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Beethoven's Family Romance

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Portrait of young Beethoven

The Beethoven family

Ludwig van Beethoven was born in Bonn on December 16, 1770 to father Johann and mother Maria Magdalena.

His father was a singer in the choir of the Elector - precisely tenor soloist - and he in turn had a father, Ludwig's grandfather, and was named after him.

Ludwig, who was Kapellmeister, was a musician of great quality.

He was of Belgian origin, he came from the province of Liege.

The relationship between Beethoven and Beethoven's grandfather is a fundamental to understand why he absolutely did not see his father as a role model. This role was instead of the grandfather, despite the fact that his grandfather had died when he was only three years old, so when he was really an infant.

All commentators and historians tell us that, until she died, her mother Mary Magdalene always spoke about her father-in-law in an extraordinary way with her son. The child grew up with the constant reverberation of the praises made by his mother towards the father-in-law.

This is strange because the father-in-law did not want his only son Johann to marry Mary Magdalene because she was from another city, Trier, and because, according to him, his son was not able to have a bride and a family, he was happy with the life he had, the economic tranquility, the social position obtained, the house in which they lived.

The Beethovens lived on the first floor of a building where the owners, the Fisher family, were on the ground floor. And the memories of the Fischer family make us understand something of Beethoven's early life.

They confirm what Beethoven's childhood and adolescent friends affirmed, in the interviews made by the first musicologists who were already interested in writing biographies on Beethoven in the years after 1830.

Immediately after the death of grandfather Ludwig, which occurred in 1773 due to a heart attack, when Beethoven was only three years old, his father had offered himself, or rather had imposed himself, as a teacher of his son. He had seen in him some musical qualities, a talent that had to be exploited. Perhaps it was an attempt to emulate Leopold Mozart, who had brought his son Wolfgang around Europe as a child prodigy.

The son did not become a child prodigy as he had hoped. Beethoven would have had to study a lot of composition, and with real teachers, to reach a very high professional level, and then be able to take off as a great genius of music as we know him today.

In order to force him to study according to his own methods, the father beat him and tortured him psychologically. For example, he forced him to wake up at night time to take lessons, when the child was still asleep, a child aged four to nine, and often locked him in the cellar in the dark as punishment.

He also prevented him to improvise on the piano.

Beethoven loved improvising on the piano. His creativity, although not a child prodigy, must have been very high indeed. His father, on the other hand, forced him only to read music, so much so that at the age of eleven he could read all the Well-tempered Harpsichord by J.S. Bach.

This is confirmed by his first true music teacher, Christian Gottlob Neefe (1748-1798), composer, conductor and also organist to the Elector.

He put young Ludwig as a substitute organist already at the age of twelve, and the following year he began to have his first small salary.

Beethoven somehow wanted to emulate the wisdom and poise of his grandfather Ludwig, whom he truly revered.

While he had no consideration of the father who beat him constantly. The bruises that his father gave him were under the eyes of everyone he met.

His father could not teach him anything while he studied alone. He practically had a great ability, like many other composers, to be self-taught, and therefore he was able to move forward and grow on his own.

To the point that, when he reached ten years of age, he realized that his father would even get in the way as a teacher.

In the first 20 years of Beethoven's life that he spent in Bonn, the relationship with the cultural life of the city was very important, which was very high and of great level.

The presence of the Prince-electoral was also very important.

The Prince-electoral, in charge until 1784, was a great friend of grandfather Ludwig. A minister of his took from the Beethoven family part of the protective wing, because his father Johann did not do his job well.

The other Prince-electoral, in office after 1784, was also important for Beethoven. He was the brother of the emperor and brought new ideas in the effort to bring a great impulse to the entire cultural and artistic part of the city.

So fortunately, after 1784, Beethoven began to be considered in the city of Bonn. Thanks to the Prince-electoral and thanks to his new teacher who even wrote a review on the quality of the young man, both as a great pianist and as a composer. He had even made him print a composition, some Variations for piano.

In short, throughout this period Beethoven was able to build within himself the strength that allowed him to obtain enormous satisfaction, both as a concert performer and as a composer, when he left and went to Vienna.

Soon after moving on to study with Neefe, Beethoven began writing a lot of music, for piano, a ballet, a trio, variations, rondos and even lieder.

One of these lieder, WoO 108, written at the age of twelve, makes us understand how he replaced the father model with the grandfather's one.

The text reads:

"You do not yet know whose son you are, you do not know who prepares your swaddling clothes, who warms you and feeds you, yet you grow up calm.

In a few years, among those who have taken care of you, you will learn to recognize your mother. However, there is an occult benefactor who provides for all of us, our thanks go to him, providing us with food and drink.

My weak intellect still does not understand all this, but over the years, if I am devoted and have faith, he will be revealed to me."

In the copy of the *Odyssey* that was found, on his death, in Beethoven's house, the following words of Telemachus were doubly underlined: "Mater semper certum". You cannot say it about the father...

Beethoven soon realizes that he has to take matters into his own hands and has to become the head of the family.

He had two younger brothers and a mother, who died in 1787. This awareness allowed him to survive and fortify himself until the moment he decided to go to study with Haydn in Vienna.

And this happened in 1792, fifteen days before the death of his father.

Index of illustrations

Portrait of young Beethoven	6
Portrait of Franz Joseph Haydn	11
Portrait of Carl Czerny	16
Beethoven's ear trumpets	20
The Heiligenstadt Testament	25
Title page with dedication of Beethoven's Third Symphony	31
3D, colourised portrait of Ludwig van Beethoven	36
Portrait of Antonia Brentano	41
Malzel's Panharmonicon	47
Pair of Biedermeier chairs	52
Portrait of Karl van Beethoven	56
Portrait of Anton Diabelli	61
Painting of Beethoven's funeral	65

Index

Foreword	5
The Beethoven family	7
The meeting with Haydn	12
The virtuosos of Vienna	17
The calvary of deafness	21
The Heiligenstadt Testament	26
Napoleon Bonaparte	32
The heroic period	37
The beloved immortal	42
The Congress of Vienna and the Victory of Wellington	48
The Biedermeier	53
The last years	57
The birth of the myth	62
Last days	66
Appendix - Works with opus numbers	70
Index of illustrations	78
Index	79