

“My harmony linked to yours “

Beethoven and Goethe

**An Exhibition of the Beethoven Haus and the
Foundation Weimar Classic
Goethe- and Schiller-Archive**

Beethoven Haus, Bonn, 27.9. - 5.12.1999

Beethoven and Goethe - their encounter is one of the most fascinating moments in Beethoven's biography. It is characterized by interest, but reservation, on the part of Goethe and by an intense attempt to come to terms with Goethe on Beethoven's part. A close and lasting personal relationship or artistic collaboration was never to develop out of it. The first and last time they ever met, in the summer of 1812 at the Bohemian baths, deep irritations did not fail to surface.

Beethoven had already read and studied Goethe's works intensively during his youth in Bonn, long before their first personal encounter. His first Goethe settings were produced around 1790. Beethoven announced his Music to Egmont in a first letter to the poet in the spring of 1811 with the following words: "I am only able to approach you with the greatest veneration [and] with an inexpressably deep feeling for your glorious creations." He had already set 18 texts by Goethe, two others were to follow. Goethe therefore occupies a privileged position in Beethoven's vocal works.

The collections of the Beethoven Haus and the Goethe - Schiller Archives contain almost all the known documentary material on the topic of Beethoven and Goethe. The exhibition can therefore present for the first time a comprehensive picture of Beethoven as seen by Goethe and Goethe as seen by Beethoven. Its special attraction lies in the direct juxtaposition of Goethe's manuscript poems and the pertinent musical manuscripts by Beethoven.

The Special Exhibition begins in Room 12 (ground floor, on the left):

Songs

Case 1: Goethe wrote the "Mailed" (May Song) in May of 1771, and Beethoven probably set it in 1795. The copy exhibited here comes from the poet's own music collection. The Song with Six Variations for Piano four hands, "Ich denke dein", was composed by Beethoven for his two piano students, Josephine Deym and her sister, Therese Brunswick, who were both close to him. The first edition shown here is the earliest of his Goethe settings to appear in print. Goethe's journal from the year 1807 contains the first mention of Beethoven: A scene by Beethoven - probably his Scene and Aria "Ah! Perfido" - was sung at a house concert in the poet's home.

Case 2: Most of the songs to texts by Goethe were written between 1808 and 1810. Beethoven began with not one but four settings of Mignon's song from Wilhelm Meister. On the title page of the autograph he wrote, "I didn't have time for one good one, thus several attempts." The first setting appeared in the newly founded magazine Prometheus. In his setting of Mignon's song "Kennst du das Land", Op. 75, No. 1, Beethoven adhered very closely to Goethe's description: Mignon, who is accompanying herself on a zither, "began every verse solemnly and splendidly, as if she wanted to call attention to something strange, as if she wanted to express something important." Beethoven studied the text on the basis of the Berlin edition of 1795. The sketch leaf demonstrates his efforts to find the proper meter and a forceful declamation. In the spring of 1810 he recommended Wilhelm Meister to Therese Malfatti, whom he hoped at the time to be able to marry. He induced her to write out his song, but then completed her copy, which was not quite finished, himself.

Case 3: "Neue Liebe, neues Leben" ("New Love, New Life") was written by Goethe during his last year in Frankfurt. He had become engaged at the time to Lili

Schönemann, the daughter of a Frankfurt banker. The connection was soon broken off, however. The original manuscript shown here, a very carefully written manuscript collection of Goethe's early poems, served as the printer's copy for the first edition, which appeared in 1775. Beethoven set the poem first in 1798. Eleven years later he revised it. He created here one of his most important songs with piano accompaniment, capturing in music the same ambivalent spirit, moving between rapture and exaggeration, which was inherent in the poem. The composer had a copy of the song made for Bettina Brentano, who was later to be the main force behind the eventual meeting of Goethe and Beethoven. On the wall an impressive portrait study of Bettina and of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy.

Continuation of the Special Exhibition in Room 7 on the second floor

Case 4: The focus of the exhibition is the "Flohlied" ("Flea Song"), Op. 75, No. 3. The so-called Göchhausen copy is to be seen, the earliest preserved single source of Goethe's Urfaust. The "Flohlied" in this early version is written in the "Hildebrand strophe" of the late medieval heroic epic. For his 1809 setting Beethoven used a partial edition of Faust which had been published in Leipzig by Göschen in 1790. He had first studied the text in Bonn. Only a few years later he wrote down an extensive draft. The song is truly conceived as incidental music to the play. Beethoven finished work on it finally in 1809. The autograph was recently purchased by the Beethoven Haus and is now being displayed publicly for the first time since 1890. Beethoven relished the text to the fullest. Mephisto as a ballad singer and the choir of lusty revellers in Auerbach's Cellar tell the grotesque story of the king, the flea and the tormented courtiers and make their comments upon it. In the last measures of the piano postlude, the pianist himself meets the flea through an unusual fingering prescribed by the composer.

