

CLASSIC *f*M

**JOHN SUCHET**  
**BEETHOVEN**

THE MAN REVEALED



Elliott & Thompson



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*Front cover:*

The bust made from the life mask by Franz Klein is  
the most accurate representation we have of Beethoven's  
features (see caption, page viii).

*Chapter*

**ONE**

*The Spaniard*

*In which a  
momentous life begins*







## IT WAS AN INAUSPICIOUS START.

We cannot be certain of the day on which Beethoven was born, since his birth certificate has not survived, and in the baptismal register his mother is given the wrong first name, Helena rather than Magdalena (possibly because both names share the diminutive *Lenchen*). The date given in the register for the baptism of the Beethoven infant Ludovicus is 17 December 1770, and the place St Remigius's Church in Bonn. It was customary for baptism to be carried out within twenty-four hours of birth; therefore it is likely that Beethoven was born on 16 December, with the lesser possibilities of the 15th in the late evening or 17th in the early hours. Given that there is a strong likelihood that the birth certificate was wilfully destroyed (as I will recount later), it is probable that we shall never know for sure the date of his birth.

More auspiciously, there is a legend that Beethoven was born with a caul, that is with part of the amniotic sac covering the face. Traditionally this carries beneficial supernatural qualities, such as protecting the individual from drowning, giving healing powers or endowing clairvoyance. He himself lent weight to the legend (or possibly created it) by writ-

ing to a publisher that he was born 'with an obligato accompaniment'. The passage in the letter, which refers to his Septet, Op. 20, is clearly written in jest: 'I cannot compose anything that is not obligato, seeing that, as a matter of fact, I came into the world with an obligato accompaniment.' I have not found any other reference to it in any source.

Beethoven was the eldest, but not the firstborn, and to say that his arrival brought unbridled joy to his parents, or even to say that he was born into a normal and loving family, would be a considerable overstatement. For a start, both sides opposed the marriage of his parents, Johann van Beethoven and Maria Magdalena Leym née Keverich. It seems the reason was the same for both families: that both were thought to be marrying beneath themselves.

To take the Beethoven family first. Ludwig van Beethoven the elder, the future composer's grandfather, had established himself as the most senior, and therefore the most respected, musician in Bonn. He had left his home town of Malines in Flanders (today Mechelen in Belgium) at the age of twenty-one and settled in Bonn, where he was given a position as bass soloist and singer in the court choir. At the age of forty-nine he was appointed *Kapellmeister*,

which put him in charge of music at court – in the chapel, concert hall, theatre, and court ballroom. This earned him a substantial salary and enormous prestige. In addition he ran a wholesale wine business on the side. It was probably not on any grand scale, but his income from the court, together with proceeds from the sale of wine, allowed him to rent two apartments, as well as cellars for storage. He was also wealthy enough to lend money to a number of people.

Ludwig's son Johann gained a position as tenor in the court choir. This brought him in a modest salary, which he supplemented by giving clavier and singing lessons to sons and daughters of well-off English and French families attached to the embassies, as well as to members of the nobility.

Father and son lived together in a large and well-furnished apartment at Rheingasse 934 (where, later, Ludwig van Beethoven was to spend many childhood years). In a later memoir, the child of the owner of the house, who remembered the Beethoven family living there, described the *Kapellmeister's* apartment as being

*beautiful and proper and well arranged, with valuables, all six rooms provided with beautiful furniture, many paintings and cupboards, a cupboard of silver service, a cupboard with fine gilded porcelain and glass, an assortment of the most beautiful linen which could be drawn through a ring, and everything from the smallest article sparkled like silver.*

But there was a cloud hanging over the Beethoven family. The *Kapellmeister's* wife, Maria Josepha Poll, became an alcoholic and had to be moved out of the family apartment to be cared for in a special home. It is not known when this action was taken, but it was almost certainly before Johann's marriage, because at



*Above* Ludwig van Beethoven (1712–73). Beethoven's grandfather was the first musician in the family. He was described as 'a big, handsome man with a longish face, broad forehead, round nose, large prominent eyes, chubby red cheeks, and a very serious demeanour'. This portrait shows him as court *Kapellmeister*. Beethoven had the portrait sent to him in Vienna and kept it for the rest of his life.

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the wedding Ludwig senior was reported to have tears streaming from his eyes, and when asked about it he replied that he was thinking about his own wedding and marriage. It is known that Maria Josepha stayed in seclusion until her death in 1775.

