

„I should have liked to dedicate my whole life to this man.“

Beethoven and the Viennese Piano Builders Nannette and Andreas Streicher

Special Exhibition
at the Beethoven Haus, Bonn
10 June - 23 September 1999

This exhibition documents for the first time the relationship between Beethoven and the Viennese piano builders Nannette and Andreas Streicher on the basis of selected documents from the Streicher family archive, the collections of the Beethoven Haus as well as some additional objects on loan.

In 1787 Beethoven became acquainted with Nannette Stein (the daughter of the famous piano and organ builder, Johann Andreas Stein) and Andreas Streicher, whose flight with Friedrich Schiller won him a niche in literary history. After the Streichers had moved their factory to Vienna in 1794, a close personal friendship developed with Beethoven. Nannette Streicher was one of Vienna's leading piano builders. She contributed significantly to the rapid development of the Hammerclavier, without which Beethoven's works as they are would not be conceivable. Beethoven was repeatedly loaned instruments from their workshop. In the Streicher's piano salon Beethoven's piano works were the preferred repertoire.

Nannette and Andreas Streicher had many friends and acquaintances in common with Beethoven. Andreas Streicher was for many of them the contact person: for friends such as Carl Amenda, who inquired of him about Beethoven's well-being, for publishers who hoped through Streicher's mediation to be able to publish works by Beethoven. The exhibition shows a whole series of letters unknown until now in which various character traits of Beethoven's were mentioned in a confidential, critical tone, knowledge of which deepens our understanding of Beethoven's personality.

Nannette Streicher advised Beethoven in all household matters, especially in the years 1817 and 1818 - an invaluable service for Beethoven, who was rather awkward in such matters. Their son, Johann Baptist Streicher, who became Vienna's most successful piano builder, also maintained a friendly relationship to Beethoven. He travelled widely and was therefore in a position to advise the composer about a planned journey to England.

Room 7 (Case 1) Johann Andreas Stein (1728-1792) was the most important piano builder and one of the best organ builders of his day. His notebook, which he began in 1748, gives insight into his years of travel as a journeyman and into his ideas about piano and organ building. It is open to the pages showing the disposition of his most famous organ, which he built in the Barfüßer Church in Augsburg 1755-1757, where he thereafter became organist. A contemporary etching shows a frontal view of this organ. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart visited Stein's workshop in 1777. He was enthusiastic about Stein's Hammerclaviers and amused at Nannette's extravagant style of piano playing. The young Beethoven met the family on his first journey to Vienna in 1787, when he was hoping to become Mozart's pupil. A report about an excursion of the Bonn Court Orchestra to Mergentheim in 1791 mentions that Beethoven did not perform there in public as a pianist, because no instrument from Stein was available; he was accustomed to them from Bonn and required one for his nuanced style of playing.

(Case 2) Stein's daughter, Nannette, revealed early on an exceptional talent both as a pianist and as a piano builder. Her album contains numerous entries extolling her „soulful“ manner of playing. On exhibit are the entries by the composer Francesco Antonio Rosetti and the writer-composer Christian Daniel Friedrich Schubart. In her letters to her fiancé, Andreas Streicher, Nannette Stein also touches upon musical matters. She reports about a friendly piano competition which she had with her friend Nannette von Schaden, in whose house Beethoven was once a guest.

(Case 3) She repeatedly requested new compositions from Andreas Streicher, among others a Singspiel to a text by Friedrich Schiller, a friend of his youth. Even Haydn praised

Streicher's piano works. Streicher arranged many works for the piano for the Mannheim publisher Götze (see the piano reduction of an opera from V. Martin y Soler).

Among the friends whom the Streicher family had in common with Beethoven was the theologian Carl Amenda, who became Beethoven's closest friend during the 1 1/2 years that Amenda lived in Vienna. After he left Vienna in 1799, he waited in vain for letters from or news about Beethoven. Therefore he repeatedly enclosed letters to Beethoven in his own to Streicher, for whom he sold pianos a number of times, and inquired after Beethoven's well-being. „I should have liked to dedicate my whole life to this man [...] Pardon me for so often being a burden to you because of my love of Beethoven; but how should I otherwise do it? You did predict that he would neglect me. - Yes! he does, it hurts me - but I still will never cease to love him as long as I live,“ he writes to Streicher in 1806. (Case 4)

Streicher was in great demand as a piano teacher and respected as such by Beethoven. Among his pupils was Lisette von Küssow (married name Bernhard), who moved Beethoven to tears with her playing and motivated him to compose more for the piano. In her later years she also preferred works by Beethoven, all of which she held to be „classics“. During her travels she twice met acquaintances of Beethoven's from Bonn. A certain Noist(en) divulged to her that he attributed Beethoven's strange character to the fact that his father had treated him brutally and beaten him daily. She also met Beethoven's occasional piano teacher, Tobias Friedrich Pfeifer, who had lived in the same house as the Beethoven family. He is reported to have been quite a good pianist. She felt him to be „completely uneducated and immoral“, however.

(Case 5) Nannette Stein also had several other musically talented siblings (see the family tree on the wall). Matthäus Andreas also became a piano builder and had contact with Beethoven, just as did her brother Andreas Friedrich, who was a talented pianist and composer. In 1802 he wrote his sister that he had a portrait of Beethoven hanging over his piano and felt inspired by it while improvising. In 1808 he performed the solo part in Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto, op. 58, under the direction of the composer.

