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THE COMPOSITIONAL INFLUENCE OF WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART ON  
LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN'S EARLY PERIOD WORKS

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Honors Western Civilization Humanities  
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Imagine having the opportunity to spend a couple years with your favorite celebrity, only to meet them once and then receiving a phone call from a relative saying your mother was about to die. You would be devastated, being prevented from spending time with your idol because you needed to go care for your sick and dying mother; it would feel as if both your dream *and* your reality were shattered. This is the exact situation the pianist Ludwig van Beethoven found himself in when he traveled to Vienna in hopes of receiving lessons from his role model, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Beethoven delivered an impressive and successful audition, earning his spot as Mozart's pupil. Unfortunately, before his first lesson, he received news that his mother was ill and dying, so he had to go back to Bonn, Germany, his hometown. Even though Beethoven never got the chance to study with his favorite pianist, Mozart still stands to be the most significant influence on Beethoven's early period compositions.

Beethoven was born on December 10th, 1770, twenty years after the beginning of the Classical era. By that time, most music had progressed away from Renaissance polyphony—music with multiple melodic lines—towards a lighter and simpler texture, which had become the staple of Classical music. This was in part due to the adoption of the *galant* style, which Professor Bathia Churgin defines as “‘lightly accompanied periodic melodies, and the appropriate manner of performing the same.’”<sup>1</sup> Beethoven's early period works—compositions published from 1775 to 1802—possess this lighter texture, most likely because he explored the works of his famous contemporaries: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Joseph Haydn, two of the most prominent figures of the Classical period. Their music was so

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<sup>1</sup> Bathia Churgin, "Music of the Classical Era," *The Journal of Musicology* 5, no. 4 (1987): 233, accessed February 15, 2018, doi:10.2307/763840.

famous and widespread at the time that “even Beethoven must have envied Mozart’s sublime skill in internal composition.”<sup>2</sup> Since Beethoven resided in Bonn, Germany, home to the Bonn Nationaltheater, he also discovered the music of the French, Italians and other European artists. Along with listening to music, Beethoven additionally studied the works of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, in which he explored the expressive side of music.

Beethoven was also heavily impacted by the people he was close to. His father, Johann van Beethoven, sang for a living and pushed his son to become a musician as well, with the goal of shaping him into the next Mozart. Even though Beethoven was a musical child prodigy, his father often beat him when Beethoven failed to meet his high expectations. Luckily, most of Beethoven’s other teachers were not as harsh. Some of his pedagogical influences include Christian Gottlob Neefe and Johann Albrechtsberger. Through private lessons, these two teachers taught Beethoven how to compose. Neefe introduced him to thoroughbass, a musical notation, while Albrechtsberger fixed Beethoven’s bad compositional habits that he picked up during his studies with Joseph Haydn. The music of various composers along with private piano lessons from multiple teachers gave Beethoven the tools and the impetus to compose. But even though countless brilliant musical figures appeared in Beethoven’s life, the biggest influence on his early period works proves to be Mozart.

Near the end of the early period of Beethoven’s life, his compositions started to move away from the typical Classical style. Known as the bridge between the Classical and Romantic eras, Beethoven added a new element of expressivity, which set him apart from most Classical composers. According to Durairaj, Magann, and Rosenthal, “expressivity is a multidimensional

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<sup>2</sup> Francis Carr, *Mozart & Constanze* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1984), 1.

phenomenon involving principles of musical structure, movement, emotional intention, personal nuance and unintentional events occurring during the process of performance.”<sup>3</sup> Before Beethoven, many musicians didn’t try to express anything through their music. Through dynamics, tone, texture, and all the other variables mentioned above, Beethoven expressed emotions, moods, and characters. It has been theorized that Beethoven developed this expression due to his tragic life; his father beat him and the death of his mother prevented him from studying with his role model. Additionally, at the age of 26, Ludwig van Beethoven began to go deaf. For many composers, this disability would inevitably end their careers—a fact that Beethoven was both aware and afraid of. However, deafness did not stop him from composing great works of music, such as his Ninth Symphony, more commonly known as “Ode to Joy”. To make up for his inability to hear, Beethoven began to move away from higher frequencies in his composition.<sup>4</sup> His music progressively shifted towards the lower range of the piano as his hearing diminished, which contained notes that were easy to hear and feel the vibrations of. By 1816, he lost his hearing completely, relying only on the vibrations that the strings of the piano created. Despite his deafness, he continued producing music, imagining how different notes would sound together in his head. This was an incredible feat, even for a prodigy like himself. However, his deafness crippled his self-esteem and led to a deep depression and alcohol abuse. With a tragic life such as Beethoven’s, there’s no wonder why he felt the need to express his

