Beethoven and his “Ode to Joy”
- A Hero’s Journey

For Middle School and High School students
by Lisa Boyko, violist, The Cleveland Orchestra

I. Biography

Besides deafness, Beethoven faced many other personal challenges during his life. As you read the short biography, in the assignment below, you will realize that the things he struggled with are not so different from what young people struggle with today.

You’ll also see that, despite these obstacles, Beethoven worked hard and did not give up, or give in to despair. And often, people came into his life who believed in him and were able to help him.

Assignment:

A. Carefully read and study the article on Beethoven from Wikipedia.
   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ludwig_van_Beethoven
   Make a list of the difficulties that Beethoven had to overcome in his life.
   Then make a list of some difficulties you might be facing.

B. Keep combing through the article! Make a list of the people and circumstances that encouraged Beethoven and helped him through his difficulties. Then make a list of people who have helped you through difficult times!

C. Consider the “Elements of the Classic Hero’s Journey,” listed below. How does Beethoven’s life compare to this model, and what helped make his “hero’s journey” a success.

Elements of the Classic “Hero’s Journey”:

1. Call to Action/Adventure
2. Leaving Home
3. Meeting Mentors/Allies
4. Encountering Obstacles/Enemies
5. Struggling for the Goal/Prize
6. Achieving Victory
7. Returning Home with the Prize

Bronze of Beethoven, Cleveland Museum of Art
II. Literature

Beethoven’s personal life story played out against the backdrop of a very turbulent time in history. Far from staying in his own musical “ivory tower,” Beethoven was very aware of the social and political currents of the day, and had strong opinions about them. His reading of the classics, as well as contemporary writers and philosophers, informed his beliefs and provided inspiration for his music. That music was the language Beethoven used to challenge the prevailing stereotypes of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Here are a few ways that Beethoven challenged the status quo:

• **Challenged social** stereotypes by attempting to be self-employed; refusing to be treated as a servant or lower class citizen; insisting on writing music to please himself and not the elite of society.

• **Challenged musical** stereotypes by writing in a more heroic style, with in-your-face drama that can’t be relegated to “background dinner music”!

• **Challenged political** stereotypes by elevating democratic ideals and depicting freedom fighters in his programmatic music.

• **Challenged artistic** stereotypes by proclaiming through his music a message to the world about human dignity and equality, human genius and freedom.

Assignment:

A. Read the following excerpts or summaries. How might these stories and ideas have influenced late 18th/early 19th-century political, social and artistic trends in general?

B. Listen to the accompanying musical examples. Can you hear echoes of these revolutionary ideas in Beethoven’s music? Write about this!

**Roman mythology - Prometheus**

**Goethe - Egmont** (attach PDF)
More at: [gutenberg.org/files/1945/1945-h/1945-h.htm](http://gutenberg.org/files/1945/1945-h/1945-h.htm)

**Kant - Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals**
Sound Cloud link: [clevelandorchestra.com/from-the-archives/prometheusproject/symphony-no-3/](http://clevelandorchestra.com/from-the-archives/prometheusproject/symphony-no-3/)

**Schiller - Ode to Joy**
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III. History

Beethoven walked the fine line between hiding from and engaging with the problems facing his generation. He knew he’d been given a unique and specific talent which he needed to use to respond to his times, and communicate with the society that he was a part of. Consider this timeline (far from exhaustive!) of events that happened during Beethoven’s lifetime. Although he experienced the trauma of war (literally at his doorstep), he also witnessed the early stages of some amazing technological advances, as well as the beginnings of a broader franchise and greater justice for working people.

Assignment:

A. Draw a timeline and map out the events listed below.
B. Choose an event or person from this outline and do more research. Write about what you learn.

1770-1780

• Beethoven born (1770)
• Industrial revolution begins in England with invention of steam engine (James Watt) and mechanical loom
• American colonies declare independence from England
• American Revolutionary War (1775-1783)

1780-1790

• Feudal system gradually dismantled in Western Europe
• Emperor in Austria, Joseph II, supports religious tolerance and free press
• U.S. Constitution crafted and ratified (1789); George Washington elected first president
• French Revolution begins (1789)
• Improvements and new uses for the steam engine
• First human flights in hot air balloons

1790-1800

• France embroils Europe in war
• “Reign of Terror” begins with execution of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette
• Napoleon (b. 1769) rises to power, from soldier to commander-in-chief to First Consul
• Several European nations move to abolish slavery/slave trade
• Smallpox vaccine discovered and produced (Edward Jenner)
1800-1810
• Napoleon proclaimed emperor
• France defeats Austria, occupies Vienna
• Napoleonic wars continue
• British army uses newly-invented rockets (William Congreve) in battle; shells invented (Henry Shrapnel)
• Steam engine used to power boats (Robert Fulton)
• Electricity harnessed, batteries invented (Alessandro Volta)

1810-1820
• Austria makes new alliances, helps defeat Napoleon and occupy France
• America and Britain fight the War of 1812, considered “The Second War of Independence”
• Napoleon banished, returns and loses the Battle of Waterloo, banished again
• French monarchy restored
• Jews emancipated in Prussia
• Several German states receive constitutions
• Cities in Europe and America begin to install gas-lighting in their streets
• Homeopathic medicine founded (Samuel Hahnemann)
• First steamship crossing of the Atlantic

1820-1830
• South American colonies gain independence from Spain and Portugal
• Monroe Doctrine (U.S.) forbids more European colonization of the Americas
• Britain reforms penal system, allows workers to unionize
• First passenger railway systems established (Britain, France, U.S.)
• Erie Canal opens in U.S., facilitating travel and trade between Midwest and East Coast
• Early photographic inventions (Daguerre and Niepce)
• Napoleon dies (1821)
• Beethoven dies (1827)
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IV. Research and Analysis

Read through the following archival news reports from Cleveland and U.S. history. Do you think it was worth the effort and investment to found an orchestra and build a concert hall when terrible things were happening in the world? Is it worth it now, to create something beautiful and lasting, despite the stress and uncertainty we may be experiencing?

Newspaper Clippings:

1918 - The founding of The Cleveland Orchestra
1918 - World War I and Flu Epidemic
Newspaper Clippings:
1929 - Severance Hall ground-breaking
1929 - Stock Market Crash
V. Synthesis

Think about the “history” that you have witnessed personally in your lifetime, or have heard accounts of from a parent or grandparent. Sometimes it seems overwhelming, doesn’t it? But each generation has its own storms to weather, its own obstacles to overcome, its own stereotypes to challenge.

Looking back can help us to look forward!

In each generation, lessons are learned, however imperfectly. Now we have the opportunity to build and improve on those lessons. Write your thoughts on this.

What lessons are you learning in 2020?

How is the COVID-19 pandemic similar to and different from the 1918 flu epidemic?

How would you describe the political climate during this presidential election year?

What lessons would you want to tell your own grandchildren about this time in history?