



# In the open air

## Beethoven and Nature

Special exhibition  
at the Beethoven-Haus Bonn

3<sup>rd</sup> of November –  
19<sup>th</sup> of December 2017

**BTHVN**  
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BEETHOVEN-HAUS  
BONN

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Cover: Beethoven composes the Pastoral, aquatint etching after a drawing  
by Franz Hegi, circa 1839, collection Hans Conrad Bodmer, Beethoven-Haus Bonn

The special exhibition *In the open air - Beethoven and Nature* focuses on an essential aspect of the composer's life: Beethoven's relation to nature not only offers insight into his attitude of mind and his view of everyday existence but also into his musical creativity and compositional process. 'Nature' covers many things; the exhibition presents various approaches to the subject.

## Beethoven's life with nature

Beethoven's affinity with nature showed itself already when he was a child. It is said that as a boy, he spent hours on the roof with a telescope, viewing the Rhine and the Siebengebirge, a range of high hills visible on the horizon to the southeast of Bonn. From 1799 onwards, he would also have been able to enjoy nature on the long walks he took, not far from Vienna, during his yearly summer holidays in the country. These walks, and others that he undertook in his free time, were not the same as the daily walks he took, both as moments for composing and simply as a form of exercise in the fresh air. These regular walks he continued during the autumn and winter months in Vienna. Beethoven was not afraid of wind and weather (**showcase 1: *Beethoven in ugly weather, photography (autotype) after a watercolour by Johann Nepomuk Hoechle, 1820-1825***). In an article in the *Stuttgarter Morgenblatt* (Stuttgart Morning News) of the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 1823 Johann Sporschils wrote: "But above all he loves nature. It is not easy for him to spend a whole day in his room even in the worst winter weather and when he is in the countryside in the summer, he is usually already in God's flowering garden before sunrise."

The sketchbooks Beethoven took with him during his walks helped with capturing and the ordering of his musical ideas. Although he thus composed on his walks, this is not to say that he necessarily drew direct inspiration from the nature around him. Compared with busy urban life in Vienna (*Beethoven in the streets of Vienna, reproduction of a painting by Lazar Binenbaum, circa 1904*), life in the country not only gave Beethoven more freedom of movement but above all rest and the opportunity for undisturbed work.



All his life, Beethoven had a longing for his homeland by the Rhine. This longing was expressed in a letter of 1801 to his youth friend, Franz Gerhard Wegeler: "My fatherland, the beautiful place in which I first saw the light of the world, I still always have as beautifully and clearly before my eyes as it was on the day I left you. In short, the day on which I can see you there again and bring greetings to our Father Rhine I shall regard as one of the happiest of my life." (*View of the city of Bonn from the Kreuzberg, etching by Johann Ziegler after a watercolour by Lorenz Janscha, 1792, shown on the wall*).

From the year 1799 onwards, Beethoven usually spent the months May or June to September or October in various summer quarters (*General view from Nussdorf in the direction of the city of Vienna, etching by Joseph and Peter Schaffer, circa 1800; The Helenental by Baden with a view of the castles 'Rauhenstein' and 'Rauheneck', engraving by János Blaschke after a drawing by Ludwig Maillard, circa 1805, shown on the wall*). The aristocracy, who, so to say, gave the example, also left the city in the summer and retired to their country properties. Not infrequently however, Beethoven's summer change meant moving out of his city apartment to country surroundings where the rent prices were lower. With his increasingly poor health, Beethoven chose spas for his summer residence. They offered healing through thermal or sulphur baths (*The Beethoven House in Heiligenstadt near Vienna, Pfarrplatz 2, watercolour by Gottfried Bürklein, 1868, shown on the wall*). Beethoven spent the autumn months of the year 1826 with his brother Johann on the 'Wasserhof' estate in Gneixendorf near Krems (*The 'Wasserhof' in Gneixendorf, watercolour by Max Unger, circa 1939*). Here he completed opus 135, his last string quartet (**showcase 2:** *Beethoven, Quartet for two violins, viola and cello, F major op. 135, parts, autograph, 1826*). This work was published in Berlin by Schlesinger and it was to him that Beethoven wrote on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October 1826: "At last I managed to be in the country; a real recuperation for me after having to spend the summer in the city. [...]"

Stripped away is the fatigue of the city and I feel myself better disposed."

A notebook page written by Beethoven (*Beethoven, notes as well as sketches for an unknown work, autograph, 1810*) in the year 1810 shows that he toyed with the idea of having an estate near Krems where he would keep horses; with this idea in mind he made notes of advertisements for properties he found in a Viennese newspaper of the 6<sup>th</sup> of October 1810.



