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## psychiatry in music

### Emotion in Beethoven and his music

François Mai

Beethoven was the first of the romantic period composers who dominated classical music during the 19th century. He himself was a passionate man who carried his feelings on his sleeve. He had episodes of depression accompanied by suicidal ideas, and rarer episodes of elation with flights of ideas. The latter are reflected in some of his letters. He had a low frustration tolerance and at times would become so angry that he would come to blows with others such as his brother Carl, or he would throw objects at his servants. Although he never married, he had several affairs, including one with a married woman who has come to be known to posterity as 'the Unknown Beloved'. To her he wrote three love letters that are filled with affection and feeling. He much enjoyed wine and this resulted in hepatic cirrhosis that caused his premature death at the age of 56.

This moodiness is reflected in his music. The 'Marches Funébres' of his Third Symphony (*Eroica*) and the Piano Sonata, op. 26, no. 12, are poignant and powerful portrayals of grief and bereavement. The final movement of the String Quartet, no. 6, op. 18 (*La Malinconia*) has sudden and alternating changes of tempo and rhythm that depict, in musical terms, the mood changes that occur in bipolar disorder. The pace and fortissimo dynamics of both his Rondo a Capriccio for piano, op. 129 and the storm movement of his Sixth Symphony (*Pastoral Symphony*) beautifully (or perhaps one should also say fearfully) display anger and agitation.

Beethoven also displayed positive emotions in his music. The prime example is his rendering of Schiller's poem *Ode to Joy* in his Ninth Symphony (*Choral Symphony*), where the lyrical exaltation of peace and of our common brotherhood and humanity are beautifully and powerfully rendered in musical terms. Tenderness and love shine forth in the third movement of the Piano Sonata, op. 90, no. 27, and in the well-known Bagatelle, *Für Elise*. During the last eight years of his life Beethoven was almost totally deaf yet during this time he composed some of his most complex and profoundly spiritual music. His deafness forced him to turn inward for inspiration, and his music during this final period of his compositional career reflects the inner peace he had achieved despite the outward turmoil of his life. The late string quartets are a sublime portrayal of this mental attitude.

Beethoven is considered to be one of the greatest composers of all time. During most of his life he had many medical and psychological problems. He may have suffered from bipolar disorder. D. Jablow Hershman and Dr Julian Lieb in their book *Manic Depression and Creativity* have argued quite convincingly that Beethoven was manic depressive. His medical problems included progressive deafness that began in his late twenties, chronic alcohol dependency causing cirrhosis of the liver, lead poisoning and a chronic gastro-intestinal condition (likely irritable bowel syndrome complicated by laxative misuse). Because of the strength of his personality and knowledge of the power of his message, he was able to rise above these ailments. As he himself on occasion admitted, composing for him was therapeutic. His deafness forced him to withdraw from teaching, performing and conducting, hence all his energies were focused on composition. His passionate nature is reflected in the passions of his music. We are all the beneficiaries.

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