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<sup>3</sup> Manju Durairaj, Joyce Magann, and Roseanne Rosenthal, “Musicians' Descriptions of Their Expressive Musical Practice,” *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, no. 181 (2009): 37-38, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/40319226>.

<sup>4</sup> Saris Saccenti and Age K Smilde, "Beethoven's Deafness and His Three Styles," *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 343, no. 7837 (2011): 1300, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/23066620>.

emotions through music. Geringer and Sasanfar state that “Music students, teachers, and performers have agreed that expressivity may be the most important and appreciated aspect of a performer’s skills”, and this is because it gives the performer an opportunity to create and tell a story with music.<sup>5</sup> To be expressive, the musician needs a story to tell, and to tell a story, the musician must learn how to express it. In Beethoven’s case, he projected his sorrow and anger through his compositions.

It’s possible that Johann van Beethoven’s infatuation with making his son into the next Mozart caused the young Beethoven to idolize and emulate Mozart. Beethoven dreamed about meeting Mozart someday, a dream that eventually came true in 1787. That year, Beethoven took half a year’s leave of absence from his court orchestra and traveled to Vienna, where he played for Mozart. As mentioned earlier, Mozart was impressed by his skill and accepted him as a pupil, but Beethoven received news that his mother was ill and returned to Bonn before he could start his lessons with Mozart. By the time Beethoven went back to Vienna in 1792, Mozart was already dead. Although Beethoven never got the chance to learn from Mozart personally, he left his home and family in hopes of meeting his role model and gaining musical knowledge from him, revealing that Beethoven felt a connection to Mozart’s music and wanted his direct guidance.

However, Beethoven’s pursuit of receiving Mozart’s instruction did not stop there. Since Mozart died before he could teach Beethoven, Beethoven returned to Vienna once again to seek

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<sup>5</sup> John M. Geringer and Justine K. Sasanfar. "Listener Perception of Expressivity in Collaborative Performances Containing Expressive and Unexpressive Playing by the Pianist," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 61, no. 2 (2013): 161, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/41999575>.

a new teacher, Joseph Haydn, who was another brilliant Classical composer. Beethoven hoped he could “receive Mozart’s spirit from Haydn’s hands”, but sadly, Haydn wasn’t such a great teacher.<sup>6</sup> According to Beachy, Haydn neglected to fix Beethoven’s mistakes and bad compositional habits, which fostered negative feelings between the student and teacher.<sup>7</sup> However, it was impossible for Beethoven to learn nothing from Haydn’s teachings. As historian Donald Grout states, “The first three sonatas published at Vienna (Op. 2, 1796) contain some passages reminiscent of Haydn...the Adagio of No. 1, for example, is quite Haydnian both in themes and treatment.”<sup>8</sup> It is important to remember that Beethoven wanted to learn from Haydn to obtain Mozart’s spirit. Therefore, the parts of Beethoven’s compositions that sound like the works of Haydn are likely to sound like the works of Mozart as well. Since Haydn and Mozart were both well-practiced in Classical music, Beethoven could have gleaned musical knowledge from Haydn’s teachings that brought him closer to Mozart. As shown by Grout, Beethoven adopted parts of Haydn’s compositional style in hopes that it embodied Mozart’s spirit. Even though Haydn wasn’t Mozart, Beethoven considered him an indirect source for gaining Mozart’s influence.

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<sup>6</sup> Bathia Churgin, “Beethoven and Mozart's Requiem: A New Connection,” *The Journal of Musicology* 5, no. 4 (1987): 457, doi:10.2307/763840.

