

Two Important Men of Bonn - Franz Gerhard Wegeler and Ludwig van Beethoven

“Only the ever unwaivering, firm principles of Good
held us nevertheless always bound closely together”.

Special Exhibition in the Beethoven House Bonn
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Franz Gerhard Wegeler and his wife Eleonore, née von Breuning, were among Beethoven’s closest friends. A year before Beethoven’s death, Wegeler summed up as follows: “For me at least, the acquaintance and the close boyhood friendship with you, encouraged by your dear mother, was a very bright spot in my life, which I look back on with pleasure and which occupies my time especially when I am travelling. Now I look up to you as to a hero and am proud to be able to say that I was not without influence on his development, that he confided in me his wishes and dreams, and when he was later so frequently misunderstood, I at least knew well what he wanted. Praise God that I may talk about you with my wife and now with my children, for my mother-in-law’s house was more your home than your own family’s house, particularly after you had lost your precious mother”.

But Franz Gerhard Wegeler’s importance is by no means confined to his friendship with Beethoven. He was for a time Rector of the University of Bonn, before he later became an

outstanding physician and, as a civil servant first in the French and after 1814 in the Prussian administration, he was able thanks to his wisdom and great perseverance to bring about important improvements in the medical care of the Rhineland. In particular the training of qualified midwives cannot be overestimated, in a time of high infant mortality which had affected the Beethoven family as well as so many others. This exhibition seeks to illustrate the diversity of his work.

1st Floor Room 7 *Showcase 1:* Wegeler introduced the 11-year-old Beethoven into the von Breuning family. After interruptions due to Wegeler’s period of study in Vienna between 1787 and 1789 and Beethoven’s departure for Vienna in November 1792, they met regularly in 1794-1796 when Wegeler was living in Vienna again because of the French occupation of Bonn. It was shortly after Wegeler’s first return from Vienna that Beethoven wrote a transcription for piano of C.F.D. Schubart’s “Kaplied” (“Cape Song”), a sublime indictment of Duke Carl Eugen of Württemberg, who had sold an army of mercenaries which was sent to the Cape. Wegeler and his wife Eleonore remained friends with Beethoven all his life, although Beethoven found it difficult to write letters to them in particular, and in fact did so quite infrequently. In his letter of 28th December 1825 Wegeler took the opportunity of renewing the contact with Beethoven after so many years. He recalled their shared boyhood in Bonn and their close band of friendship. Although this letter must have delighted Beethoven, it was a year before he replied. He often had difficulty expressing his feelings in words, and although he had an answer ready in his head, he was not able to formulate it. He gave notice that he would be sending the portrait displayed here, but in fact it was put aside and did not reach his friend until shortly after Beethoven’s death. The hand-written dedication reads: “To his long-standing, revered and much loved friend F. v. [!] Wegeler from LOUIS VAN BEETHOVEN“.

On the wall is a view of the original University of Bonn, as well as portraits of Wegeler (done in the year of Beethoven’s death) and his later wife sitting at the square piano when she was about 13 years old. At that time she was being given piano lessons by Beethoven, who was only four months her senior. He considered her one of the “best and most adorable girls in Bonn”.

Showcase 2: Wegeler began in 1783 to study medicine at the Bonn Academy. His teachers were the court counsellor Franz Wilhelm Kaulhen (who until 1783 was the only lecturer in

medicine), in pathology, practical medicine, police medicine and the writing of prescriptions, the privy councillor Peter Wilhelm de Gynetti in physiology, semiotics and botany, and the highly esteemed anatomist and surgeon Joseph Claude Rougemont, who in 1783 was appointed by the Prince Elector Max Friedrich as his court physician in Bonn. In addition, the new Prince Elector Max Franz brought with him his own court physican Martin von Ney from Vienna, who duly received a fourth professorship in obstetrics.

In November 1786 a grand celebration took place to mark the official raising of the Academy to the status of university. In the presence of the Elector and his guests there were scientific disputations, in the course of which Kaulhen spotlighted his student Wegeler by making a dissertation written by him concerning breathing and lung functions the subject of the medical disputation. Thus made aware of him, Prince Elector Max Franz sent Wegeler, as he did Beethoven, in 1787 to Vienna to further his studies. For two years Wegeler continued his studies at the Medical-Surgical Joseph’s Academy.

Wegeler later translated from the French three medical papers by Rougemont, for instance about rabies and vesicants. In 1789 Wegeler returned from Vienna to succeed von Ney as Professor of Obstetrics. In 1793, after Rougemont’s resignation, he was voted Rector by the University Senate. In that capacity he signed on 4th September 1794 a petition to the Prince Elector.

