

arena's page

student study guide

contents

- The Play
- Meet the Playwright
- Characters at a Glance
- Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS)
- Beethoven: A Biography
- Composing Music
- Play Premieres and Music Premieres
- Additional Resources

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.



"I have never thought of writing for reputation and honor.

What I have in my heart must come out; that is the reason why I compose."

—Ludwig van Beethoven

33 VARIATIONS

August 30 – September 30, 2007

Now playing in the Kreeger

Written and directed by Moisés Kaufman

MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



Moisés Kaufman

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

CHARACTERS AT A GLANCE



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."

■ **musicologist:** someone who studies music

a! *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?*

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. ●

"Doctors...all say the same thing: "Stay the course. Stay the course." What course? There's no medicines, no treatment, no nothing." —Clara, 33 Variations

"All this from a man who couldn't dance." –Katherine, 33 Variations

BEETHOVEN: A BIOGRAPHY



Beethoven as a young man. This was before he developed the unruly hair that would become his trademark. When this picture was painted, Beethoven was already supporting his family by writing music.



Left: Young Ludwig van Beethoven idolized Mozart. His dream of one day meeting his idol in person came true when he was 17. Beethoven visited Vienna, the music capital of Europe, and performed for Mozart. Mozart was

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. ●

▣ **patronage:** support for an artist, often financial

a! *Activity: What are your passions? What if you had to overcome an obstacle like Beethoven's? Would you give up?*

tremendously impressed by the young pianist, reportedly saying, "Watch out for that boy. One day he will give the world something to talk about." Beethoven began taking lessons with him but was forced to leave Vienna by his mother's illness.

BEETHOVEN AT THE MOVIES

Even though 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.

a! *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.*

ALTHOUGH HE WAS DEAF, Beethoven could communicate by using conversation books. People who wanted to talk to him would write down their 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.

COMPOSING MUSIC

KEY TERMS:

Theme: a musical figure that forms the "backbone" of a given composition. Themes are usually simple melodic statements.

Variations: reworkings of the theme over the course of the piece, often with more complex harmonies and rhythmic variations.

Waltz: a dance in 3/4 time (three beats per measure of music). Examples of waltzes and songs in waltz form include "The Blue Danube" by Strauss (who wrote a lot of waltzes) and "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning!" from *Oklahoma*. Diabelli's theme is a waltz.

Minuet: a light, frolicsome dance in waltz time. A minuet closes the series of variations on Diabelli's waltz. ●

a! *Activity: Write some variations of your own, using the tune of a familiar waltz like "Edelweiss" from The Sound of Music as your theme. Perform them for your class.*

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.

	New Play	New Composition
Creator	Playwright	Composer
Personnel	Actors	Musicians, often an orchestra
Directed By	Director	Conductor
Crafted In Collaboration With	Dramaturg	Sometimes, an editor
Afterwards, may be	Published	Published
Other Needs	Lights, Sound, Set and Costumes	Lights, Sound
Medium	Words	Music

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 photocopiers 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! ●

a! *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



above: *Waltzing*, as this sheet music cover from the early 20th century shows, was viewed as a highly erotic, intimate dance. The physical proximity of the dancers was believed to lead to immorality.

"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!



1101 Sixth Street, SW
Washington, DC 20024
Phone: (202) 554-9066
Fax: (202) 488-4056

Community Engagement
Phone: (202) 234-5782
Fax: (202) 797-1043

Written by Alexandra Petri
Edited by Rebecca Campana

Illustration by Jody Hewgill

Visit www.arenastage.org for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.