

## “Beethoven Actually Heard Even Less”

**Music.** Vienna has its first Beethoven Museum. There you can contemplate the remains of his cancelled inscription to Napoleon and a bust Beethoven shattered in anger, listen as did the almost deaf composer and find the key to his coffin.

By Theresa Steininger

When one piano key is depressed, you can hear the original “Ode to Joy”; when the next one is pushed, you experience this famous fourth movement of the Ninth Symphony filtered to represent how the almost deaf Ludwig van Beethoven would have heard it. Nearby the activation of several keys conveys the progressive hearing loss of the composer through the music of the “Pathétique”. This is just one of many examples that illustrate how the creators of the new museum enable the visitors to grasp how Beethoven thought, lived, felt, and worked.

The memorial display in the Probusgasse 6, administered by the Historical Museum of Vienna, has now been expanded and transformed into the Vienna’s first Beethoven Museum. This weekend it opens those rooms, in which Beethoven lived and worked. Born at Bonn in 1770, he lived beginning in 1792 permanently in Vienna (and changed residencies roughly 42 times), and ten years later in 1802 he came for the first time to live in Heiligenstadt (today part of the 19<sup>th</sup> district, Döbling) on account of the thermal baths and to seek rejuvenation through walks in the countryside.

Up to now one could contemplate in the space of 45 square meters, and this—as research on the building has shown—was not the apartment where Beethoven likely stayed, but adjacent to it. Now the entire house, with about 250 square meters, has been utilized: in six sections the life and art of Beethoven has been presented. Not only amateurs will learn something here, but even Beethoven experts will discover new perspectives, as the scholarly co-curator William Kinderman, a worldwide recognized Beethoven researcher, emphasized in discussion with *Die Presse*. A completely unknown fragment for string quartet is presented as well as previously obscure sketches for the “Storm” Sonata, for instance. “These stand for a whole category of musical materials that are otherwise inaccessible,” says Kinderman. “Very few people are aware that Beethoven made preliminary drafts for the “Storm” Sonata.”

When the curators place next to such facsimiles crunched up music paper, as well as a coffee cup with Beethoven’s typical measurement of 60 beans, this signals that the curatorial team aims for broad accessibility. For his trip from Bonn to Vienna in 1792 we see his spiritual luggage: a traveling trunk from that time holds writings by Kant, Schiller, and Goethe and a picture of Napoleon Bonaparte, whom Beethoven initially admired, next to some of Beethoven’s early compositions. Beethoven initially intended to title his “Eroica” after Napoleon, and in another

room one sees a facsimile of the title page, on which the inscription has been scratched out. The impact is heightened, since the discarded fragments of paper are captured on a small overhang beneath the title page.

### **In Heiligenstadt and on the Himmel**

This impressive display was engineered by Peter Karlhuber; he and curator Lisa Noggler-Gürtler bring together documents and paintings that are engaging and necessary. What is added is an original mode of presentation. If one presses a certain configuration of keys on a keyboard, one hears a meaningful piece. Mineralwater bottles stand for the thermal baths, which were a reason for Beethoven's choice to come to Heiligenstadt. In another spot when one turns the wheel of a gramophone, we hear Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau sing "If I was a little bird" and learn that Beethoven found the inspiration for this song specifically in Döbling, during an excursion to the lookout point "Am Himmel". A replication of the bust of Beethoven's aristocratic supporter Lichnowsky, with whom he quarreled, lies broken apart before the viewer—since the composer smashed this bust as an outcome of a fit of anger. A carpet in this room lies angled up onto the wall, conveying the tensional relationship between the composer and the aristocracy.

Especially impressive is the room devoted to the "Heiligenstadt Testament," which is given dampened acoustics through special sound-absorbing materials on the walls. Beethoven's testament, this letter never sent to his brothers, documents his health challenges, and he writes about his progressive inability to hear, and his determination to struggle against this infirmity. One can view the facsimile of the testament, read the printed text, listen to its recited narrative and experience the progressive hearing loss Beethoven experienced by listening to recordings. Whereby—"actually we will need in my opinion to make these recordings still quieter," says Kinderman: "he actually heard even less." A conversation notebook, in which Beethoven's conversation partners wrote down their comments, is displayed, as well as listening horn devices and similar hearing aids. Even in the garden reference is made to Beethoven's disability through the installation of a large hearing horn from which the sounds of the Septet in E-flat emerge.

### **As if played by a thousand musicians**

If Beethoven heard too little, his contemporaries often heard from his music a great deal, as is conveyed by the museum. The instruments of Beethoven's day had a different sound and since there were no concert halls as exist today, and instead music was made in palaces and in salons, Beethoven's compositions could sound then as if played by a thousand musicians. This message stands near the model of the "Eroica"-Room in the Lobkowitz Palace, in a space that is devoted to the performance conditions of that time.

The death of the composer is represented not only through a death mask and the key to his coffin, but also through an action figure à la Ludwig van as well as a monumental sculpture, which is apparently just about to be hauled off for display by a moving team. One sees: here we can find very many points of entry . . .

