Beethoven's Piano Sonatas

A Special Exhibition at the Beethoven-Haus Bonn
2nd July to 4th November 2012

Beethoven's piano sonatas are considered to be the "New Testament" of piano literature (Hans von Bülow). From the early "Elector" sonatas (1783, without opus number) to the 32 sonatas (1794-1822), they make up a whole range illustrating Beethoven's development as a composer. The exhibition goes along with a master class held by András Schiff from 2nd to 8th July in the H. J. Abs Chamber Music Hall at the Beethoven-Haus. This class is intended to provide an insight into the appropriate art of interpreting Beethoven's piano sonatas. Indications for that can be found in reports by Beethoven's contemporaries on his own piano playing and in the piano methods of the time. The particular properties of pianos of the period, Beethoven's frequently meticulous instructions in his original hand-written scores and the vitality of the handwriting often give us, with the most subtle of nuances, an idea of the composer's conception of how the music should sound. Interpretations and instructions published by famous performers of Beethoven's music in later times give us also an insight into the history of the interpretation. They show that unfortunately Beethoven's annotated scores are not always taken entirely seriously.

1st Floor Room 7 *Showcase 1:* Contemporary reports on the 12 and 20 year old Beethoven give evidence of his remarkable talent as a piano player. The hand-written fingering scores for his early sonatas, and a sketch sheet with piano exercises and relevant comments about playing them, show that the young Beethoven wanted to be a brilliant virtuoso. On the other hand his very individual way of playing the piano created unforeseen sounds and profound musical experiences.

The pictures on the wall demonstrate clearly the development of the piano from a rather simple domestic instrument, which was in those days played primarily by women, into the most important concert instrument of the 19th century. At the first concert which he personally organised, on 2nd April 1800, Beethoven played an improvisation (at which he was considered without equal), and as a soloist in his own piano concerto. Originally Beethoven performed his compositions for piano himself in order to enhance his own reputation. Only when they had been printed were they put at the disposal of other musicians. Beethoven's pupil Carl Czerny was Vienna's most important piano tutor. For instance, he taught Franz Liszt and with his practice pieces he laid the foundations for the Virtuosi Era.

Showcase 2: It is today often completely underestimated what importance an adequate knowledge of the tonal diversity of contemporary pianofortes has for an appropriate interpretation on a modern instrument, which in that respect is clearly inferior. While still in Bonn, the ambitious young court musician and composer had access to the newest and best pianofortes. A maker of musical instruments who had relocated from South Germany to Bonn built around 1780 instruments which combined harpsichord with pianoforte (whose hammers in those days were not covered with felt or leather). Such an instrument made it possible to make a direct comparison between the not so different timbres. There was even a piano which recorded immediately on music paper the notes which were played. Daniel Gottlob Türk's keyboard method lists in the introduction numerous special types of instruments, demonstrating how adventurous the period was with regard to the pianoforte. The "old" instruments such as the harpsichord in which the strings are plucked with a plectrum, and the clavichord, where they are struck with a tangent, were still in use. Attempts were made to give the harpsichord a greater dynamic range by adding swell devices. It was not until the end of the century that the harpsichord was gradually but then conclusively superseded by the pianoforte, which had been invented around 1700. On this instrument it was possible to vary the volume (forte or piano) at will, merely by changing the force with which the keys were pressed down, which indeed was the origin of the name "pianoforte". Between 1770 and 1827 it was rapidly refined. A lightweight instrument with a comparitively thin sound and a range of five octaves developed into a solidly built and rich sounding instrument with a range of up to 6½ octaves, which was also powerful enough in volume to fill the large halls which were being used more and more for public performances in the course of the emerging middle-class interest in music. As an outstanding pianist and composer, Beethoven himself played an important role in this development, because the pianomakers kept close and stimulative contact with the foremost pianists and attempted to fulfil their wishes.

An gifted pianist and one of the best piano teachers in Vienna at that time was Johann Andreas Streicher, the husband of pianomaker Nannette Streicher. Beethoven was on friendly terms with them both, and he regularly received instruments on loan from their workshop. In two letters to Streicher written in 1796, Beethoven, to our surprise today, tells that he considers the method of playing piano to be more uncultivated than that of all other instruments. The pianist must realise that it is possible to "even make a piano sing, if only one had enough

feeling". The instrument he had been loaned was "truly admirably turned out […] any other person would try to be able to keep it and I […] would be lying if I did not tell you that it is too good for me, and why? – Because it robs me of the freedom to produce my own sound".

