

"All these notes don't pay my needs!!". Beethoven's capital

**Special exhibition of the Beethoven-Haus Bonn in conjunction with the Archives of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Wien and the National Bank of Austria
13th May to 25th August 2005**

The special exhibition deals with the ways and means with which Ludwig van Beethoven earned his living as a freelance musician without a permanent position. Beginning with an outline of the general cost of living in those times and a brief glance at Beethoven's sources of income, there evolves a picture of his economic circumstances. The exhibition is interspersed with contemporary currency: copper, silver and gold coins as well as various banknotes.

Beethoven's *transition from court musician to freelance artist* begins in his home town. At the early age of 12 he deputised for the court organist Neefe and soon afterwards he was given a permanent position as assistant court organist. The receipts for his first salary payments are on display in the showcase in **Room 2**. Endowed with an annual scholarship of 100 ducats, he was sent by his employer, the Elector Maximilian Franz in 1792 to study in Vienna, from where he was never to return to Bonn. He quickly established good contacts and made a successful entry into the art-loving aristocratic circles of the music metropolis. **Room 7 (Showcase 1):** the letter to his friend Franz Gerhard Wegeler in Bonn proves that in 1800 Prince Karl von Lichnowsky settled an annuity of 600 guilders on Beethoven, valid until he had a secure income. But things were to take a different turn.

In 1808, after unsuccessfully applying for a position with the k + k royal theatre, Beethoven received an offer from Napoleon's brother King Jérôme Bonaparte to become director of music at the court in Kassel, for a generous annual salary of 600 ducats (2,600 guilders in Convention currency silver coins). He had already decided to accept the offer (see the letter to Breitkopf & Härtel in **Showcase 2**) when three aristocratic patrons joined forces to keep Beethoven in Vienna with a "working scholarship" of 4,000 guilders in Banco-Notes (1,620 guilders Convention coinage) per year. In the spring of 1809 Prince Lobkowitz, Prince Kinsky and Archduke Rudolph signed so-called *contract of annuity*, the draft and final versions of which are on display. Beethoven showed his gratitude by dedicating various works to his benefactors. The piano sonata op. 81a, the original handwritten original of which is displayed in **Showcase 3**, is dedicated to Archduke Rudolph and deals in its three movements with his departure from Vienna, his absence and his return to the city in the course of the events of war in 1809. On the cover, Beethoven himself wrote, "Das Lebe Wohl / Wien am 4ten May 1809 / bei der Abreise S Kaiserl Hoheit / des Verehrten Erzherzogs / Rudolf. [Farewell / Vienna on 4th May 1809 / on the occasion of the departure of His Imperial Highness / the revered Archduke / Rudolf.]" But if Beethoven now believed that he had found a secure basis from which, absolved from all material worries, he would be able to concentrate entirely on his art, the truth soon taught him otherwise. The astronomic rate of inflation, caused by the emission of large quantities of unsecured paper money to finance the wars against Napoleon and which culminated in the "State Bankruptcy", kept Beethoven's economic situation on an uneven keel. In February 1811 Emperor Franz I ordered that the paper money in circulation be devalued to one fifth of its nominal value. Hitherto existing "Banco-Notes" had thus to be exchanged for new "Redemption Coupons of Vienna Currency" (**Showcase 4**). The revised value of annuities, pensions etc. was calculated with the help of a scale (hanging like the patent on the wall). The only patron who acceded to Beethoven's request that the full value of his "pension" be paid in redemption coupons was Archduke Rudolph. The receipt for a payment can be seen in **Showcase 5**. Indeed, for various reasons in the following three years 1812 to 1814 the composer actually received no payments at all from the two princes. After a

tragic and fatal riding accident, the complicated negotiations with the solicitors of Kinsky's heirs dragged on and on. Prince Lobkowitz, on the other hand, was heavily in debt and Beethoven's lawsuit claiming due payment was only allowed after appeal. Both court cases are documented by various letters and judgements.

