the play

Why would Ludwig van Beethoven, the world’s greatest composer, spend three years of his life composing variations on a mediocre waltz by publisher Anton Diabelli? This question drives Beethoven scholar Katherine all the way to the composer’s home in Bonn, Germany in pursuit of answers. Like Beethoven, Katherine develops an all-consuming fascination with the waltz, even in the face of her encroaching ALS. Katherine’s disease and her obsession put a strain on her relationship with her daughter Clara, who follows her to Bonn and begins to fall in love with Katherine’s nurse, Mike. As Katherine’s disease progresses and Beethoven slowly goes deaf, their stories intertwine in an intricate dance of love, loss, and obsession.

composer: someone who writes music

ALS: a nerve-weakening disease, see “Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis” feature.
Katherine — A **musicologist** whose struggle with ALS and quest to find answers about Beethoven’s 33 variations drives the play. “Beethoven is saying: Look at what Diabelli has made—how trivial, how inept, how ordinary, and now see what the great Beethoven can make with it. I will make something out of nothing.”

Beethoven — One of the greatest composers in history who becomes obsessed with a mediocre waltz by Diabelli and composes 33 variations on it as he slowly goes deaf. “What can I do? The waltz still has material to offer me. Just when you think you’ve extracted all it can give, you realize you’re wrong, there’s more in it.”

Antonio Diabelli — A music publisher and amateur composer who finds Beethoven’s obsession with his waltz simultaneously flattering and frustrating. “Never did I think that my humble waltz would inspire such a great masterpiece. This is without a doubt the greatest set of variations ever written.”

Anton Schindler — Friend of Beethoven who devotes himself to “the master” and serves as a go-between for him and Diabelli. “You should be working on the Missa, on the 9th. Why this trifle of a waltz? You’ve already composed 12 variations on it.”

Clara — Katherine’s daughter, who struggles to spend time with her mother and provide her with care in the face of her encroaching illness. “Great. One of the most articulate people I’ve ever met reduced to winks and nods.”

**Activity:** Do you have any idols you dream of meeting? What would you do if you met them? What do you think they would say about you?

Moisés Kaufman is a playwright and director. In collaboration with Tectonic Theater Project, he wrote and produced *The Laramie Project*, one of the most-performed plays of recent times. He also crafted *Gross Indecency: The Trials of Oscar Wilde*, winner of numerous awards, including the Outer Critics’ Circle Award for Best Off-Broadway Play. He has been nominated for both an *Emmy* and a *Tony* for his writing and directing.

- **Emmy**: awards given to the best television programs
- **Tony**: awards given to the best productions on Broadway

**AMYOTROPHIC LATERAL SCLEROSIS (ALS)**

Katherine has **Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS)**, otherwise known as Lou Gehrig’s disease.

People with ALS gradually lose control of their bodily functions as their motor neurons degenerate, leading to muscle death. Motor neurons control muscles by transmitting messages to them from the central nervous system. When they decay, the muscles lose their connection to the “control center” in the brain and cease to function voluntarily. Since they no longer receive the information from the brain that enables them to survive and perform tasks, the muscles begin to atrophy, or decay. Indeed, the word “amyotrophic” comes from Greek roots meaning “no muscle nourishment.”

In the script, Mike describes ALS as an “orphan disease”—so called because pharmaceutical companies are not producing drugs to treat it. This is because of the relatively small number of people afflicted with ALS; according to the ALS Association, up to 30,000 people have ALS at any given time. As a basis of comparison, according to the American Cancer Society, over 1,400,000 people had cancer in 2007.
Although he was deaf, Beethoven could communicate by using conversation books. People who wanted to talk to him would write down parts of the conversation for him to read. Beethoven would then respond out loud. These books have given us valuable insights into at least one half of Beethoven’s daily conversations—unfortunately, not Beethoven’s half.

Although he was not a child prodigy like Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven displayed tremendous musical ability from an early age. Beethoven was only 19 when his father died and he became the head of the family, but his talent had already been recognized by famous musicians across Europe—including Mozart himself.

