

Prague. A centre of music in Beethoven's time

A special exhibition at the Beethoven House
in co-operation with the
National Museum - Czech Museum of Music, Prague,
for the Beethoven Festival 2004, 10th

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The motto of the Beethoven Festival 2004 is „Bohemia“, and the special exhibition duly illuminates different aspects of the music metropolis Prague. The city has been able to preserve its great music tradition, which reached a peak during Beethoven's time, until the present day.

Between 1796 and 1812 Beethoven visited Prague at least four times. The exhibits on display in **Showcase 1 in Room 7, „Beethoven and Prague“**, bear witness to this fact. It is also known that he visited the West Bohemian spa towns Karlsbad, Franzensbad and Teplitz, as well as the Silesian town of Grätz near Troppau. On the whole, however, there is very little documentation, since his visits created less interest than Mozart's had. Indeed the only mention of his first visit in 1795, to give a concert at a music academy, is to be found in a dictionary of musicians published in Prague by Dlabacz in 1815. Beethoven accompanied his Bohemian patron Prince Carl Lichnowsky on the latter's ambassadorial journeys to Upper Silesia, and stayed in Prague between February

and April 1796. During this time he gave concerts in the salons of the aristocracy and made new acquaintances. Two compositions, for mandolin and piano, were dedicated to the musically gifted Countess Josephine Clary. The Variations WoO 44 are on display in Beethoven's original handwritten version. The scene and aria „Ah Perfido“, first performed in Leipzig by the outstanding Prague singer Josephine Duschek and shown here in the first edition, was also dedicated to the Countess. In addition, Beethoven composed six German dances for piano and violin for the Thun sisters. The one still existing ticket proves that on 11th March 1796 Beethoven performed a public concert, which he had organised himself, in the Konviktsaal in Prague. The composer became friends with the magistrate of the County Court of Appeals, Jan Kanka, who became his legal advisor and who later counselled him in the negotiations with Prince Ferdinand Johann Kinsky and Prince Franz Joseph Lobkowitz regarding the payment of his pension. (These negotiations were the cause of Beethoven's last visits to Prague in July and October 1812.) In the autumn of 1798 Beethoven gave two concerts in which he presented himself as composer and musician. Among other works he performed his piano concertos op. 15 and op. 19, which he re-arranged for the occasion. In his autobiography, published in 1845-1850, Wenzel Johann Tomaschek (1779-1850) writes about these performances and gives his opinion on the subject „Beethoven as composer and performer“.

Showcases 2 and 3 give an outline of the *concert scene in Prague* in Beethoven's time. Although at that time there were fewer public concerts than in other comparable European cities and a permanent orchestra did not exist, there was nevertheless a continuous exchange of musical ideas. Semi-public performances regularly took place in the salons of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie. In aristocratic homes the musicians were usually professionals, whereas the bourgeois hosts generally engaged so-called dilettantes, who were talented and enthusiastic, but who did not earn their living by playing. Music academies also took place each week in various locations. Most often it was chamber music which was performed with different orchestrations, whereas full orchestra performances

remained an exception. The concert programme on display in **Showcase 2** illustrates the type of „assorted agenda“ which was popular at the time. The Yearbook of Musical Art of Vienna and Prague of 1796, displayed in **Showcase 3**, contains not only a directory of dilettantes and composers, but also much additional information and gives a comprehensive picture of the Prague music scene. Also on display are the articles of the Prague Society of Music Artists, which was founded in 1803 and which organised at Easter and Christmas the first regular performances of large-scale oratorios, such as Händel's „Messiah“ and Haydn's „The Creation“.

The Church played a particularly important role, because it enabled all segments of the population to come into contact with music. The most important centres in Prague are shown in the section *Music and the Church* (**Showcases 4 and 5**). Music was also performed at ceremonies which took place outside the churches themselves, for instance at processions or pilgrimages. Despite all the limitations and interdictions imposed by the Josephine Reforms (the religious services and prayer ordinance valid for Prague from 1st May 1784 is on display), the culture of music did not completely vanish from the churches, although the dissolution of the monasteries led to the disappearance of many important centres of music and had a negative influence on the training of young musicians. This void was partially filled with the foundation of the Prague Conservatory in 1811, although far fewer musicians could be instructed there than in the monasteries.

Theatre and Music: opened in 1783, the 1000-seat Nostitz National Theatre (**Showcase 6**) played a key part in the development of Bohemian theatre, which in the beginning was supported almost entirely by the aristocracy. Mozart's operas „Don Giovanni“ and „La Clemenza di Tito“ had their world premieres at the Nostitz Theatre and opera thus became available to all who could afford the entrance fee. This was a great step towards the emancipation of the bourgeoisie. The lower classes however preferred the so-called „Penny Theatre“ with its greater proportion of music. The repertoire of the different Prague theatres

included operas and musical comedies by German, Austrian, Italian, French and Bohemian composers; among the performing groups were such well-known companies as that of the Italian impresarios Pasquale Bondini and Domenico Guardasoni.

Showcase 8 on the Ground Floor, **Room 12**, contains views of some important centres connected with the subject *Aristocracy and Music*. In the late 18th Century concerts were held every week during the winter at the nobles' palaces. Aristocratic families, who usually had several residences, also spent much of the year away from Prague, in cities such as Vienna. Most nobles had disbanded their private orchestras, which meant that local and foreign musicians were engaged for each individual concert. Only Count Pachtá retained a permanent ensemble. The aristocrats would often play with the orchestra (their favourite instruments were the strings, piano or flute), but they rarely went as far as to dedicate a composition to themselves.

The importance of the formal dance is shown in **Showcase 9 – Amusement and Music**. As in other European cities, dances and balls became increasingly popular with the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. Dances were held in the aristocrats' palaces or at the Konviktsaal. Although the tradition of the elite ball, which remained a privilege of the aristocracy, continued into the 1820s, simpler forms of dance, such as the Anglaise, Ecossaise, contra dance and barn dance, grew in popularity as the formal ceremony surrounding dancing became less and less rigid. And so here too the gap between the classes began gradually to diminish.

In those days music was normally distributed by means of handwritten copys, although sometimes a composer would take the trouble to print and publish his works himself. It was not until 1811 that the Italian Marco Berra founded the first specialised *Music Publishing Company* in Bohemia. Well-known book publishers such as J.F. von Schönfeld, Carl Enders, Karl Barth and Carl Joseph Helmer also began to include music compositions in their catalogue (Helmer published works by Haydn und Mozart). These

were usually pieces for piano or guitar, songs or piano scores. Examples are on display in **Showcase 10**.

The dissolution of the monasteries and in particular the disbandment of the Jesuit Order had a negative influence on *Music Education* in Bohemia for at least thirty years. The basic music tuition in schools, where the teachers were often also church organists or choir leaders, was followed by a vacuum, since the teaching of more advanced music theory and practice, as well as a more thorough grounding in music literature, had been the domain of the monasteries. The few professional musicians and itinerant virtuosi such as Abbé Vogler, who lectured in music theory 1801/1802, could not hope to provide more than marginal relief. Hefty public criticism of this crisis in music education finally led to the founding of the Prague Conservatory in 1811.

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