Piano music and playing technique developed in the same way as the making of the instruments themselves. Piano methods enjoyed a real boom. They were usually intended for self-instruction. Conventional courses hardly go beyond simple playing technique and doctrines of basso continuo, while the more progressive dealt mainly with expression. The "Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments" by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (s. facsimile on the music stand) was the most important piano tutor of the second half of the 18th century and Beethoven of course also owned a copy. He used it in his instruction of Carl Czerny. Every pianist today should still be proficient in the piano-playing technique taught in the book, for instance that concerning the relationship between fingering and articulation. The second oldest son of Johann Sebastian Bach had a considerable stylistic influence on the young composer from Bonn.

On display in *Showcase 3* is the original hand-written manuscript of the Sonata No. 28 in A-major op. 101, composed in 1816. On the left-hand page we find "sul una corda" (i.e.: only one string, being an instruction to use the una corda pedal, whereby the hammer hits only one string instead of three) used as an opposite to the term "tutto il Cembalo" (meaning: all strings), a terminological inexactitude which arises out of the still known practice of using the one term to cover different forms of clavier (= keyboard instruments). Of course, as is evident from the front page of the first edition of this sonata, it refers to the pianoforte. It is clear from the notation "tutto il Cembalo ma piano" that the shifting action was used not to produce less volume, but rather to make the sound thinner. The effect on a pianoforte of that time is completely different from the effect on a modern instrument.

Showcase 4: The piano method of his composer colleague and sometime publisher Muzio Clementi was given as present by Beethoven in 1826 to the 13 year old Gerhard von Breuning (a portrait of him as an old man is on display on the wall between the windows), as shown by the attached letter. Beethoven promised to support the son of Stephan von Breuning, his old friend from his childhood in Bonn, with his self-instruction studies. Clementi's textbook is a practicable piano method which consists of numerous examples of pieces and contains almost no theory.

Showcase 5: Beethoven's autograph manuscripts can "talk" if one regards them closely enough and "listens" to them. They contain a rich treasure trove of information, which also provides important clues with regard to the interpretation of the works. Although the first page is missing from the hand-written score of the famous Sonata No. 14 in C-sharp minor (later called the "Moonlight Sonata"), the first edition still shows the importance to the composer of the instruction "Si deve Suonare tutto questo pezzo delicatissime e Senza Sordino" (meaning: the whole piece should sound truly delicate and should be played without dampers). Immediately below is the second instruction "Semper pianissimo e Senza Sordino" (meaning: always very softly and without dampers), which indicates anew that the sustain pedal, which lifts the dampers in order to let the strings vibrate freely, should be kept depressed. Carl Czerny on the other hand interpreted it to mean that "on every bass note the pedal should be depressed anew". Since Beethoven says nothing to that effect, it is possible that Czerny – 40 years later – is recommending a playing instruction which makes allowance for the rapid development in piano-making technology which had taken place in the meantime. András Schiff is virtually the only pianist who takes Beethoven's wording seriously and keeps the sustain pedal depressed throughout the piece. Since Beethoven's pedal instructions are usually noted down meticulously and in this case produce sounds which were at that time revolutionary, Czerny's suggested instruction seems questionable. The facsimile of this manuscript (see music stand) makes the great difference clear between an autograph manuscript and a printed score. For instance the transition to the coda of the third movement has in Beethoven's notation an expressive, independent existence and is noted weightily, whereas the same notes lose massively in "importance" through the use of small cue notes in the printed score.

The original manuscript of the subsequent composition, the Sonata No. 15 in D-major op. 28, was intended to be the final version and indeed to be used as a master copy for the engraver. It can be seen that the composer needed a second attempt before he could bring the third movement into its final form. At the end of the Scherzo he had problems with the final chords, and the second part of the Trio was originally intended to be repeated (except the last bar). Then Beethoven decided to make variations to the lower part and completely rewrote the new version on the back of the page. A musician can glean much information from the cancelled versions. The piano method of Friedrich Starke contains a part of this sonata with fingering instructions which supposedly originate from the composer himself. The enclosed anecdote from the most

important music journal of the time shows how far the technical and intellectual demands of a Beethoven piano sonata surpassed the norm. “A well-behaved and naïve little damsel came into the music shop. “I should like to purchase a few piano sonatas, pretty and the very latest.” “Certainly, would you like to name a composer?” “Yes, from Beethoven, they are said to be particularly beautiful.” “Of course, here are the newest Beethoven sonatas.” She leafs through the scores and puts them all back. “Yes”, she says, “but the fingering must be above the notes, as in Pleyel’s piano method. That’s what I’m playing at present.””

