

What do Beethoven and Lead Have in Common?



In 1827, Ludwig van Beethoven died at the age of 56.

He suffered many ailments in his short life - and these included stomach cramps, deafness, dramatic mood swings and towering rages his whole adult life, amongst others.






25 years before his death, he wrote a letter to his brothers with the following request:

After my death, if Dr. Schmidt is still alive, ask him in my name to discover my disease, and attach this written document to his account of my illness... (HRI, 2000).

Recent testing of Beethoven's hair and skull fragments revealed that indeed the culprit was lead.

How did this happen?

Here are some of the possible sources of his lead exposure:

-  Fish from a river downstream from lead mines;
-  Wine from his leaded pewter goblet;
-  A lifetime of medical treatments (which at that time were often sweetened with sugar of lead);
-  Holding a leaded pencil in his mouth and resting the other end on the piano so he could "hear" the sound vibrations; and
-  Plus all the usual lead sources of his era, lead-based sweeteners in wine, lead pewter dinnerware and utensils, in the leading of windows, in candles, in water pipes, in paint.

Beethoven also used his saliva-wetted finger to make beautiful noises on the mechanically-spinning different sized lead crystal bowl (possibly also lead-painted) rims of a musical instrument he loved to play called the armonica, before his symptoms began.

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