



# If you knew Beethoven like he did...

Play attempts to dispel the notion of a bitter and grumpy composer

By Kathleen Allen  
ARIZONA DAILY STAR

**L**udwig van Beethoven was — is — an imposing figure. He was deaf, yet wrote the most sublime music ever composed.

His life, full of struggles and dark moments, was punctuated by symphonies and sonatas that make the spirit soar.

It's no wonder that Hershey Felder decided to make Beethoven the first movement in what he has called his "Composer Sonata." Arizona Theatre Company brings Felder's "Beethoven, As I Knew Him" to the Temple of Music and Art next week. The Temple has already seen the other two movements, "Monsieur Chopin" and "George Gershwin Alone."

Felder doesn't portray the composer, as he did in the other movements, though he does play some of the composer's great music.

"I kept looking to Beethoven and found that wasn't the way to go," said Felder, speaking by phone from his Paris home.

"How can I best tell a story that gives a sense of Beethoven, a sense of his life, yet doesn't try to be him? The answer was someone who knew him."

Then he came across Gerhard von Bruening's book "Aus dem Schwarzspanierhaus" (From the House of the Black Spaniard).

Von Bruening was the son of Beethoven's best friend. In the last two years of the ailing composer's life, young von Bruening sat beside Beethoven, who lived in a one-time monastery that had been converted to flats.

Decades after Beethoven's death, von Bruening wrote the memoir that served as Felder's inspiration.

"In 1870, the 100th anniversary of Beethoven's birth, von Bruening received an invitation to the celebration," said Felder.

"He discovers he was the last person alive to know Beethoven. He is compelled by this to write of Beethoven's last two years."

So, Felder takes on the persona of von Bruening, talking about the master.

"I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do until I came across what I was supposed to do," Felder said about the moment that brought writing his Beethoven movement to clarity.



CRAIG SCHWARTZ / COURTESY OF ATC

Hershey Felder plays Gerhard von Bruening, the son of Beethoven's best friend, in "Beethoven, As I Knew Him."

Beethoven's music is genius, and all the more stunning that he wrote much of it while he was deaf.

"He said he would much prefer to take his own life," Felder said about the composer. "Going deaf was driving him mad. But every time he got an artistic idea, he had to get it out. 'If not for my art,' he said, 'I would have taken my own life!'"

While much has been written about how grumpy Beethoven was, Felder found another side of the man.

"He was nice, he was gentle, he was generous," said Felder.

"He actually cared. Listen to some of his delicate music, the heartbreaking movements... He wasn't an arrogant son of a gun. He was a gentle soul. He just so wanted to be loved!"

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## PREVIEW

"Beethoven, As I Knew Him"

• **Presented by:** Arizona Theatre Company.

• **Written by and starring:** Hershey Felder.

• **Director:** Joel Zwick.

• **When:** Previews are 7:30 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday; opening is 7:30 p.m. next Friday. Continues through April 27.

• **Where:** Temple of Music and Art, 330 S. Scott Ave.

• **Tickets:** \$31-\$54.

• **Reservations/information:**

622-2823.

• **Running time:** About 2 hours, with no intermission.

## Also...

Hershey Felder in Concert: The American Songbook Singalong.

• **When:** 2 and 7:30 p.m. April 30; 7:30 p.m. May 1; 2 and 8 p.m. May 2; 2 p.m. May 3.

• **Where:** Temple of Music and Art.

• **Tickets:** \$31-\$54.

• **Reservations/information:** 622-2823.