Andreas Streicher played an important role as a contact person for publishers who hoped through his intercession to be able to publish works by Haydn or Beethoven. (Case 6): The Leipzig publisher Ambrosius Kühnel, who also dealt in Streicher pianos, visited Vienna in 1810 and was deeply impressed by the „genius“ Beethoven and his deep love of art. Kühnel's wish to be the recipient of new compositions from him was not fulfilled, however, which led him to sum up in resignation: „Beethoven always promises, but he never sends anything!“

The Streicher factory, which was managed by Nannette, was one of the leading piano building firms in Vienna, where at Beethoven's time there were over 100 piano manufacturers! They also competed with French and English piano builders, some of whom constructed their instruments along other lines. Streicher expressed his opinions on these matters in his draft of an article for the Leipzig Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung, which he never did publish, however. As early as 1807 he ordered an instrument from England in order to combine the best qualities of both the „English“ and the „Viennese“ mechanism.

(Case 7) Beethoven was repeatedly loaned instruments from Streicher at no cost to himself. Thus he thanked them in a letter from Preßburg/Bratislava from November of 1796 for an instrument which he used a few days later in a concert. His words of appreciation are repeatedly supplemented by critical remarks. Through this technical exchange, new developments in piano building occurred at enormous speed precisely at Beethoven's time. This in turn opened up new possibilities for pianists and composers and was an important prerequisite to the formation of the Classical and Romantic styles. Beethoven helped Streicher to sell instruments a number of times. In 1810 he arranged to have an instrument sent to the Frankfurt pianist Dorothee Krug which she could not use: Beethoven had not passed on the mensuration and the instrument was thus pitched too low. She could not play it with an orchestra. A new instrument was then delivered. Beethoven picked out an instrument for Baron Schall in Vienna. He sent Streicher a sheet of paper with his signature on it which probably was supposed to be mounted on the damper board of that instrument.

(Case 8) Nannette Streicher did not build her instruments on stock, but rather to the specifications of her customers. In 1811, Count Apponyi ordered an especially elaborate instrument for the wife of the Elector of Baden. Johann Friedrich Reichardt reported in his „Confidential Letters“ about the exceptionally high level of the house concerts at the Streicher's, who opened up a concert hall in 1812 which could hold an audience of up to 300 people.

(Case 9) Nannette Streicher rendered seemingly trivial, but actually extremely important assistance to Beethoven as his adviser in household matters, especially in the years 1817-1818. Beethoven moved to their neighborhood for this very purpose. He often was vexed by his household staff. Once when his scullery maid, Baberl, interrupted him constantly, he took up in desperation a heavy armchair which stood by his bed and threw it at the maid. „After that I had a whole day of peace,“ he concluded triumphantly.

Room 12 on the ground floor at the right: In the right-hand case are busts of Friedrich Schiller, Beethoven and Andreas Streicher. The latter two were displayed in niches in the walls of Streicher's piano salon (see the lithograph on the wall). Streicher had ordered the Beethoven bust for this purpose in 1812 from Franz Klein, who took a living mask from Beethoven in order to make it. The Schiller bust was a gift to Streicher from a pupil who in this way wanted to encourage him to finish writing his memoirs about his flight from Stuttgart in 1782 together with Schiller. It appeared posthumously (see the first edition). Joseph Stieler, the creator of the famous Beethoven portrait in Room 8, painted around 1850 (together with his son) the work „The Flight of Schiller and Streicher“ (on the wall, on loan from the Biberach Museum). Schiller is holding the manuscript of his „Fiesco“ in his hand. The play received its first performance in Bonn. In 1823 it was suggested to Beethoven that he set this work to music, but he never did.

Case 1: In 1801 Andreas Streicher wrote his „Brief Remarks about Playing, Tuning and Preserving the Pianoforte“ from his own workshop (beside it: contemporary tools for tuning a Hammerclavier). The instrument on exhibit (Württembergisches Landesmuseum, Stuttgart, loan Sorms-Klincker-

fuß) was made in 1805. With this instrument, Nannette Streicher for the very first time carried further the principles of construction which she had taken over from her father. Nannette and Andreas Streicher died in 1833 within a few months of each other. The eulogy on Nannette was written by Andreas himself. Both are buried in a tomb in Vienna's Central Cemetery, very near to Beethoven.

Case 2: Their son, Johann Baptist, became Vienna's leading piano manufacturer. In 1821-22 he undertook an extensive European tour which also brought him to Bonn and London. In his travel journal he records visits to Nikolaus Simrock and to Thomas Broadwood in London, who ran the largest piano factory of all at that time. On the basis of his notes, Johann Baptist Streicher was able to give Beethoven advice when he was planning a journey to England in 1825. After the death of his mother in 1833 he took over the workshop. At that time, an inventory was made which recorded everything that was in the workshop, down to the last screw. In 1839 Johann Baptist Streicher was named „Royal and Imperial Court Fortepiano Maker“. His son, Emil, managed the business until 1896. During three generations approximately 8600 instruments were built.

M.L. / J. C. B.

A detailed catalogue of the exhibition can be purchased at the ticket office or in the Museum Shop.