On the wall are three views of the piano factory in Vienna which was owned by Beethoven’s acquaintance Johann Baptist Streicher. The showroom, which was also used as a concert hall, was adorned with a bust of Beethoven (*see room 8 on the 2nd floor*). Streicher pianos were exported all over Europe, which required good packaging in straw-padded wooden cases.

Showcase 6: In Beethoven’s time the tonal aspect of an interpretation was particularly in the spotlight. Some composers did not always make a note of their tonal ideas but rather left it up to the musician, according which instruments were available, but Beethoven gave more instructions than his contemporaries. Admittedly though, composers limited their instructions for the use of the pedals (as many as seven!) on pianofortes of the time to shifting and damping (as they still do today) and in the case of Franz Schubert, in very occasional exceptions, to the use of the moderator (the sound is muted by interposing a strip of felt between hammers and strings). The autograph of the Sonata No. 21 in C-major op. 53 – the “Waldstein Sonata” – is open at the page which shows that Beethoven not only replaced the original middle movement of his “Sonata grande” with a much shorter Introduzione, but also stipulated that the sustain pedal be kept depressed during the first eight bars of the Rondo. The resulting sfumato or “blurring” effect was at the time revolutionary. The first edition, however, contains fewer instructions on dynamics than the original manuscript. There are also discrepancies between the two sources as far as the notes are concerned.

Showcase 7: The autograph of the Piano Sonata No. 24 in F-sharp major op. 78 is a prime example of a very carefully produced final version, which was used as the engraver’s copy. It is very rare for a composer to be able to keep that up so consistently. It is open at a page showing that Beethoven again experimented with the sustain pedal being depressed for two bars; at one point a figure, which has previously appeared in different places, is suddenly marked with fingerings to emphasise the articulation of the two-note groupings.

The original manuscript of the Piano Sonata No. 31 in A-flat major op. 110, composed in 1821, is also very neatly written. However, the manuscript contains only the third movement. A comparison with a second, complete autograph shows that the composer intended here to produce a final copy, but then gave the movement its final polish in the other, earlier manuscript. He did use the manuscript however, to note down corrections (crosses and "berl[in]") which were still to be sent to the publisher in Berlin. Autographs do not necessarily contain the definitive final version. It pays to make a comparison with the first edition. The first page of the manuscript on display contains one curious feature: Beethoven wrote under tied notes a fingering 4-3, although the tie means that the second note is not actually to be played. From his childhood the composer was familiar with the clavichord, in which the sound was produced with a tangent (metal blade). If the pressure on the key is varied from time to time, it is possible to produce a vibrato effect. With a slight repeated pressing of the key Beethoven may have been attempting to reproduce a similar effect on the pianoforte, on which for technical reasons a vibrato was not possible. It can also be seen that Beethoven did not complete his pedal instructions until he pencilled them during a second revision.

Showcase 8: There are also two handwritten manuscripts of the first movement of the last Piano Sonata No. 32 in C-minor op. 111. The first copy is on display here. Beethoven had his much corrected manuscript transcribed by a copyist and sent it to a publisher. Afterwards he refined the work further and had to send an urgent plea to the publisher to take the copy out of circulation, because it was no longer up to date. The second hand-written manuscript (see facsimile) contains few corrections, is much more disciplined and as a result much more cleanly written out as the first. For the same reason, however, it is also much less expressive. The first copy contains, in addition to the very dynamic handwriting, numerous instructions regarding time, use of pedals and dynamics (sf, Ped., meno all[egr]o, ritardando, adagio, tempo primo) and it shows how Beethoven, more than any of his contemporaries, meticulously set the music score. Nevertheless there is plenty of latitude left for the musician. Since the original first edition, which was printed in Paris, contained so many mistakes, Beethoven arranged, actually contrary to his contract agreement, a corrected edition to be printed by a Vienna publisher, for which the list of corrections on display was compiled.