Displayed in *Showcase 3* is an exceedingly rare instrument: an orphica. Carl Leopold Röllig invented this instrument in 1795 and immediately procured an Imperial patent for it. He described it as follows: “an instrument which, in its construction, differs greatly from the theorbo, the lute, the English or Spanish zither (cithara) and which far surpasses them all with regard to its sweetness of sound and variety of modulation.” It is a fortepiano (Hammerklavier) of light-weight construction with steel or gut strings. Reminiscent of the lyra in its shape, it made piano playing (and the accompaniment of songs) possible in the open air, for its lightness and a carrying strap made it easy to transport. Its invention was a result of the “music making rage” of the time. In his own words, Röllig „created it by its nature for tranquility and gentle feelings - for the night, for friendship, for love“. The orphica had a range of no more than three to four and a half octaves. The sound can be modified by a damping system and lute stop. The orphica’s keys were so narrow that the instrument could only be played by ladies or children, and

indeed they were the targeted group. Lorenz von Breuning probably brought his sister Eleonore an orphica to Bonn when he returned home in October 1797, having finished his medicine studies in Vienna. As a leaving present Beethoven gave him two pieces, in C major and F major, specially composed for Eleonore, which took into account the specific capabilities of this instrument. The original handwritten score is kept in the Wegeler Collection.

The brown stained oak wood shrine with ornaments and water-colour double portrait of Beethoven (after Joseph Karl Stieler) and Franz Gerhard Wegeler (after Rudolf von Norman) has since 1912 accommodated very good photographs of Wegeler’s and Beethoven’s manuscripts in the inside of the lid. It was a present from Carl Wegeler, grandson of Franz Gerhard Wegeler, to the Beethoven House, to which the Wegeler family then ten years ago gave over its entire collection on permanent loan.

Showcase 4: During his second stay in Vienna, Franz Gerhard Wegeler counted the surgeon Johann Nepomuk Hunczovsky among his circle of friends. Among the professors of the Joseph’s Academy were also Johann Adam Schmidt, who was later Beethoven’s doctor, and Wilhelm Schmitt. In his letter of 23rd July 1796 to Wegeler, Hunczovsky mentioned them both, as well as sending greetings to Rougemont and Christoph von Breuning. Wilhelm Schmitt lectured in obstetrics, as did the chemistry and botany professor Joseph Jakob Plenck, which proved to be of particular importance with regard to Wegeler’s subsequent work. Simon Zeller, head obstetrician at the newly opened natal institute, reformed obstetrics by propagating natural childbirth even in difficult circumstances (see Showcase 1 in Room 12 on the ground floor). In his letter, Hunczovsky made his sympathy for his former pupil clear in many ways. The latter had left Vienna a month earlier to return to Bonn. Hunczovsky informed him first of all in confidence about his election to the Medical-Surgical Joseph’s Academy, which at that time was at the peak of its fame and the membership of it was a great honour.

It can be gathered from Stephan von Breuning’s letter of 23rd November 1796 to Wegeler and his brother Christoph that on “one of the most beautiful evenings in Vienna” the Hunczovsky family had been invited to the home of his brother Lorenz and that Beethoven and the Rombergs had played music. Bernhard Romberg had been unable to play one of Beethoven’s compositions and had railed against it, which in turn had greatly annoyed Beethoven’s patron Prince

Lichnowsky. The situation of both Rombergs in Vienna was not good. They had also left Bonn, where they had been Beethoven’s colleagues in the court music ensemble, because of the French occupation.

Showcase 5: It is an absolute stroke of luck that two silhouettes have resurfaced, which for decades was thought to have perished in the flames of the Second World War. They depict Helen von Breuning with her four children (from left to right: Eleonore, Christoph, Lorenz and Stephan) and her brother-in-law, Canon Johann Lorenz von Breuning, domestically preoccupied with reading, lacemaking, playing music or chatting to a bird respectively drinking tea. Beethoven was piano teacher to Eleonore and Lorenz, and together with Stephan he took violin lessons from Anton Ries. Helene von Breuning (see also the large portrait of her in Room 4) played an important role in Beethoven’s character development, particularly after the death of his own mother. In the adjacent letter Stephan von Breuning begs his mother to give up her resistance to a marriage between his sister Eleonore and Franz Gerhard Wegeler, “which unfavourable circumstances have postponed for too long”. The wedding finally took place on 19th March 1802. In particular it had been prevented by the moderate income of the bridegroom, who, after the dissolution of the Electoral University, had as a general practitioner for some years no substantial financial security. That, however, was in those days an essential prerequisite for marriage.