Case 5: In 1823 Beethoven set as a canon the first two lines of "Edel sei der Mensch, hilfreich und gut" ("Noble be man,

helpful and good”) from Goethe’s hymn “Das Göttliche” (“The Godlike”) written in 1782. The conversation book displayed here contains an entry which refers to an earlier setting which Beethoven had written in Baroness Caecilie von Eskele’s album.

Case 6: shows the living masks of both Goethe and Beethoven. The latter, which was taken in the year that they met personally, belonged to Goethe.

Egmont

Case 7, 8 and 9: Beethoven studied Goethe’s Egmont very intensively. Goethe had asked his “house composer”, Philipp Christoph Keyser, to compose a symphony (overture), musical entr’actes, the songs and some parts of the fifth act which require music. Beethoven wrote his dramatic music in the years 1809/10. Exhibited here are sketches for “Kennst du das Land” and “Freudvoll und leidvoll”, notes to the entr’actes III and IV as well as a complete copy of the score with numerous entries by the composer. In August 1810, he wrote his Leipzig publisher that he had written the music “purely out of love for the poet.” In April 1811 Beethoven declared his deep admiration for the poet and announced to him the imminent arrival of his composition. Beethoven’s letter was delivered by his friend, Franz Oliva. On June 25, 1811 Goethe thanked Beethoven with similar words of appreciation in the only letter he ever wrote to him. On February 20, 1812, Friedrich von Boyneburg performed Beethoven’s Egmont music on the piano for Goethe at his house am Frauenplan. At that point in time the music had already appeared in several printed editions. Goethe’s friend and musical advisor, Carl Friedrich Zelter, spoke appreciatively - although without true comprehension - about Beethoven’s dramatic music. In 1819 Friedrich Mosengeil had written a prologue and intermediate texts linking the nine sections of Beethoven’s music. They were supposed to help secure for it the recognition it deserved and to aid in its dissemination as an independent piece. Goethe praised Mosengeil’s work.

Personal Encounter

Case 10 and 11: Beethoven and Goethe met in 1812 while taking the waters at the Bohemian baths: on July 19, 20, 21 and 23 in Teplitz and on September 8 in Carlsbad. Goethe noted these meetings in his journal. The personal impression which each of them took away was ambivalent: “I have seen no artist who was more composed, more energetic, more fervent. I comprehend very well how strange he must seem to the world,” Goethe wrote to his wife, Christiane, after the first encounter. Beethoven’s pianistic skills impressed him. In comments to Zelter also, Goethe stated that Beethoven’s talent had astonished him. (The draft of a coat of arms for Zelter displayed here is from Goethe himself.) Zelter, himself a productive composer, answered that he admired Beethoven “with alarm.” Beethoven’s judgement, on the other hand, was that “Goethe is much too cozy in the court air, more than is seemly for a poet.”

Continuation in Room 8 on the third floor:

Case 12: In 1810 Beethoven set Goethe’s “Wonne der Wehmut” (“Delight of Melancholy”). It exists in two versions. The fascinating autograph of the first version - for Beethoven a typical working manuscript, written impetuously - contains numerous corrections and additions. The manuscript was in Goethe’s possession. When Felix Mendelssohn visited the poet for the first time in Weimar in 1821 at the age of 12, he supposedly played the song at Goethe’s request from this manuscript - truly not easy to read - on Goethe’s new Hammerklavier, an instrument built by Beethoven’s friend, Nannette Streicher. The copy lying next to the autograph was probably written by Mendelssohn in 1830. Beethoven included his second setting of “Wonne der Wehmut” as number 1 of the “Three Songs”, Op. 83. The first edition on display here is dedicated to Antonie Brentano. “Mit einem gemahlten Band” (“With a Painted Ribbon”), the last song included in Op. 83, is shown here in Goethe’s own handwriting.

The Final Measures

Case 13: After their personal meeting Beethoven set texts by Goethe two other times: “Meeresstille und Glückliche Fahrt” (“Quiet Seas and Safe Journey”) for choir and orchestra, Op. 112 (to be seen is a copy of the score with numerous corrections and interesting performance instructions by Beethoven). Beethoven sent a first edition to the poet in May of 1822. Goethe noted it in his journal and in a book list. The “Bundeslied” appeared in print in 1825 as Op. 122. Beethoven’s opera Fidelio was performed in the Weimar Court Theater on September 4, 1816, during the last season in which Goethe was the theater’s director.

Case 14: Zelter reports his amusing encounter with Beethoven in the summer of 1819 in a manuscript which Goethe’s secretary wrote down at the poet’s behest. In 1823 Beethoven turned one last time to Goethe and Zelter: He asked them to mediate for him and persuade the Grand Duke, resp. the Berlin Singakademie and the Prussian King to subscribe to the Missa Solemnis.

The Echo

Room 9

Case 15: Franz Liszt represents a bridge between Weimar and Bonn. Liszt gained lasting recognition for his role in the creation of the Beethoven monument on the Münsterplatz in Bonn. As a token of gratitude he was awarded a double signet in 1845. On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Beethoven’s birth, Liszt composed his second Beethoven cantate in Weimar.

An extensive, richly illustrated catalogue about the exhibition is available in the Museum Shop.

M.L.