There is no evidence that any member of the Beethoven family ever visited Maria Josepha in the home, and although Ludwig van Beethoven was nearly five when his grandmother died, he

is not reported to have spoken about her a single time in his life, nor did he ever refer to her in correspondence. This is all the more remarkable since the elder Ludwig predeceased his wife by nearly two years and yet Beethoven spoke about his beloved grandfather and wrote about him time after time, and treasured his portrait (which stayed with him almost all his adult life and was in his apartment when he died).

Of course he took pride in his grandfather's accomplishments as a musician, and presumably felt shame at his grandmother's descent into alcoholism, but it seems as if he erased his grandmother's existence from his mind. This is more than likely due to the fact that he watched his own father descend into alcoholism, thus making the whole question of alcohol something that was not for discussion. But that did not stop Beethoven himself in later years consuming enormous quantities, as will become clear as the story progresses, to the extent that it brought about the cirrhosis of the liver that was the probable cause of his death.

Clearly the Beethoven family had a liking for alcohol – Beethoven's grandmother and father were both alcoholics, and he himself was probably a victim of it. It is tempting to suggest that ready quantities of wine in the household from the elder Ludwig's business sideline meant it was easily accessible for the family, and certainly early biographers attribute the family tendency to this. It is indeed likely that there was a generous supply of wine on the table, although the *Kapellmeister* kept his wine in storage in rented cellars, and there are no reports that he himself ever over-imbibed.

But alcohol and its effects aside, the Beethoven family was highly respected, thanks to the accomplishments of Ludwig senior, and lived in a certain amount of comfort. So when Johann announced to his father, as a *fait accompli*, that he intended marrying Maria Magdalena Leym, of

Ehrenbreitstein, the *Kapellmeister* was appalled. He made enquiries and established not only that she was a widow, but had been a housemaid. The Fischers at Rheingasse 934 heard him explode to his son, 'I never believed or expected that you would so degrade yourself!'

In fact his misgivings were largely misplaced. Maria Magdalena's family included a number of wealthy merchants, as well as court councillors and senators. Her late father, Heinrich Keverich, had been chief overseer of the kitchen at the palace of the Elector of Trier at Ehrenbreitstein. True, he was 'in service', but it was a senior position, and he was in the employ of the most powerful and prestigious local dignitary, the Prince-Elector.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, there is no evidence that Maria Magdalena was ever a housemaid.

Where Ludwig senior was correct was that Maria Magdalena was already widowed. More than that, she had experienced more sadness than a teenage woman should have had to bear. At sixteen she married a certain Johann Leym, and bore him a son. The child died in infancy, and her husband died not long after. She was thus a widow who had lost a child before she was nineteen.

Ludwig senior might have been influenced by the fact that Maria Magdalena's father had died many years before, leaving her mother as the family breadwinner, working as a cook at the court. Her mother was clearly already in fragile mental health, because she suffered a psychological breakdown soon after the marriage. She had one other surviving child, a son (four other children having died in infancy),

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<sup>1</sup> Prince-Electors were senior members of the Holy Roman Empire who had a direct role in electing the Holy Roman Emperor, head of the Habsburg Empire, whose seat was in Vienna.



and there was patently no prospect of a substantial dowry coming with the intended bride.

It seems an accumulation of unfortunate circumstances, combined with his own prejudices, turned Ludwig senior against the marriage, to such an extent that he refused to attend the ceremony ‘unless the thing were quickly over with’.

The Keverich family was apparently no more enthusiastic about the union; this, if nothing else, cemented the absence of any dowry. The evidence for this is that the wedding took place in Bonn, rather than the bride’s home town, which would have been normal, and there is no evidence that any member of Maria Magdalena’s family attended. One can imagine that any pride they might have had that she was marrying into the family of the *Kapellmeister* was undone by Johann’s documented lack of charm (admit-

*Above* Beethoven’s father, Johann van Beethoven (1739 or 1740–92), and his mother, Maria Magdalena née Keverich (1746–87). Johann was a tenor described in a court report as having ‘a very stale voice’. At school Beethoven was so unkempt his schoolmates assumed his mother was dead. These are the only known portraits of Beethoven’s parents, and cannot be verified.

tedly more evident in later years), and his clear obsession with money.