On the wall hangs a view of the von Breuning’s family residence, in which in 1889 the Beethoven House Society was founded, as well as portraits of Johann Philipp von Breuning, dean of a collegiate church in Kerpen, Stephan von Breuning and his son Gerhard, whom when he was a child Beethoven affectionately called “Trouser Button”.

Showcase 6: All members of the earlier illuminati society „Stagira“ found themselves in the Bonn Reading Society, founded in 1787, of which Wegeler was chairman in 1806/07. In 1805/06 members of the society founded the Masonic Lodge “Les Frères courageux”, and among the founders were Nikolaus Simrock and Wegeler’s close friend Franz Anton Ries. The lodge offered like-minded people who qualified according the principles of Freemasonry and who followed similar aims with the help of certain ceremonies and rites, the opportunity to practise an intensive and, thanks to the vow of secrecy, free exchange of ideas and thoughts. Beethoven never became an official member of a lodge. Wegeler adapted some of Beethoven’s songs for use in the Lodge by giving them new lyrics. The “Masonic Questions”,

adapted from “The Free Man”, was even printed in that version. For the slow movement of the piano sonata op. 2 no. 1 Wegener composed his own lyric, “The Lament”. A reflection can certainly be construed here on Beethoven’s “letter of confession” of June 1801, in which he confided to Wegeler before anyone else about his increasing deafness. Beethoven admired Wegeler as a friend and as a doctor, and surely hoped for medical advice.

Showcase 7: The Bohemian drinking glass is a present from Beethoven to Wegeler. Beethoven purchased it during his stays at the Bohemian health spas in 1811 or 1812. For Wegeler the present was not without associations, since as a medical civil servant he oversaw the quality of the health spas in his area of responsibility, for instance Bad Bertrich, where Beethoven’s former violin teacher Franz Anton Ries and his son Ferdinand, a close friend of Wegeler, took the waters. Wegeler was also a joint partner in the Tönisstein Mineral Springs, about which he produced a publication. As a foresighted and prudent physician it was his aim to improve the water-quality, which at that time was generally rather poor. He continually informed the public in newspapers about how they should behave in cases of sickness or in bad weather conditions.

He gave a friend from Bonn, who was staying in Vienna for the Congress of 1815, not only the drinking glass but also his engraved portrait for Wegeler. It bears the hand-written inscription “For my friend / Wegeler Vienna / on 27th March 1815 / L. v. Beethoven”.

Beethoven’s letter of 29th September 1816 to Wegeler contains an interesting comparison between himself and his boyhood friend: “You are man and father, I too but without a wife”. Beethoven had adopted the son of his brother Kaspar Karl, who had died ten months earlier. Beethoven writes with some pride that in this respect he has drawn level with Wegeler. He did not yet realise what problems the custody would cause him.

Showcase 8: As is reported in the Coblenzer Anzeiger newspaper of 3rd September 1839, Wegeler’s golden jubilee as a doctor was cause for extensive celebration. Because of his popularity with all social classes, the jubilee was commemorated like a public festival. Salutes were fired from the town cannons and even from the passing ships of the Cologne Steamship Company on the Rhine. A commemorative publication was produced in his honour. And a portrait of him was printed, showing him as bearer of the Order of the Red Eagle

of Prussia, which Beethoven had hoped in vain to receive, despite dedicating his Ninth symphony to the Prussian king.

The *display cabinet* contains a copy of Beethoven’s certificate of baptism. Wegeler had had to obtain the original in 1810, when Beethoven was seriously considering marriage. Shortly before Beethoven’s death Wegeler obtained the copy, because even then he had the idea of cooperating on a biography of Beethoven. All attempts by third parties were in vain, before in 1838 the “Biographic Notes on L. v. Beethoven” appeared, in which Wegeler and the composer Ferdinand Ries, who for several years had been Beethoven’s secretary, wrote down their personal recollections and published letters which the maestro had written to them. This publication is still today one of the most important sources of information with regard to Beethoven’s life. Until recently, the miniature portrait of Beethoven was considered to be the work of Franz Gerhard Wegeler. It has been in the possession of a number of prominent musicians: the Bonn Director of music Hugo Grütters, the violinist Adolf Busch, the conductor Arturo Toscanini and the pianist Rudolf Serkin. In fact the portrayal, which is based on the famous painting by Joseph Karl Stieler (the original hangs in Room 8), is the work of Franz Wegeler (1835-1894), the grandson of Franz Gerhard Wegeler. It is ample proof of the unbroken esteem in which Beethoven was held even by later generations of the family.

