

# Letters Beethoven wrote about his Deafness

Beethoven's career as a virtuoso pianist was finished when he began to experience his first symptoms of deafness. In a letter written to his friend Karl Ameda on July 1, 1801, he admitted he was experiencing signs of deafness.

"How often I wish you were here, for your Beethoven is having a miserable life, at odds with nature and its Creator, abusing the latter for leaving his creatures vulnerable to the slightest accident. My greatest faculty, my hearing, is greatly deteriorated."

Beethoven had been aware of the problem for about three years, but had not wanted to admit it to anyone else. In a letter to Wegeler, he wrote:

"How can I, a musician, say to people "I am deaf!" I shall, if I can, defy this fate, even though there will be times when I shall be the unhappiest of God's creatures ... I live only in music ... frequently working on three or four pieces simultaneously."

In a letter to Wegeler, written five months after the despairing one quoted above, it becomes clear that Beethoven saw his deafness as a challenge to fight and to overcome:

"Free me of only half this affliction and I shall be a complete, mature man. You must think of me as being as happy as it is possible to be on this earth - not unhappy. No! I cannot endure it. I will seize Fate by the throat. It will not wholly conquer me! Oh, how beautiful it is to live - and live a thousand times over!"

Now that Beethoven could no longer perform, he threw himself into composing music. He was very popular with his audiences and could make quite a lot of money off of his compositions.

In 1802 his doctor sent him to Heiligenstadt, a village outside Vienna, hoping that the calm and quiet countryside would rest his hearing. Beethoven had always loved nature and hoped this visit to the country would reawaken his passion for it. It was here that he was inspired to write his "Pastoral" Symphony no. 6. However, the joy of springtime turned to despair when it was obvious that his vacation had no effect on his hearing loss. It was in the fall of that year that he wrote his last will and testament, the *Heiligenstadt Testament* ([link to entire document](#)). He gave instructions for it to be opened only upon his death. This emotional document

reveals more about his state of mind than does the music he was writing at the time.

"O ye men who accuse me of being malevolent, stubborn and misanthropical, how ye wrong me! Ye know not the secret cause. Ever since childhood my heart and mind were disposed toward feelings of gentleness and goodwill, and I was eager to accomplish great deeds; but consider this: for six years I have been hopelessly ill, aggravated and cheated by quacks in the hope of improvement but finally compelled to face a lasting malady ... I was forced to isolate myself. I was misunderstood and rudely repulsed because I was as yet unable to say to people, "Speak louder, shout, for I am deaf" ... With joy I hasten to meet death. Despite my hard fate ... I shall wish that it had come later; but I am content, for he shall free me of constant suffering. Come then, Death, and I shall face thee with courage. Heiglstadt (sic) 6 October, 1802".

Beethoven's deafness progressed from a faint muting of sounds in 1801 to entire deafness for the last ten years of his life.