The following two **Showcases 6 and 7** and the grocery price lists on the wall give us some idea of *Beethoven's living costs*. In order to ensure that at least staple foods were available to all, their prices were controlled by the state ("Uebersicht der Satzungen" [Summary of Articles]). In different letters Beethoven tells of the general rise in prices, which was also reflected in rent charges. On the death of his brother Kaspar Karl, Beethoven assumed the guardianship of his nephew Karl, which incurred additional expense. Concerning this matter he signed a contract with his sister-in-law, which can be seen in **Showcase 7**. Beethoven's servants made note of the outlay for groceries in books of household accounts, which he checked regularly. (A price list for pianos is on display next to the grand pianos in Room 8).

Showcases 8 and 9 give an impression of *Beethoven's financial circumstances*. Although the beginning of his relationship with the publisher Sigmund Anton Steiner may appear somewhat strange from a modern point of view – a court order forced Beethoven to relinquish to him the rights to the piano sonata in E sharp op. 90 as payment of debts – but Beethoven also used Steiner as a substitute for a bank, by borrowing money from him as well as investing it with him.

The Privileged National Bank of Austria, founded as an independent stock company on 1st June 1816, was soon able to stabilise the currency. Until 1847 it was possible to exchange the "Vienna Currency" into the established Convention currency (silver coinage) at almost 100% of the fixed rate of 2.5:1. Beethoven used his "moderate assets" of 4,000 guilders, which he had previously invested with Steiner, to buy 8 shares in the bank as savings for his nephew. One of the two shares which are today still in the possession of the National Bank of Austria is on display in Showcase 9, as is the wooden casket in which, after Beethoven's death, his friends found the shares. They made up about 73% of his total estate. Beethoven used the shares regularly as security for loans. The quote which gave the exhibition its title is taken from a letter written by Beethoven to the chief clerk of the k + k Privileged National Bank of Austria, Franz Salzmann, in which Beethoven asks for information on the dates of dividend payments. Beethoven uses a similar play on words in the canon for his doctor Dr. Anton Braunhofer, "Doktor, sperrt das Tor dem Tod – Note (=a note) hilft auch aus der Not (=need)". (In English: "Doctor, close the door on death – a note helps us in our need").

Showcase 10 outside Room 7 provides an insight into the *tax system* in Beethoven's time. This was no less complicated and ever-changing than it is today. Beethoven's oversimplified statement on the levying of household tax is evidence of the fact that he did not concern himself with it in any detail. Incidentally his brother Kaspar Karl worked in the tax offices.

In **Room 12** (at the end of the tour on the ground floor, to the right) there are three sections devoted to Beethoven's possible sources of income. One of his primary *sources of income*, if not the most important of all, was the royalties which he received from his *publishers*. These were substantial and in fact considerably greater than most of his contemporaries could achieve. Three stories have been selected, from a volume of correspondence and publishing contracts, which illustrate particularly well the problems created in the world of business by the impenetrable thicket of different currencies, exchange rates etc. The correspondence with the Leipzig publishers Breitkopf & Härtel in **Showcase 11** refers to the following compositions: the oratorio "Christ on the Mount of Olives" op. 85, the opera "Leonore" op. 72 and the Mass in C sharp op. 86. Contrary to agreement the publishing company had

authorised payment entirely in Banco-Notes of the stipulated sum of 250 guilders Convention currency. With reference to the high rate of inflation (and with a description of the state of emergency in Vienna) Beethoven requests that the Banco-Notes be taken back, or at least that half his royalty be paid in Convention currency silver coinage.