Josefine Allmayer,  
Beethoven walking in  
the woods, silhouette,  
Vienna, around  
1920–1925, collection  
Hans Conrad Bodmer,  
Beethoven-Haus Bonn

## Nature as part of Beethoven's work

Nature is well known to have had its part in Beethoven's work, especially and in the first place in the country idyll presented in the Sixth Symphony, the 'Pastoral Symphony' op. 68 (**showcase 3:** *Beethoven, Symphony no. 6, F major, parts, first edition, Breitkopf & Härtel, Leipzig, 1809*). The immediate impression is that the inspiration for this symphony must have come from nature during a country walk. The first sketches for the Pastoral may be dated to the year 1807 however, by which time Beethoven's deafness can be shown to have become severe. Beethoven himself, in a letter to his publisher, pointed out that the music is meant to be "an expression of feeling rather than a description" (the latter words were also included in the first edition). Natural phenomena such as rolls of thunder, lightning and bird song (*Beethoven, Symphony no. 6, score, autograph, 1808*) must still have been present in Beethoven's memory but not obtained directly through his senses at the time of writing. The drawing by Franz Hegi 'Beethoven composes the Pastoral', made in about 1839, must therefore be classified as romantic (*Beethoven composes the Pastoral, aquatint etching after a drawing by Franz Hegi, circa 1839; see also showcase 4*).

## Over-romanticising of the Beethoven image

Beethoven's love of nature spoke to the imagination of artists and, especially in the twentieth century, both the image of Beethoven himself and his relationship with nature were over-romanticised. Sources for the romantic image were provided by a variety of biographical anecdotes about the composer as a walker and, above all, by the Pastoral Symphony with its vivid musical descriptions of nature. Inspired by the idea of a relationship with nature, countless depictions of Beethoven wandering in the woods or composing in natural surroundings appeared, starting already in the first half of the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth (**showcase 4:** *Beethoven wearing a cloak, standing in a stormy landscape holding a scroll, photograph of an engraving by Paul Barfus after a painting by Fritz Schwörer, around 1870; Beethoven making a walk near Vienna, photograph by Karl Steinle after a painting by Wilhelm Faßbender, 1937*). Besides Beethoven's love of nature, his deafness and the isolation this brought him also spoke to the exaggeration of the romantic imagination. Various painters showed Beethoven, melancholy and withdrawn, wandering alone in the countryside surrounding Vienna. This image of the "solitary master", one who only found consolation and understanding in the encounter with godly nature, was widespread. (*"The solitary master": Beethoven walking in nature, reproduction by the art publisher Hermann A. Wiechmann after a painting by Julius Schmid, circa 1960; Beethoven at the Alsbach, print by Otto Felsing after an etching by Moritz van Eyken, 1903–1904*).

## Beethoven and nature in written texts

Considering the various perspectives - Beethoven as a wanderer, as a composer - the question arises as to how he expressed himself on nature and about his feelings for nature. What do his letters relate?

This also requires a differentiated approach: Beethoven not only described nature as giving health and as "ravishingly beautiful" (**showcase 5:** *Beethoven to Archduke Rudolph in Baden, Baden, 27th of May 1813*) but also saw himself imprisoned and fettered because of his health, above all by his deafness. He wrote to Carl Amenda in 1801: "How often I would like to have you here with me, for your B[eethoven] is most unhappy, quarreling with Nature and the Creator who I have cursed more than once for exposing his creatures to the least hazard, often breaking and destroying the most beautiful flower. You should know

that my noblest possession, my hearing, has greatly deteriorated [...]" (*Beethoven to Carl Amenda in Wirben, Vienna, 1st of July 1801, autograph*). In those days, the understanding of health and disease, especially with regard to diagnosis and cure, was more limited so that it was not unusual to resort to religious and metaphysical contexts for explanations.

Sophia Allef

translation: Michael Latcham



Ludwig van Beethoven, Symphony no. 6, F major op. 68 "Sinfonia pastorale", score, autograph, 1808, first page, Beethoven-Haus Bonn

# Beethoven Pastoral Project

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The BEETHOVEN PASTORAL PROJECT invites artists from all over the world to form a network through their engagement with Beethoven's 'Pastoral' Symphony, to take a stance against the degradation of the environment and to stand up for the UN's sustainability goals formulated in the Paris Agreement with a performance of 'their Pastoral' at the World Environment Day of the United Nations in 2020.

An initiative of BTHVN2020 in collaboration with the UNFCCC.

[www.beethoven-pastoral-project.com](http://www.beethoven-pastoral-project.com)

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