove the last of his remaining ability to hear.

His Symphony No. 3 (*Eroica* Symphony), the opera *Fidelio* and Symphony Nos. 4-8 were composed during this period.

Leonore – or is it *Fidelio*?

Beethoven called his only opera *Leonore*, but his impresario insisted on entitling it *Fidelio*, so *Fidelio* it was – but not until a revival of the work was performed nine years after the first performance.

This work was one of many theatrical works of the “rescue” genre of this period. The essence of the story is how Leonore disguises herself as a man, taking the name “Fidelio” in order to get a job as an assistant jailer, to rescue her husband who is a



political prisoner. It was based on supposedly true incidents during the Reign of Terror in France.

Perfecting the composition

The original version, performed in 1805, was performed at the Theater an der Wien before a small audience because the French invasion had driven away the aristocratic Viennese. The performance was a failure, considered to be too long.

It was revised and performed again in 1806. Once again, the opera was considered a failure. Then, in 1814, Beethoven, on his own initiative, revised the opera once again for a revival performance. This time, it was a resounding success.

Even the music genius didn't get it right the first time

"I carry my ideas a long time, rejecting and rewriting until I am satisfied...I change many things, discard, and try again until I am satisfied," Beethoven once told Louis Schlosser, a young musician and friend.

Finding the "right" overture

The overture for the first performance was actually the one we now know as *Leonore* Overture No. 2.

The most important revision in the 1806 version of the opera was Beethoven's substitution of a new overture, *Leonore* Overture No. 3. It was considered to be a masterpiece on its own; however, it completely overshadowed the first act of the opera, thus contributing to the failure of that version of the opera too.

The overture with the misleading title, *Leonore* Overture No. 1, was composed in 1807, in anticipation of a performance of the opera in Prague, which never took place.

Beethoven put the opera on the shelf until 1814, when it was successfully produced with substantial dramatic and musical revisions. This version – the version of *Fidelio* we know today – had an entirely new overture (the fourth), the *Fidelio* Overture.

Symphony No. 4

How can it compete with these two gems?

Sandwiched between his Third ("Eroica") and Fifth symphonies, Beethoven's Fourth symphony is often overlooked. As a perceptive critic remarked in 1811: "On the whole, the work is cheerful, understandable and engaging, and is closer to the composer's justly beloved First and Second symphonies than to the Fifth and Sixth. In the overall inspiration we may place it closer to the Second."

Pleasing the Count takes precedence

Beethoven wrote the piece during a late-summer stay at the palace of Count Franz von Oppersdorff, to whom the work eventually was dedicated. The Count had heard a

performance of Beethoven's Symphony No. 2 and he liked it so much that he offered a great amount of money for the composition of a new symphony for him.

At the time, Beethoven was working on what is now known as Symphony No. 5, but he put that aside to compose a symphony closer to the style of the Second symphony to please the Count.

It passed the test

This symphony, marked with joviality and humor, premiered at a private concert at the Lobkowitz Palace in Vienna, along with the first performance of the Fourth Piano Concerto. Though not much was written about the piece after its premiere, contemporaries celebrated it.

Did you know?

- In 1863 the bodies of Beethoven and Schubert (who was buried nearby) were exhumed, studied and reburied in proceedings paid for by the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde.
- A plaster death mask of Beethoven was taken two days after his death by Carl Danhauser, a normal procedure for famous men during that period; the best copy of it is in the Historisches Museum in Vienna.
- Beethoven's father, a difficult alcoholic, forced the boy's early progress in the hope of making a second Mozart of him.
- Beethoven was one of the greatest pianists of all time.
- Beethoven never married, although he proposed to at least one lady.
- Mozart's *Requiem* was played at Beethoven's funeral.