

Beethoven's Teacher

Christian Gottlob Neefe (1748-1798):

Composer, Author, Teacher

Special Exhibition at the Beethoven-Haus, Bonn

26 September 1998 - 27 January 1999

Christian Gottlob Neefe, to whom this exhibition is dedicated in honor of his 250th birthday and the 200th anniversary of his death, is known to us today almost exclusively as Beethoven's teacher during his early years. This is astonishing because only a few documents relating to the pupil-teacher relationship have survived and also because Neefe as a composer, as an arranger of piano reductions and as an author was so important and so typical of his time that studying him today is still a worthwhile activity.

Neefe was born on February 5, 1748 as the son of a tailor in Chemnitz. (For this reason the exhibition was planned in cooperation with the Schloßberg Museum in Chemnitz.) He went to school in his home city. Subsequently he studied law in Leipzig. His new main interest is expressed in the topic of the public disputation with which Neefe ended his legal studies: He answered on the negative the question which he himself had formulated of „whether a father has the right to disinherit his son because the latter had dedicated himself to the theater“. Neefe had sought contact there to Johann Adam Hiller, the eminence grise of Leipzig's musical life. Hiller had rendered great services in the development of the city's musical life (from 1781 to 1785 he was musical director of the Gewandhaus, 1789-1801 choir master and organist of the Thomaskirche) as well to the cause of the German „Singspiel“. He became a kind of a father figure to Neefe. In analogy to the author and poet who dominated the literature of the time, Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, Neefe characterized Hiller as his „musical Gellert“.

In 1776 Neefe joined the well-known theatrical company of Abel Seyler in Dresden, where he inherited the position of musical director from his mentor, Hiller. One year later he moved with Seyler via Leipzig to Frankfurt on the Main and Mainz. Beginning in 1778 the group played twice a week in Bonn and Cologne. One year later Neefe moved on to the acting company of Gustav Friedrich Wilhelm Großmann who played in the National Theater in Bonn, which had opened on November 29, 1779. As music director he played a central role. As in Steyler's company, Neefe contributed his own „Singspiele“, original accompanying music for plays, and arrangements/translations of theatrical works by others. In 1781 he was named successor of the court organist van den Eeden. Beethoven became his substitute in this function beginning in 1782. Neefe must already have been his teacher and supporter by this time.

Neefe's career at the court in Bonn had its ups and downs. By the spring of 1783 to the summer of 1784 he was asked to take over the position of master of the chapel for Kapellmeister Andrea Lucchesi, who was on leave, but the reorganization of the court musical establishment after the death of the Elector Maximilian Friedrich (April, 1784) weakened Neefe's position. Also his situation as a Protestant at a Catholic court caused critics to put in an appearance. Additionally, the new Elector dissolved the National Theater (it was reopened only in 1789) so that Neefe, who was thus robbed of his main duty, considered leaving Bonn, but finally was forced to improve his reduced financial situation with a busy schedule of teaching. Socially, on the other hand, Neefe belonged to an exclusive circle of Bonn intellectuals through his membership in the Order of the Illuminati and, beginning in 1787, in the Reading Society („Lesegesellschaft“).

After the occupation of the Rhineland by French revolutionary troops and the dissolution of the electoral state in 1794, the cultural life in Bonn came to a halt. Neefe had to make his living as a city civil servant. When, at the end of 1796, he was offered the position of music director by theater director Bosann in Dessau, his life in Bonn, which had become extremely difficult

towards the end, came to an end. Only a brief - but happy - time was granted him at the court of the Prince of Anhalt, Leopold Friedrich Franz: Neefe died on January 26, 1798.

The tour of the exhibition begins in **Room 12** (ground floor, left).

Neefe's home city of Chemnitz is shown in a large oil painting which was commissioned in 1780 by the local guild of linen weavers (on loan from the Schloßberg Museum in Chemnitz). Case 1 contains documents which sketch his intellectual and spiritual environment: a chronicle from the year 1767, a hymnal from 1783 and a description of the Latin school from the year 1755 which was written by its rector at the time, Johann Georg Hager, who also taught Neefe (on loan from the City Library, Chemnitz). The seven year old Neefe might well have participated as a choir member in the figural Vesper which was performed at the celebration in honor of the 200th anniversary of the Peace of Augsburg in September 1755 (see the libretto). The tailor's measures from 1744, 1769 and 1779 refer to the occupation of Neefe's father.

The „Songs with Piano Melodies“ are among Neefe's earliest printed compositions. They are simple, strophic songs to texts by poets such as Carl Wilhelm Ramler or Johann Gottfried Herder who were popular at that time. Neefe's early works appeared in small publishing houses which printed music only on the side.

The autobiography of Neefe's mentor, Johann Adam Hiller (on loan from the University Library, Leipzig), Neefe's own „Contributions to the History of my Life“ (on loan from the City Archive, Bonn) as well as an auto-graph entry in an album with the song „Integer vitae“ (September 20, 1771) illuminate his life in Leipzig.

