

# *Louis van Beethoven*: A German film biography of the great composer

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17 January 2021

*Louis van Beethoven*, a new biographical film about composer Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827), whose 250th birthday was celebrated in December (and throughout 2020), has aired on German television and is available for streaming in Germany and in the US, with English subtitles.

Beethoven's dedication to the ideas of the Enlightenment and social progress, and determination to struggle, help make him a figure of enormous contemporary relevance. While raising many of the central themes of Beethoven's life and epoch, the film—written and directed by Niki Stein (born 1961)—ultimately fails to fully capture Beethoven's significance as both a musical genius and a serious political thinker and intellectual.

Stein's work contrasts the older Beethoven in 1826 (played by Tobias Moretti)—who feels increasingly isolated, both personally and artistically—to the younger Beethoven (Anselm Bresgott) who comes of age in the era of the American and French Revolutions amidst an extraordinary flourishing of the arts and social thought. The movie shifts, often in a very abrupt manner, between scenes at different junctures in Beethoven's life.

At its strongest, the movie gives the viewers a valuable sense of the world into which Beethoven was born. The son of an unsuccessful and not very talented musician who works for the local court in Bonn, a small city close to the French border, the future composer is drilled day-and-night by his abusive father who hopes to turn him into a second Mozart. (The very young Beethoven is played by Colin Pütz, born in 2007, one of the most promising pianists in Germany today.) The older man shamelessly lies about his son's age to present him as a *wunderkind*, and drinks away much of the money that the child earns for the desperately poor family. In terms of the family's social standing and Beethoven's own musical development, almost everything depends on the good will of the court of Archduke Maximilian Francis of Austria, the Elector of Cologne.

The young boy comes under the influence of the actor Tobias Pfeiffer (Sabin Tambrea), who lives with his family. Pfeiffer is shown as a fervent adherent of Enlightenment

philosophy and forcefully reads out the US Declaration of Independence to a crowd, which includes the young Beethoven, in 1779, risking his own arrest. He tells the boy, "If you want to be free, Ludwig, truly free...you have to go to America."

Pfeiffer is also shown encouraging the young Beethoven to break away from existing musical norms, insisting that only truthful expression matters in art, whether it sounds beautiful or not. The other major and perhaps better known figure who would come to significantly influence the musicianship and world view of the young Beethoven is composer and conductor Christian Gottlob Neefe (Ulrich Noethen). In the movie, he is depicted as less of a radical than Pfeiffer but a strong supporter of the German Enlightenment. While he is one of the first to recognize the boy's extraordinary talent for composition, he is appalled by Beethoven's early attempts at moving away from the classical style.

In this climate, Beethoven early on develops a commitment to democratic rights and social progress, a hatred of feudalism and the dependence of artists upon the good will of the courts. Unfortunately, many of these themes are not developed further. For unclear reasons, the filmmakers chose to skip over the single most important single development in Beethoven's life—the French Revolution, including the rise and fall of Napoleon. The movie shifts unexpectedly from 1787 to 1826.

This also means, of course, that none of the compositions from Beethoven's so-called heroic period, including his well-known symphonies and many of his greatest sonatas and concertos, are performed. In its storyline, the film focuses more and more on Beethoven's personal woes and experiences in love, at the expense, unhappily, of both the historical struggles of the time *and* his music.

Perhaps the weakest scenes in *Louis van Beethoven* are those centering on the 17-year old Beethoven. We see him foregoing his one genuine love for the sake of pursuing his musical education in Vienna with Mozart. However, it is neither certain that the girl Beethoven was in love with at the time was, as Stein's film suggests, the "immortal beloved"

to whom he later addressed a famous letter, nor has it been established that Beethoven and Mozart ever met in Vienna.

Mozart (Manuel Rubey) appears in the movie as little more than a witty, somewhat cynical and moody dandy who composes *Don Giovanni* in between a few games of billiards. This does not make for a credible depiction of a musical genius who, much like Beethoven, composed some of his greatest works, such as *The Magic Flute* and *The Marriage of Figaro* (based on a play by Beaumarchais, a supporter of the American Revolution and the early phases of the French Revolution), in the spirit of the Enlightenment and in an intense intellectual and cultural engagement with the ideas of the great French upheaval of 1789.

Again, the historical and social background of the time is touched upon, but not really worked through. In one of the stronger scenes, Neefe urges a discouraged Beethoven after his return from Vienna to start composing again. “The world has a right to hear your music,” he insists. Beethoven replies: “The world, who is that? The princes, the nobles, the high society? Powdered fops who know as much about music as you know about farming. Even Mozart has to grovel before this rabble.” Neefe: “Times are changing. Things are boiling over on all sides. The voice of freedom can no longer be ignored, Ludwig, and you can compose the accompanying music.”

The conversation ends suddenly when the woman Beethoven is in love with drives by in a carriage. The fact that the adolescent Beethoven is played by an actor who depicts the composer as a rather naïve, sentimental youth—and who mercilessly butchers the German dialect he seeks to imitate—does not help matters. The viewer may find it difficult to believe that this callow young man only five years later in 1792 would write that he had contracted a “revolutionary fever” and summed up his principles as follows: “To do good whenever you can; love liberty above all else, [and] not to deny the truth, even before the throne.”

When we meet Beethoven again it is already 1826. He lives with his younger brother, his sister-in-law and his nephew, Karl (Peter Lewys Preston), whom he adopted after the death of his other younger brother. The relationship with Karl, often the starting point for superficial psychoanalysis or even the vilification of Beethoven on the part of biographers, is portrayed in a generally balanced and fair manner.

Beethoven is working now on his late string quartets which would go down in history as seminal milestones in the development of classical music and musical expression more broadly. However, his style increasingly alienates even his closest friends and admirers and the payments are meager. Despite his significant reputation internationally, he barely manages to survive on what he makes through composing.

Beethoven’s deafness further complicates both his musical composition and his personal relationships.

One of the most moving scenes in the entire film shows him listening to a quartet playing (albeit reluctantly) his latest composition. Due to his advanced hearing loss, he can only hear the higher pitches, the lower tones appear as a mere scratching to him. The considerable abilities of Moretti, who does a fine job portraying the older Beethoven, are revealed in this scene. Unfortunately, the actor barely receives a chance to develop his character in many of the other sequences.

*Louis van Beethoven* concludes with a scene in which a profoundly disillusioned Beethoven asserts that there will “always be servants and masters.” Torn out of its historical and even biographical context, this scene can be misleading. If he was isolated and felt growing political despair toward the end of his life, this was above all a product of the climate of political reaction that prevailed in Europe after the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and the restoration of the monarchy even in France. It would take several more decades and more revolutions, and the further development of capitalism, to finally abolish feudal relations in Europe.

While this climate could not but have an impact on the composer, Beethoven remained, in fact, committed to the ideas of the Revolution and the Enlightenment until the end of his life. The sense of the inevitability of struggle and the orientation toward the betterment of humanity remained very much alive also in his late masterpieces.

In the end, Stein’s film leaves the viewer with contradictory feelings and, ultimately, disappointment and dissatisfaction. While many substantial themes in regard to the revolutionary epoch that shaped Beethoven are introduced, they are barely developed and their impact is marred by the much weaker second half of the movie. Despite these failings, we hope that the film will encourage many of its viewers to engage more deeply with Beethoven and his epoch which in its historical struggle for equality and liberty is so resonant for ours. For more on Beethoven and his enduring significance, [click here](#).



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