This latter attribute is evidenced by the fact that four months after the marriage a petition was sent to the Elector of Trier on Johann’s mother-in-law’s behalf, reporting that ‘through an ill-turned marriage of her only daughter up to 300 Thalers disappeared’. This is a barely concealed accusation that Johann relieved his



mother-in-law of the bulk of her savings, although it is likely the petition was deliberately written in an exaggerated way to increase Frau Keverich's plight. It is quite possible that this transfer of money, however it took place, occurred before the marriage, or at least that the process started then, which would be another reason for the Keverich family to be against the union.<sup>2</sup>

Exactly what took Johann van Beethoven up the Rhine to the fortress town of Ehrenbreitstein in the first place is not known, but one can imagine his father's frustration at the frequent absences as he pursued a young woman with an unenviable history before she was out of her teens from another town a good thirty-five miles away. With both families set against the marriage, we can assume that the wedding of the couple who were to be the parents of Ludwig van Beethoven was a small and one-sided affair, attended reluctantly by Ludwig senior, whose tears at his own memories might have hardened his heart still further.

The marriage took place in Bonn on 12 November 1767, and it would not be long before more heartache ensued, first for Maria Magdalena and then for both her and her husband. After the marriage Johann moved out of the large well-appointed apartment he had shared with his father, and rented a small apartment at the back of a building in the Bonngasse for himself and his wife. At the same time his

mother-in-law's already precarious mental health went into sharp decline. The same petition that cited the loss of her savings stated that she had begun to live a life of such penitence that she stopped eating and could not be expected to live long. Sometimes, it reported, she lay outside the church all night in the bitterest cold, wind, and rain. She died less than a year after her daughter's marriage, and it must be the case that Maria Magdalena felt considerable guilt that her choice of husband, not to mention her departure from her home town, had caused her mother so much distress.

In the weeks before her mother's death, Maria Magdalena would have realised that she was pregnant. One can only imagine what the knowledge that her mother would never see her grandchild would have done to Maria Magdalena's already damaged emotions.

Johann and Maria Magdalena van Beethoven's first child was baptised Ludwig Maria on 2 April 1769. One can envision *Kapellmeister* Beethoven's joy at the arrival of his first grandchild, augmented by the couple's decision to choose him as godfather, meaning that the child carried his name. For the couple, too, the arrival of a son after almost a year and a half of marriage must have been a cause of enormous family celebration, and one can imagine the stern grandfather melting towards the daughter-in-law he had not wanted to see become a member of the Beethoven family.

The infant Ludwig Maria van Beethoven died within a week of baptism. Even in an era when infant death was common, the loss of a child who carried so much hope for reconciliation must have been a catastrophe for the family. For Maria Magdalena it meant that she had been widowed and had lost two infants before she was twenty-three years of age.

Approximately a year later she fell pregnant again. As the months passed she must have

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<sup>2</sup> In a bizarre turn of events almost a decade later, Johann and Maria Magdalena van Beethoven took out a suit against the Ehrenbreitstein court bailiff, who was related by marriage to Maria Magdalena and who was the guardian of her mother's estate, accusing him of stealing the old lady's savings. The suit was thrown out.



been overwhelmed with trepidation about the child's survival. As on the previous two occasions she safely gave birth, and on 17 December 1770 the infant was baptised Ludwig after his grandfather, who was once again godfather. Like his grandfather, he was given the sole Christian name of Ludwig.

There were now two Ludwig van Beethovens in the family, and as each day passed the child grew stronger. Correspondingly there occurred a remarkable change in the demeanour of the elder Ludwig. He began to be drawn towards his daughter-in-law and soon the two had established a close and loving relationship. Unfortunately this was due at least partly to a shared disappointment in Johann.

As a boy Johann van Beethoven had shown considerable musical talent, to the extent that his father removed him from school and undertook his musical training himself (a pattern that was to be repeated when Johann, in turn, removed his son Ludwig from school to concentrate on music). He sang in

*Above* 'In this house Beethoven was born on 17th December 1770.' He was almost certainly born on 16 December, and baptised the following day. We will probably never know for certain on which day Beethoven was born, since his birth certificate has not survived.

*Right* The house at no. 515 Bonngasse, owned by the lacemaker Clasen. The Beethoven family rented rooms at the back on the first floor. In one of these Beethoven was born. The house is now a museum dedicated to Beethoven, with artefacts including his last piano.