The way in which Beethoven's piano sonatas were interpreted in later times, particularly in the days before there were sound

recordings, can be best guessed at with the help of those editions which gave exact instructions as to how a piece should be played (so-called "instructive editions"). Beethoven's pupil Carl Czerny was in 1842 the first person to publish in his Complete Theoretical and Practical Pianoforte Method an extensive treatise "On the Proper Performance of all Beethoven's Works for the Piano". Czerny, a musical child prodigy who became a pupil of Beethoven around 1800, was as a child able to play the composer's Piano Sonata No. 8 in C-minor op. 13 (the "Sonata Pathétique"). The lessons covered in detail four piano concertos as well as the sonatas opp. 13, 14 nos.1 and 2, 31 no. 2 and 101. It is known that Czerny played other sonatas, such as op. 53 and op. 57, in Beethoven's presence and he presumably received feedback from the composer. They often listened to each other playing the piano or improvising. Czerny's instructions on interpretation may not have been directly authorised by Beethoven, but they were significantly influenced by him. Adolf Bernhard Marx followed in 1863 with his "Introduction to the Interpretation of Beethoven Piano Works". The music theorist, pianist, composer, teacher and publisher of the Berliner Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung (Berlin General Music Journal) was a pupil of Daniel Gottlob Türk, with whose work Beethoven was familiar. Marx championed in particular Beethoven's later works. In 1825 the composer wrote to him that he should continue "to uncover more and more the higher and truer values in the realm of the arts". His "Introduction" was very popular and went through four editions.

Displayed in the high showcase are instructive editions from the early 20th century from such outstanding interpreters of Beethoven as Hans von Bülow and Eugen d'Albert. In this way Bülow, who was the first person who dared to perform Beethoven's last five piano sonatas in one concert, finally paved the way for the sonatas to make the transition from private or semi-private home music-making into the concert hall, where for many years mixed programmes of piano chamber music and songs were standard. In his edition Bülow makes comments on the score, on the musical structure and on interpretation. The book is open at the page on which it can be seen in the context of the transition between the 2nd and 3rd movement of the "Waldstein Sonata" that Bülow made alterations to the music score, which in those days was perfectly normal. Whereas in the original manuscript (*see showcase 6*) it is clearly specified that the sustain pedal should not be released until the end of the eighth bar, in Bülow's version this happens after two bars. The following two bars contain no pedal instructions. This is repeated in bars 5-8.

Bülow also "defuses" the famous octave glissando in the third movement by spreading the octaves over both hands and simply omitting a number of notes.

In the late 19th century Eugen d'Albert was considered one of the world's foremost pianists. Beethoven formed, together with Bach, the nucleus of his repertoire. Although some pianola recordings of d'Albert exist, his instructive editions show his perception of the appropriate interpretation. His tonal (sound) conception makes associations with orchestral instruments, which is appropriate insofar as pianofortes, in contrast with modern pianos, were deliberately not uniformly voiced. This meant that, depending on the pitch, they produced a different timbre.

Hugo Riemann, a leading German musicologist and music theorist of his time, published not only a three volume monograph on Beethoven's piano sonatas with an aesthetic and formal technical analysis which included historical remarks, but also a "phrasing edition" of the sonatas.

Room 8 on the 2nd Floor: A striking sign of the reverence in which Beethoven was held in Britain is the pianoforte, which Thomas Broadwood of London, by far the most prolific pianomaker of that time, gave Beethoven in 1817. (On the left hand side is an absolutely identical instrument as can be seen in the picture on the wall of Beethoven's instrument in his death room.) His last public performance as a pianist had taken place two years earlier. Not only the fact that he was given this present, but also the fact that Broadwood assembled five of the best musicians in London to choose what they considered to be the best instrument for Beethoven, to autograph it and send it as a musical greeting card to Vienna, shows the significance which this noble gesture had for Broadwood and the other persons involved. The sound of the piano, which particularly in the bass regions has a low damping factor, differs greatly from the instrument opposite, which the Vienna pianomaker Conrad Graf placed at Beethoven's disposal. This has four strings per key instead of the usual three. This attempt to design an instrument with greater volume was soon abandoned, however, because the statics were problematical on account of the high string tension and the effort required for tuning increased dramatically. Both instruments were placed in Beethoven's music- and bedroom in the same way as they are here.

Lecture Room (at the end of the tour on the ground floor):

The two pianofortes are typical examples of the two types of the time: the pianoforte and the square piano. The latter was usually considered completely adequate for home music-making. The volume produced by the grand piano could, on the

other hand, fill larger rooms. Pianomaking was by no means as standardised as it is today. Pianos were constructed with different ranges. Ambitious pianists ordered instruments to be built which were to produce a sound consistent with their ideal. The purchase of a piano was somewhat akin to buying a car today – with an additional price list for optional accessories.

The Beethoven-Haus Collection accommodates two thirds of all surviving original manuscripts of Beethoven's piano sonatas. They can all be viewed digitized in the Studio and be listened to in their entirety at the same time.

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M.L.

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Broadwood Piano at the Beethoven-Haus