<sup>7</sup> Sean E. Beachy. "Technique, Aesthetics, and Style in Eighteenth-Century Compositional Pedagogy: Beethoven's Pedagogical Influences," Order No. 3448204, West Virginia University, 2010: 60, <http://stats.lib.pdx.edu/proxy.php?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/docview/861913083?accountid=13265>.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Grout and Claude Palisca “Ludwig van Beethoven,” In *A History of Western Music, Third Edition* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1980), 527.

That Mozart became Beethoven's biggest influence is seen most clearly through Beethoven's studies. According to Churgin's research, Beethoven used Mozart's piano concertos as models for his own concertos and also studied and copied, or hand-wrote, Mozart's works: "The largest numbers of copies are for works by J. S. Bach, Handel, and Mozart."<sup>9</sup> Undoubtedly, Beethoven looked up to Mozart's compositional skills. Like any other music student, he studied the composer he admired the most. By copying his works, Beethoven analyzed Mozart's music closely and applied the ideas he found to his own compositions. In addition, he also built on Mozart's pieces: "Beethoven penned four sets of variations on Mozart themes, drawing more on Mozart than any other composer."<sup>10</sup> Writing variations is a way for composers to borrow ideas from other pieces and make them their own. Beethoven used Mozart's themes as the foundation for the variations and added his own stylistic touch from there on. He copied and wrote the most variations on Mozart's works, thus revealing that he preferred the themes in Mozart's music.

Mozart's influence is also noticeable in Beethoven's compositions. For example, numerous similarities can be found between Mozart's Sonata No. 14 in C minor, K. 457 and Beethoven's Sonata No. 5 in C minor, Op. 10, No. 1. Although the pieces contain different notes, the two characters they depict are nearly identical. Characters can be created with a multitude of different elements, such as dynamics (volume), phrasing (tapering of phrases, voicing certain notes, building up to the peak of the musical line, etc.), and articulation (how a note is played). Throughout the first couple lines, Beethoven stayed consistent with Mozart's mood, tone, and character changes. Not only did he imitate the expressivity of Mozart's sonata, he also copied the

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<sup>9</sup> Churgin, 459.

<sup>10</sup> Churgin, 458.



interactions between the two characters. The melody passes back and forth between the two unique characters in both pieces, with the shy one always responding to the accusations of the angry one. The first character can be defined by its loud and brash notes, usually played with a heavy arm and fast key speed. These factors make the character out to be angry and temperamental, always shouting at the second character. The second character sounds quieter and gentler, creating a shy and meek personality. The interactions between the two characters form the main theme of the piece, appearing in the A section of both sonatas.

Not only are the interactions between the characters identical, the notes of Beethoven's sonata likewise reflect the notes in Mozart's. The two pieces begin with a forte C minor chord, establishing the bold and powerful tone of the first character. The notes of the first two measures are meant to jump from one to the next with a strong, downward motion on the piano keys. This kind of motion creates the anger that can be heard in the music. Continuing on, the phrase builds up to an E flat, followed by filler rests that set the stage for the second character to enter. It sings a C minor triad at a piano dynamic, finishing the phrase with a diminished 7th in the Mozart and a dominant 7th in the Beethoven. The unresolved chords allow for the reappearance of the first character, who belts out the melody with the same arpeggiated motif from before, but this time in the dominant major—G major. Once again, the quieter character follows, this time resolving the phrase to a C minor chord. As seen in these two pieces, Beethoven copied the notes and story told in Mozart's sonata. The characters created are close replicas and line up precisely, which demonstrates Mozart's huge influence on Beethoven's Fifth Sonata.

There are several other smaller elements that Beethoven borrowed from Mozart's sonata. Mozart employed contrasting dynamics to produce a more dramatic mood, which Beethoven

copied to create drama between his characters. His angry character stays at a forte (loud) throughout the entire main theme while the shy character remains piano (soft). Another case of Mozart's influence on Beethoven's Sonata No. 5 in C minor is the proportions of the phrases.<sup>11</sup> The first two phrases of Mozart's sonata are in different keys, but they remain equal in length, spanning four measures each. Even though Beethoven chose a different time signature, he imitated Mozart's layout and formed equal five-measure phrases. The melodies within these phrases are very similar as well. While Beethoven did add in more notes, the melodic notes on the strong beats match up exactly with Mozart's melody in the first one and a half measures. All of these small, similar details demonstrate the extent of Mozart's influence on Beethoven's music. Even if Beethoven didn't mean to copy Mozart's sonata, a simple comparison of the two pieces indicates that Beethoven was heavily influenced by Mozart's music. Although this is only one comparison of two pieces out of hundreds, it is sufficient to prove that Mozart was the biggest influence on Beethoven's early period works since the piece compared is from the early period of Beethoven's life.