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the court chapel both as boy treble and after his voice had broken, and at the age of twenty-four, being proficient in singing as well as on the clavier and violin, he obtained salaried employment.

Three years later Johann was married, and things started to go downhill almost immediately. It is evident that he developed a taste for





alcohol. He had no shortage of drinking companions. The fish dealer Klein lived across the street, and the two men would lounge in the window making faces at each other, prior to a night's drinking. The Fischers reported that Johann van Beethoven would spend many an evening in the tavern, often not arriving home until the middle of the night.

It cannot have helped that soon after Johann moved into his first marital home his father followed, taking an apartment just a few doors away in the same street. Ludwig van Beethoven senior was clearly a dominant, even domineering, figure, and was intolerant of his son's behaviour. He mocked him continuously. 'Johann der Läufer,' he called him. 'Johann the sprinter. Keep running, keep running. You will some day run to your final destination.'

It can't have been easy living up to his father's expectations, but whether his own inadequacies preceded his father's intolerance, or the other way around, it's impossible to say. Similarly, whether his penchant for alcohol was a cause of his father's disappointment in him, or a form of escapism from it, must also remain a matter for conjecture.

What is beyond doubt is that an event that shook the Beethoven family to its foundations offered Johann the opportunity to turn his life round. On Christmas Eve 1773 *Kapellmeister* Beethoven, who had suffered a stroke earlier in the year, died at the age of sixty-one. Johann saw himself as the natural successor and the next holder of the highest musical position in Bonn.

Unfortunately for him, he was unsuited for it in every respect. His dissolute habits were well known and unfitting to such a high office at court. There had also been a noticeable deterioration in his vocal skills, no doubt caused by alcohol, tobacco, and late nights. His skills on clavier and violin were not exceptional, and

he had no compositions to his name, unlike other candidates for the office.

It is dangerous to apply modern-day sensibilities to events of more than two centuries ago, but certainly a reading of Johann's petition for the job as *Kapellmeister* suggests a confused, even negative, attitude:

*Will your Electoral Grace be pleased to hear that my father has passed away from this world, to whom it was granted to serve His Electoral Grace(s) for 42 years, as Kapellmeister with great honour, whose position I have been found capable of filling, but nevertheless I would not venture to offer my capacity to Your Electoral Grace, but since the death of my father has left me in needy circumstances, my salary not sufficing, I am compelled to draw on the savings of my father ... Your Electoral Grace is therefore humbly implored to make an allowance from the 400 rth now saved for an increase of my salary ... [my italics]*

It hardly reads like an appropriate job application, seeming on the one hand to take it for granted that the job is his, and on the other pleading for a salary increase. In any event he did not get the job. There was only one *Kapellmeister* Beethoven.



**OF CRUCIAL IMPORTANCE** to the future development of his son is that these traumatic events were witnessed by the infant Ludwig van Beethoven. How much comprehension a child of three can have is impossible to determine, particularly at such a distance in time. But, with the proviso that this is largely conjecture, we might assume the infant would at least pick up signs of distress in his mother, and probably too be aware that it is his father's behaviour that is causing it.

Ludwig was one week past his third birthday when his grandfather died, and of this at least we can be sure beyond any doubt: the loss rocked him profoundly, and it is something he never truly came to terms with. He idolised – and idealised – his grandfather and spoke highly of him for the rest of his life. Certainly when his own musical talents began to emerge, he would quickly have become aware of his grandfather’s considerable achievements, at the same time no doubt witnessing the decline in his father’s.

*Johann drove  
his son hard in the  
quest to develop his  
musical talent*



Exactly how early Ludwig’s musical talents began to emerge is not known, but by the age of four he was being taught clavier and violin by his father, and so some special talent in the child must by then have been evident. There is considerable anecdotal evidence that Johann drove Ludwig hard, and more than one witness reports seeing the small boy standing on a footstool in front of the clavier in tears. Others reported seeing the father using physical violence, even shutting the child up in the cellar. These accounts were given many years after the event, by which time Beethoven had become famous throughout Europe, so it is possible some exaggeration had crept in. We can, though, be relatively sure that at the very least Johann van Beethoven drove his son hard in the quest to develop his musical talent.

By 1776 Johann van Beethoven had moved his family back into the Fischer house on the

Rheingasse, where he had lived with his father before marriage, this time into a spacious apartment on the second floor. There were to be later moves, but this was the house in which Ludwig van Beethoven spent the greater part of his youth, and where he felt most at home.

