

# Moritz von Schwind and Ludwig van Beethoven

A Romantic artist and his passion for music

A special exhibition at the Beethoven House

December 17th 2004 to March 13th 2005



## Showcase 1: Schwind and Beethoven in Vienna

When the artist Moritz von Schwind (1804-1871) was born in Vienna, Ludwig van Beethoven was 34 years old and already a prominent figure in the music world. For the young painter and his friends the composer was one of the most influential figures of the age.

In particular Franz Schubert, who was Schwind's closest friend in the 1820s, revered Beethoven. After he had admired the older master for some years from a distance, he visited him several times in March 1827. During one visit he probably presented Beethoven with a booklet of pen drawings which Schwind had made in 1825 after seeing a performance of Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro". Schwind depicted Figaro's wedding procession and incorporated some exotic and allegorical figures into the series of pictures. Beethoven must have found the drawings interesting, for he kept them in his possession until his death, a fact which Schwind later noted on the cover of the booklet.

## Showcase 2: Schwind and Music

Although Schwind's circumstances changed radically when he left Vienna in the summer of 1827, his interest in Beethoven and his music remained the same, and contact with musicians was always an indispensable element in the artist's pursuit of a satisfying personal and intellectual life.

The court singer Karoline Hetzenecker played a particularly important part. Schwind greatly admired her and portrayed her time and time again in her most famous stage roles, for instance as "Leonore" in Beethoven's opera "Fidelio". In 1848 he produced a special tribute, in which a group of musicians and composers are shown paying the singer their respects. In the clouds above the main scene, Mozart and Beethoven can be seen joining in the applause.

## Showcases 2-3 and left-hand wall: "Fidelio"

During the last ten years of his life Schwind regularly occupied himself with the subject of opera. For example in 1870 he produced four drawings on Beethoven's "Fidelio" in which he depicted certain scenes from the opera from the perspective of a theatre audience, whereby his main aim was obviously to capture particularly dramatic moments of the plot and at the same time stick as closely as possible to the stage directions in the opera's scenario.

Schwind's artistic preoccupation with opera reached a peak in the 1860s, when he was commissioned to decorate the loggia of the new Royal Opera House in Vienna. He used themes from Mozart's "Magic Flute" and for the foyer he painted scenes from the most important European operas of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Among these paintings is one which is dedicated to Beethoven's work for the stage. On the left and right of the lunette are themes from "Fidelio", whereas the central picture can be linked not only with "Fidelio" but also with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's drama "Egmont", for which Beethoven wrote an accompaniment, because both works contain a scene in which a prisoner has a vision of freedom. The correct interpretation of this illustration is still a matter of contention today. It is quite probable that when Schwind composed his picture he deliberately gave it a double meaning.



#### **Showcases 4 - 5:**

##### **Beethoven – viewed with earnest and with humour**

In addition to the paintings in which Moritz von Schwind dealt with Beethoven's compositions, he also produced a small group of works which had the composer himself as their main theme.

Among these were three drawings which have long since disappeared and which are today known only through a reproduction published around 1896. At that time the owner of the drawings assumed that they illustrated Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata", but in view of the sophisticated construction of Schwind's other works on musical subjects, this seems somewhat unlikely.

The series of pictures shows how Beethoven, during a walk in the forest, sees a dying young woman to whom a vision of the Virgin Mary with the Christ child appears. Back in his apartment, the composer transposes the experience into music, while an angel with a palm branch bends over him from above. With this interpretation, which uses themes taken from sacral art, the scene complies exactly with the spirit of the romantic adoration of Beethoven which was prevalent in the mid 19th century.

In later years Schwind adopted a very different, more humorous approach to his portrayals of Beethoven, as is evident in the series of illustrations, known as the "Lachner Roll", done for his friend Franz Lachner. On the first page Beethoven is shown sitting in the fork of a big tree holding a sheet-music manuscript titled "Eroica". The composer's posture is an allusion to baroque allegory, but the portrait of Beethoven is by no means idealised. Indeed his distinctive facial features are deliberately exaggerated and his luxurious head of hair reproduced as a mass of bizarre curls. The second portrayal of Beethoven in the "Lachner Roll" is a similar kind of caricature.