Some researchers argue that Christian Gottlob Neefe was Beethoven's biggest influence, who was one of his private piano teachers in Bonn. Still, most of them agree with Beachy, who claims that "Beethoven gained his early compositional training through performance practice from both his lessons with Neefe and the continual performance of music that was presented in the electoral court."<sup>12</sup> They argue that with Neefe's help, Beethoven attained three positions in

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<sup>11</sup> Mytch Evangelista, "Mozart's Influence on Beethoven's Piano Sonata no. 5 in c minor," *Academia*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Beachy, 42.

the electoral court—assistant court organist, cembalist of the orchestra, and deputy court organist—which gave him the opportunity to perform music of the famous composers at the time, further developing his compositional abilities.<sup>13</sup> While it is true that Neeffe trained Beethoven in composition and helped him become a court musician, he never directly affected Beethoven’s compositions. His compositions prove to be most similar to the pieces of Mozart, with none of them exhibiting compositional influence from Neeffe.

Another musicologist, Barry Cooper, argues that Neeffe’s “most significant and lasting influence on Beethoven’s compositional attitudes was his view that musical ideas should be related to and based on the natural course of human feelings.”<sup>14</sup> However, only half of his claim is correct. Typically referred to nowadays as the bridge between the Classical and Romantic eras, Beethoven was the first to incorporate full expressivity and emotion into his pieces. He was the composer who introduced the world to music with deeper meaning and expression. But, Beethoven was already attracted to music as an art of feeling before he came to Neeffe. Neeffe reinforced the importance of expressivity in music, but Beethoven had already been drawn to performers who played with emotion before, such as Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. Therefore, Neeffe cannot be considered Beethoven’s most influential figure. He was indeed a good teacher, but Beethoven pulled more inspiration from Mozart’s music than he did from Neeffe’s teachings.

All of Beethoven’s compositions up to 1802 strongly exhibit Mozart’s influence. Within the field of composition, some musical scholars currently debate whether or not some of

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<sup>13</sup> Beachy, 36.

<sup>14</sup> Barry Cooper, *Beethoven* (Master Musician Series, edited by Stanley Sadie) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7.

Beethoven's pieces can actually be considered original or not because of Mozart's heavy influence on his music. Beethoven may have struggled with this question as well. He might have developed "anxiety of influence" since he started "a career as a composer in the shadow of Mozart and as the protégé of Haydn: this, if anything, is a prescription for anxiety."<sup>15</sup> He tried not to copy any ideas of the great composers around him, but their influence was unpreventable. Just as intertextuality is inevitable in almost all written texts, Beethoven's music does tend to sound like the music of earlier Classical composers. His largest compositional influence stands to be Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, but compositions make up only one part of a musician. To determine the influence on his performances, chamber music, and other components, one would need to analyze Beethoven with a different lens—pedagogical, technical, etc. It is important for historical scholars to determine Beethoven's influences because it shows how musicians were connected back in the Classical Era. Somehow musical ideas were passed around to create a genre of music that hundreds of composers were a part of. This research also reveals how music changed over time, which can reflect social, political, and religious shifts. As for musical scholars, this study is important because it helps musicians play Beethoven's early period works. Personally, by learning about his influences, I can take all of their unique aspects and combine them in the piece I'm playing. Stylistically, studying his influences gives me hints as to how to play Beethoven's music. For example, I know to play with a light texture and quick key speed when I practice his earlier pieces because they were mainly influenced by Mozart and Haydn. For pieces from the middle or late periods of Beethoven's life, I've learned to play with a heavier

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<sup>15</sup> Jeremy Yudkin, "Beethoven's "Mozart" Quartet," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 45, no. 1 (1992): 30-74, doi:10.2307/831489.

touch. As shown by all the possible applications, there is an endless store of information regarding the functions of society, continuity and change over time, and musical styles in the field of music waiting to be discovered.

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