Beethoven soon began to offer his works simultaneously to several publishers for their respective, more or less protected markets. The editions were to appear simultaneously, in order that no one publisher should suffer any loss. Ferdinand Ries and Johann Peter Salomon represented him in his negotiations with English publishers, and in 1816 he sold the piano edition of the 7th Symphony op. 92, the extremely successful battle symphony "Wellington's Victory or the Battle of Vittoria" op. 91, the piano trio op. 97 and the violin sonata op. 96 (**Showcase 12**) to the London publisher Robert Birchall for 130 Dutch ducats. The confirmation of ownership is also on display in Showcase 12. Through Ries he demanded an additional 10 Dutch ducats to cover the high costs of copying and postage. A year earlier Beethoven had asked Salomon to offer the works for sale in England, because he believed, "for the second time my salary will be worth nothing". And indeed in the meantime the quantity of the new paper money had also been drastically increased. To circumvent the February Decree, which forbade an increase of the Redemption Coupons, the new emission had been called "Anticipation Coupons", covered by tax revenue not yet collected.

Strangely enough Beethoven undertook the most complex and at the same time questionable efforts with regard to the sale of his largest ecclesiastical work, the *Missa Solemnis*, which at that time he also considered to be his most important work. Initially, and indeed nearly three years before the work's completion, he agreed a royalty of 100 Louis d'or with his old Bonn colleague Nikolaus Simrock. Although Simrock had repeatedly stressed that he regarded the value of the Louis d'or to be the same as that of the Friedrich d'or and the Pistole (which was worth about 7.5 guilders Convention coinage), in the end Beethoven believed he had been taken advantage of, since he himself had always assumed the exchange rate to be 9 guilders. In fact he had borrowed an advance of 900 guilders from his friend Franz Brentano, which he was not able to repay until three years later (correspondence in Showcase 12). As a consequence Beethoven began simultaneous negotiations with additional publishers and soon there were as many as seven of them involved. Finally the Mass was sold in 1824 for 1,000 guilders Convention coinage to the publishing company Schott in Mainz, together with the 9th Symphony, which yielded another 600 guilders Convention coinage.

As was not unusual in those days, Beethoven also acted as *concert organiser*. The first concert organised for his own benefit (in total Beethoven arranged eight so-called academies) took place on 2nd April 1800 in the Vienna Hofburg Theatre (a handbill is displayed on the wall). The two academies of 29th November and 2nd December 1814, which took place in front of heads of state who had gathered for the Congress of Vienna, were particularly successful. On the programme were the premiere of the bombastic cantata "The Moment of Glory" op. 136 and the battle symphony "Wellington's Victory or the Battle of Vittoria" op. 91 (**Showcase 13**), which hit the patriotic nerve of the times. The Vienna Peace Gazette reports that Beethoven received a "generous present of 200 ducats" from the Russian Tsarina. This was probably the reason for the composition and dedication of the polonaise for piano op. 89, the first edition of which is displayed in **Showcase 14**. Subsequently Beethoven received another generous dedication present of 50 ducats, and with a further 100 ducats the Tsarina acknowledged in retrospect the dedication in 1803 of the violin sonata op. 30 to her husband Tsar Alexander I. These, however, are the only *dedications* which reaped direct financial reward. Attempts to obtain a present of thanks from the English Prince Regent, the later King George IV, for the dedication of "Wellington's Victory", were unsuccessful,

although the work was publicly performed from the dedication copy at the Drury Lane Theatre (a hand bill is on display). In addition to a small number of completed *commissioned works* such as the three late string quartets for the Russian Prince Gallitzin (for each piece Beethoven received 50 ducats and later an additional 80 ducats from the publisher) and musical accompaniments for several theatres, there is one assignment which was not completed, but which is of particular note because of the size of the remuneration. The Gesellschaft der Musikfreund in Wien asked Beethoven to compose an oratorio based on Joseph Carl Bernhard's text "The Victory of the Cross", for which he was to be paid 300 ducats. The Gesellschaft wanted the rights to the work for one year only and had no claim to copyright on it, so that the work would have been a guaranteed financial success for Beethoven. But although he had already accepted a deposit payment of 400 guilders in Vienna currency, he did not actually carry out the assignment because he was not satisfied with the text. In the end it was art, and not money, that ruled his world.

Nicole Kämpken

(translated by John Simons)