On 26 March 1778 there occurred a remarkable event in the early life of Ludwig van Beethoven, one that has given rise to much myth and speculation surrounding the actions of his father.

Johann staged a public concert featuring one of his singing pupils, and his son Ludwig. Here is the advertisement he put in the newspaper:

*Today, 26 March 1778, in the musical concert room in the Sternengasse, the Electoral Court Tenorist, Beethoven, will have the honour to produce ... his little son of six years, [who will perform] various clavier concertos and trios ... Tickets may be had at the Akademiesaal ...*

Do you spot the mistake, and, more importantly, is it deliberate? In March 1778 Ludwig van Beethoven was seven years and three months old. So why might Johann van Beethoven, on an important occasion such as this, have stated his son’s age incorrectly?

There are two possible explanations, which I shall call the ‘conspiracy theory’ and the ‘kind theory’. The conspiracy theory runs like this. Johann van Beethoven deliberately falsified his son’s age because he wanted to make him appear younger than he was. This would make his musical skills all the more impressive, leading – Johann hoped – to favourable comparisons with the boy Mozart. It was well known that Mozart’s father had taken him on tour as a child, to wide acclaim and the amassing of substantial payments. The fact that Ludwig’s birth certificate had disappeared was no doubt because Johann had deliberately destroyed the evidence.



The kind theory absolves Johann from deliberate falsification. It points out that there was a general laxity in keeping family records at that time, that on no other known occasion did Johann make an error in his son's age, and that his own birth certificate had vanished, as well as his son's, pointing to his general carelessness with paperwork. On this occasion he simply made a mistake.

Knowing what we know of Johann van Beethoven, it is hard to be charitable, particularly in the light of the deliberate dishonesty that was to come a few years later. It is clear that he recognised his son's remarkable talent very early, and the fact that he put him in front of a paying audience at such a tender age is evidence of his intention to earn money through him. We know that the Beethoven family was short of funds from Johann's impassioned plea to the Elector for an increase in salary. Even if he exaggerated the poverty, which is likely, it is still beyond doubt that they were not flush, and that this situation was compounded by Johann's profligate lifestyle.

I subscribe to the conspiracy theory. Is it really likely that a father would not know how old his oldest son was? If he was in doubt, wouldn't he have checked with his wife? Or if he didn't want to do that, he could have left the age out of the advertisement altogether. I think it is beyond reasonable doubt that Johann van Beethoven deliberately falsified Ludwig's age to impress the audience all the more with his talent.

Future events lend weight to this. Beethoven appeared confused about his age for much of his life. His second published work (of which more later) contains the words on the title page, 'composed by Ludwig van Beethoven, aged eleven years'. It was 1783, and he was in fact twelve. Well into adulthood the confusion remained. In his twenties there is evidence that he believed he was two years *older* than he actu-

ally was. In his mid-thirties he clearly believed he was two years *younger* than he was. Living in Vienna, he asked friends back in Bonn to send him copies of his baptismal certificate, since he was considering marriage. When the first copy arrived, he refused to accept the date, claiming his friend had mistaken him for his elder brother Ludwig, who had died at a week old. The second copy also failed to convince him – he wrote '1772' on the back of it. This in spite of the fact that he must surely have surmised that if he really had been born in 1772, just one year before his beloved grandfather died, he would have had no memories of him at all.

Was he confused, delusional, or just not interested in the facts? Or did his father's falsification so affect him that he could never quite be confident of his age? We do not know the answer.

Rather more importantly for musical history, we have no idea of how that performance in the Sternengasse concert room went. We do not know what music the young Ludwig played, nor do we have any idea of whether it was successful or not, because no one wrote it up.

There is no evidence that Johann put on any more public performances, which suggests maybe that the receipts did not justify the effort. Soon after that recital, Johann did the best thing he could possibly do for his son: he put him into school. But it was not long before he then did the worst thing possible: he took him out of school to concentrate solely on music. This was in 1780 or 1781, when Ludwig was around ten years of age. For the rest of his life he suffered from an inadequate education. His handwriting was close to illegible, his punctuation and spelling poor, and he was useless with figures – there is evidence later on that he could not add up his household bills. In later life his signatures were often so erratic that future musicologists had trouble deciding whether some were authentic.