Among Schwind's humorous works is a study of Beethoven's head which was probably drawn in preparation for the portrayals in the "Lachner Roll". Although Beethoven's facial features are exaggerated in the picture, it seems to be less of a distorting caricature. Indeed it more closely resembles a spontaneous and lively snapshot which has been drawn from memory.

The distinctive feature of Schwind's later pictures of Beethoven is their very human perception of the composer, which is in contrast to the typically romantic and idealised treatment of artists which was prevalent in the 19th century. It almost seems that the painter had developed a new understanding of the composer's nature, which indeed contained his own sense of humour and ridicule.

#### **Showcases 6 - 7 and right-hand wall:**

##### **"A Symphony" – Music in pictures**

The idea of translating musical images into pictures was something that preoccupied Schwind all his life. He was continuously searching for a language of form which could reproduce in a picture the special atmosphere as well as the structure of a chosen piece of music. These efforts are evident in the composition of his work "A Symphony", painted in 1852.

Schwind himself said that the inspiration for this picture came from Beethoven's Choral Fantasy Opus 80 (Beethoven's handwritten transcript of the singing voices is on display in Showcase 7). Accordingly, the undermost of the four main illustrations, which shows a scene from a concert, alludes directly to Beethoven's composition. In Schwind's opinion the instrumentation shown in the picture makes it quite obvious which piece of music is being performed. The reference to Beethoven is reinforced by the fact that a garlanded bust of the composer can be seen in the background. Some of the figures in the picture are drawn as commemorative portraits: on the left-hand side Franz Grillparzer, Michael Vogl, Josef von Spaun and Franz Schubert are recognisable, the conductor in the upper part of the picture bears a clear resemblance to Franz Lachner, and the singer, who is standing amidst the group at the front, is obviously Caroline Hetzenecker. Maximiliane von Brentano is sitting at the piano and Schwind himself can be seen next to her. Admittedly the artist has drawn himself not as a young man but as one in his fifties, so that past and present are mixed within the picture.

The decorative design of the border is intended to reproduce the atmosphere of Beethoven's piece of music. Schwind interpreted the last movement of the Choral Fantasy as a "hymn of praise to the joys of the indulgence of Nature" and for that reason pictured the four winds, the seasons, the times of day and the refreshment of travel.

In the construction of the central scenes and the composition of their contents, the artist used the classical structure of a symphony. The set of pictures is made up of four parts, just like the four movements of a symphony. The above mentioned large concert scene, in which a singer attracts a young man's attention, corresponds to the opening movement. The next picture shows the young couple meeting again in the forest. It has a peaceful and lyrical effect, imitating the "Andante" movement of a symphony. The third picture in the set, a frieze, shows couples dancing at a masked ball, a scene reminiscent of the way in which the third movement of a symphony was typically arranged as a dance. The crowning glory – the finale of the symphony and the happy end of Schwind's tale – is contained in the upper, semi-circular picture, in which the pair are shown returning from their honeymoon and catching sight of their future home in the distance.

The picture "A Symphony" was originally intended to be hung in a music room. For the opposite wall Schwind planned a painting similar in its arrangement to Mozart's "Magic Flute". This picture was never painted however, and only exists in the form of preliminary sketches. The concept of this composition was much closer to traditional methods of treating operatic themes than Schwind normally used, for the individual themes were taken from the plot of the opera, rather than them being interpretations of a piece of music.

Although Schwind was never actually able to complete his Music Room project, the works he produced for it clearly demonstrate the lasting importance which music had for his art. Throughout his life Schwind remained true to the ideas emanating from Franz Schubert's circle of friends, and the works of the Viennese composers were always at the centre of his artistic concepts.

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