Room 8 on the 2nd Floor: The pianoforte on the left was made by Thomas Broadwood in London. A son of Wegeler’s friend and Beethoven’s violin teacher Franz Anton Ries worked for Broadwood from 1822. Through him Wegeler procured several pianos from the company within the space of a few years. Playing the piano was the best way for him to relax at the end of an arduous working day.

In Room 12 (at the end of the tour on the ground floor) stands a cabinet piano made by the Broadwood Company. It is a particular form of „upright piano“ in which the soundboard and strings are arranged vertically, and is a forerunner of the modern-day pianino. Franz Gerhard Wegeler bought an identical instrument in 1819.

This room provides an insight into Wegeler’s work as a physician.

Showcase 1: Both Beethoven’s and Wegeler’s own families were affected by the high rate of infant mortality. Of Beethoven’s six brothers and sisters only two survived, and two of Wegeler’s four children died in infancy. On display is the registry of deaths from the church in which Beethoven

was christened. One entry from 8th April 1769 refers to “Ludovicus Maria filius legitimus Jo[hann]is van Beethoven”. The baby lived for only six days and the Christian name was used again in the following year for our Beethoven. The register lists only children. In a time when not only many infants perished, but also many mothers died in childbirth, it is hardly surprising that as a physician Wegeler attached particular importance to obstetrics. After his return from Vienna Wegeler was appointed professor for the subject at the University of Bonn, where he introduced systematic teaching of midwifery. He wrote down his knowledge for a publication which was reprinted several times.

Showcase 2: Wegeler’s book also describes obstetrical instruments such as the clyster and the obstetrical lever, original specimens of which are on display here. As shown in the list, 25 midwives were trained in Koblenz under Wegeler’s supervision. He proposed the setting up of a examining board and the conferral of a certificate of qualification after the successful completion of the training course.

On display on the wall is the double portrait of Franz Gerhard Wegeler and his son Julius Stephan, who also began a medical career. The former also earned much credit when he forced through the establishment of a hospital for the mentally ill in the secularised Benedictine abbey in Siegburg, in which the patients were not simply locked away, but treated as far as possible therapeutically – a truly innovative approach.

Showcase 3: This very early cast of Beethoven’s life mask indicates, with the clearly noticeable scars on the surface, that Beethoven had smallpox as a child. The moulage (a moulding of diseased parts of the body made of wax or wax-resin mixture) in the glass display case shows clearly one clinical picture, which is in this case blindness. Wegeler himself will have studied with the help of the then new anatomic and obstetrical wax models, which are still on display at Joseph’s Academy. The second moulage shows how the serum is won for the vaccination against smallpox. The technique was successfully introduced in England by Edward Jenner in 1796. He heard stories among rural communities that milkmaids who had been infected with cowpox were subsequently immune not only against that virus, but also against smallpox itself. And so he derived a serum of cowpox or vaccinia virus taken from cowpox pustules.

Wegeler ordered a state-wide information campaign (see the circular) and serial vaccination. According to the table (on

the wall), nearly 10,000 children were vaccinated. After the plague epidemics had died down, smallpox was the most dangerous infectious disease. About 30% of those infected died, an estimated 400,000 persons a year. For his effort and his success in the fight against smallpox Wegeler, whose doctoral degree was not recognised by the French administration, received the degrees of “Docteur en médecine” and “Docteur en chirurgie”. Incidentally, in a letter written to Wegeler in 1819, Franz Ries mentioned that his newborn first daughter had been “vaccinated against smallpox”.

Wegeler fought a similarly systematic campaign against scabies, a widespread ectoparasite skin infection caused by the mite *Sarcoptes scabiei*. (The clinical picture is illustrated by the moulage in the next glass showcase). Wegeler compiled a list, in which he noted the numbers of the infested.

The exhibition shows that there were not only links of a personal nature between Wegeler and Beethoven, but also such as were based on the former’s work as a physician.

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The following publications connected with this exhibition are on sale in the Museum Shop: Berthold Prößler: Franz Gerhard Wegeler. Ein rheinischer Arzt, Universitätsprofessor, Medizinalbeamter und Freund Beethovens and Friederike Grigat: Katalog der Sammlung Wegeler im Beethoven-Haus.

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