By the end of the 1790s, Beethoven’s music had become very popular and he was able to support himself without patronage from Vienna’s aristocracy. However, in 1797 Beethoven’s hearing started to decline; by 1822, it was gone altogether.

But Beethoven let nothing stand between him and his music. He composed some of his most famous works—including the 9th Symphony with its famous “Ode to Joy”—when he was completely deaf. Such passion enabled Beethoven to become one of the greatest composers of all time.

Although Beethoven has been dead for almost 200 years, his music is still alive and well, especially at the movies. These are just a few of the films where it appears:

- Bill & Ted’s Excellent Adventure (“Fur Elise”)
- Ace Ventura: Pet Detective (9th Symphony)
- Austin Powers in Goldmember (5th Symphony, 1st movement)
- Dead Poets’ Society (9th Symphony, 4th movement)

You have probably heard Beethoven’s music without even knowing it! People often hum Beethoven’s 5th Symphony, 1st movement (dun dun dun DUN) in tense situations, and the famous choral “Ode to Joy” from his 9th Symphony is used constantly in the media, from car commercials to the Die Hard trailer.

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**BEETHOVEN AT THE MOVIES**

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- Ace Ventura: Pet Detective (9th Symphony)
- Austin Powers in Goldmember (5th Symphony, 1st movement)
- Dead Poets’ Society (9th Symphony, 4th movement)

**Activity:** Write and perform your own story, using Beethoven’s music as a soundtrack. How does the music change the impact of your scene? Try telling different stories using the same piece of music.

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PLAY PREMIERES AND MUSIC PREMIERES

33 Variations is a new play having its first performance at Arena Stage. Performing a new play and performing a new piece of music have a lot in common.

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<th>New Play</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Directed By</td>
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<td>Crafted In Collaboration</td>
<td>Musicians, often an orchestra</td>
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<td>Afterwards, may be</td>
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Musical premieres, like play premieres, require vast amounts of collaboration. In Beethoven’s day, there were no professional orchestras, although ensembles of performers were associated with various performance halls. When he wanted to put on his 9th Symphony, he had to hire dozens of musicians, engage a venue, and pay to have people write out copies of the music—there were no photocopi- ers either! This meant that many of the people who sat down to play his 9th Symphony had never even played together before. Not to mention that Beethoven had to pay for the whole show out of his own pocket!

Activity: As a team, collaborate on a short scene or song, delegating each task to a different person or small group—for example, a writer, director, and actors. Notice how the different parts of your team work together to produce a final product that is the combination of all your artistic visions!

WICKED WALTZING

“Hands promiscuously applied, Round the slight waist, or down the glowing side.”

—Lord Byron, The Waltz (Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations, 10th Edition)

At the beginning of the 19th century, waltzing was banned at dances of the aristocracy in many European countries. Only after 1815, when many prominent aristocrats were dancing it publicly, did the waltz begin to be accepted. At the time Beethoven wrote his variations on Diabelli’s waltz, the dance was still taboo. In fact, a full century after Beethoven composed his variations, the humorist H. L. Mencken observed: “The waltz never quite goes out of fashion. . . . It is sneaking, insidious, disarming, lovely. . . . The waltz, in fact, is magnificently improper. . . . There is something about a waltz that is irresistible.”

taboo: forbidden by an unspoken social code

Additional Resources

Books:
The Age of Mozart and Beethoven by Giorgio Pestelli
The World’s Great Men of Music by Harriette Brower
The Cambridge Companion to Beethoven ed. Glenn Stanley
On the web: www.alsa.org The ALS association.

Movies:
Immortal Beloved
Amadeus
Plays:
Gross Indecency
The Laramie Project
Amadeus

Helpful Hints for Theater Audiences

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive at least 30 minutes early.
- Visit the restroom before the show starts.
- Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers, and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.
- Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.
- Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!
- Do not talk, whisper, sing, or hum.
- Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.
- Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.
- Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.
- Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.

Enjoy the show!