In the tall display case the uniform jacket of a private in the Prussian Grenadiers at the time of the Seven Year's War (1756-1763) is to be seen. Neefe reports in his autobiography that at that time he was taught piano by a soldier of that rank. Case 3 shows the first edition of Neefe's comic opera „Die Einsprüche“ („The Protests“), which was first performed in Leipzig in 1772. Neefe's first

independent work for the stage was the comic opera „Die Apotheke“ („The Pharmacy“), one of his most successful works ever. (The author of the text called it „Possenspiel“ („Farce“).) It was composed for the Koch Theater in Leipzig, but was also performed in Bonn in April of 1782. An old, handwritten score from the collection of the court orchestra of Sondershausen (loan from the Thuringian State Archive, Rudolstadt) is shown, as are the printed piano-vocal score and the apothecary containers from the collection of the Schloßberg Museum, Chemnitz, which illustrate this work. (Continuation of the exhibition in **Room 2** on the upper floor.)

On the front wall the portraits of both of Neefe's and Beethoven's employers: the Electors Max Friedrich (died 1784) and Max Franz. Although we know little about Neefe's teaching of Beethoven, Neefe undoubtedly performed a great service to Beethoven by organizing the printing of a composition by the unknown, eleven year old composer: Nine Variations for Piano of a March by Dressler. This edition contains a publisher's catalogue which also lists Neefe's only piano concerto which had been published one year before by the Mannheim publisher Götz. Neefe's „Notice from the Orchestra of the Court of the Elector of Cologne in Bonn and other Musicians Located There“ which appeared in the *Magazin für Musik* in 1783 was also important for the reputation of the young Beethoven. It is the most detailed report we have about musical life in Bonn at that period of time. Besides the list of his own compositions, it contains a first public reference to Beethoven with the positively daring but correct prophecy that a second Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was developing there.

Also relating to Neefe is the first edition of Beethoven's so-called „Kurfürstensonaten“, three early piano sonatas which were also published (1783) through Neefe's good offices. Their text of dedication to the employer of both of them, Elector Maximilian Friedrich, was probably also written by Neefe (Room 5).

In **Room 7**, Neefe's role as composer and arranger are introduced. In his work, „Sophonisbe“ (1776), Neefe

utilized the genre of the monodrama which was very new at the time but extremely popular, a combination of declamation with a coloristic or interpretative piano accompaniment. On the wall the theater's notice of the first performance at the Ranstädter Theater in Leipzig, which shows a contemporary etching (on loan from the Museum of the History of the City in Leipzig). In Case 1 and 2 and on the wall, all portraits of Neefe are assembled in one place. The fact that three etched portraits appeared during his lifetime (two of them in theater journals) is a sign of the degree to which Neefe was recognized. A silhouette comes from Heinrich Philipp Böbler, the publisher of a number of early compositions of Beethoven. Case 2 shows two piano works by Neefe which were printed by his colleague in the Bonn court orchestra, Nikolaus Simrock. But musical works were disseminated above all also in handwritten copies. Much credit is due to Neefe for service rendered in the cause of the broad reception of the works of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Neefe arranged piano-vocal scores of five Mozart operas, some of which had found ready entrance into the repertoire of the Bonn court theater. Neefe's favorite work was the „Magic Flute“. He arranged several numbers from it, for instance in the form of piano variations. Case 4 shows the guest book of the Reading Society, a circle of intellectuals to which Neefe belonged. On February 25, 1789 Neefe is listed as the host of the publisher Gehra from Neuwied who had published his settings of Klopstock odes. Neefe was also mentioned (as „Herr Neff“) in the reminiscences about the young Beethoven which were written by the Bonn master baker, Fischer.

Neefe's close professional and personal relationship to the theater entrepreneur Großmann, with whom he worked from 1776 onward and who directed the Bonn court theater beginning in 1778, is illustrated in Case 5. When Großmann's wife died in 1784, Neefe published a volume containing her biography and letters of the deceased to her husband with which he wanted to portray the character of Karoline Großmann, as well as posthumous tributes in prose and verse form. He left us a further

example of his writing ability in the volume „Dilettantieren“ („Dabblings of a Dilettant“) (on loan from the Archive of the Rhine-Sieg District, Siegburg) which appeared in 1785. For only one of his stage works has the contemporary scenic representation been preserved: for the play with songs „Adelheit von Veltheim“, (text by Großmann, music by Neefe), which was first performed in 1780 in Frankfurt on the Main. The well-known printmaker Daniel Chodowiecki created a series of 12 etchings of scenes in 1783 (on loan from the Museum of Fine Arts, Leipzig).

Neefe's last life phase is illustrated by the documents (loans from the Anhalt Theater, Dessau) shown in Case 6. Beginning in 1796 Neefe himself was engaged as music director at the Dessau theater, his daughters Gretchen, Louise and Felice as actresses/singers. Mozart's „Don Giovanni“ was performed there in February, 1797, in an arrangement by Neefe and Schröder. Neefe's son, Hermann Joseph, who was born in Bonn in 1790, was also to be linked to the theater: He grew to be one of Vienna's foremost theatrical painters in the period before the mid-century and apparently came into direct contact with Beethoven in 1822 on the occasion of the opening of the Josephstadt Theater. Case 7, finally, gives contemporary voices a chance to speak about Neefe, among them an obituary notice which was published in the *Leipzig Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*. The *Berlin Musikzeitung* recorded in 1793 the following words about Neefe by Beethoven which are not otherwise preserved in any other document: „I thank you for your advice which you very often gave me in the course of my progress in my divine art. If I someday become a great man, you have had your share in it . . .“

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A detailed, richly illustrated catalogue is available at the Museum Shop at the price of DM 20.