



COMMUNICATION: REPORT

Beethoven Exhibition at the British Library

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Among the many events affected by the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 were a number of major exhibitions planned to mark Beethoven's two hundred and fiftieth anniversary, notably in Berlin, Bonn, London and Vienna. The Berlin exhibition ("Diesen Kuß der ganzen Welt!" – Die Beethoven-Sammlung der Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin'), for example, was obliged to close only two weeks after opening, returning only for a short run in the summer of 2020. In London, the British Library had scheduled its exhibition 'Beethoven: Idealist, Innovator, Icon' to open in September 2020. Planning had been underway since 2018 and was at an advanced stage when the pandemic struck in March 2020. An initial postponement of three months allowed preparations to continue in April and May 2020, with meetings of Library staff, the academic consultant (David Wyn Jones) and the external design team (Mowat & Co.) relocating smoothly to the Zoom platform. After a further postponement of a year, the exhibition, curated by Richard Chesser and me (Rupert Ridgewell), finally opened on 3 December 2021 and ran until 24 April 2022. Although the Library had mounted smaller music-themed displays over the previous twenty years, such as 'Celebrating the Proms: From Henry Wood to Hyde Park' (2007), 'Chopin: The Romantic Refugee' (2010) and 'Poetry in Sound: The Music of Benjamin Britten' (2013), 'Beethoven: Idealist, Innovator, Icon' was the first major music exhibition to be presented in the St Pancras building, occupying one of two temporary exhibition spaces (PACCAR2), with space for around fifty objects.

The narrative offered to visitors followed a chronological path, providing an outline of Beethoven's life, work and legacy, with a particular focus on the Ninth Symphony. The Library's extensive holdings of Beethoven manuscripts, personal documents and printed material, amassed since the mid-nineteenth century, provided a rich corpus of sources to draw on. While some items had previously been displayed in the Library's Treasures Gallery, or in an earlier exhibition at the British Museum in 1970, many had not been seen in public before. At the core of the exhibition were Beethoven's music manuscripts, illustrating various aspects of the creative process, from sketches and drafts to full autograph scores and annotated copies. The works represented ranged from the earliest known draft of a symphonic movement (Hess 298) – specially extracted for the exhibition from the so-called Kafka Miscellany (Add. MS 29801) – to the score for the Violin Sonata in G major Op. 30 No. 3 (Add. MS 37767) and the pocket sketchbook for the String Quartet Op. 130 (Egerton MS 2795). Beethoven's literary interests were represented by such items as a draft of the aria 'Die Trommel gerühret' from the instrumental music to Goethe's *Egmont* (Zweig MS 8) and the canon to Schiller's text 'Kurz ist der Schmerz und ewig ist die Freude' (Zweig MS 11). Of particular note was a leaf of Beethoven's transcriptions from the poetry of Herder alongside his own personal reflections on the power of nature, written first in pencil – apparently outdoors – before being inked over (Zweig MS 15). Beethoven's hearing loss represented another sub-theme in the exhibition. Entries in Sir George Smart's journal (Add. MS 41771), for example, documented a rehearsal for the String Quartet in A minor, Op. 132, in Vienna in 1825 at which Beethoven attempted to illustrate a passage on the violin (in Smart's description) 'a quarter tone flat'.

The impact of Covid-19 was felt not just in the timing of the show, but also in some of its contents. An initial plan to feature historic recordings from the Library's extensive Sound Archive via headphones had to be abandoned to minimize physical contact points across the exhibition space. The space was also not large enough to accommodate multiple 'sound showers' (isolated ambient audio points), so instead an ambient soundtrack permeated the entire exhibition to highlight works represented in the display. This was linked to an immersive bone-conduction installation, designed by Clay Interactive Ltd, which allowed visitors to experience the music as vibration, with an accompanying visual interpretation. Visitors could place their elbows on a wooden panel and clasp their hands over their ears, allowing the vibrations created by the music to be conveyed from the panel via bones in the elbow and upper arm to the inner ear, thus bypassing the ear canal.

Covid-19 travel restrictions implemented in early December 2021 in response to the emergence of the Omicron variant meant that two key loans from the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin could not travel to London before the exhibition opened, which was the intention. Happily, a relaxation in the restrictions allowed these items – a conversation book from May 1824 (Mus.ms. autogr. Beethoven, L.v. 51,59) and part of the autograph manuscript of the Ninth Symphony (Mus.ms. autogr. Beethoven Artaria 204 (3b)) – to be added to the exhibition on 2 February 2022. For the first time in nearly two hundred years, the Ninth Symphony autograph was reunited with the manuscript copy (RPS MS 5) Beethoven sent to London in 1824 in fulfilment of the commission from the Philharmonic Society. Other letters and documents from the archive of the Society, acquired by the British Library in 2002, offered an insider view of the circumstances that surrounded the first London performance of the symphony on 25 March 1825. These included a letter from the conductor Sir George Smart, written less than two weeks before the concert, encouraging the Society to postpone the performance until Beethoven himself could come to London to oversee it himself – because 'I have not the vanity to imagine that I can fully enter in the ideas of the composer' (RPS MS 364, fol. 12r).

In his final days Beethoven received news that the Philharmonic Society was sending £100 to relieve his suffering. Beethoven's spirits were temporarily lifted and he promised the Society a Tenth Symphony, or at least an overture. Popular myth has it that Beethoven breathed his last as he raised a clenched fist in defiance of an outburst of thunder and lightning. The reality is likely to have been more peaceful, as depicted by the artist Josef Teltscher, who attended Beethoven on his deathbed. Teltscher's sketchbook (Zweig MS 207) was one of several items on display that illustrated the circumstances surrounding Beethoven's death, including a copy of the printed funeral invitation (Zweig MS 211), a document detailing expenses incurred in the funeral service (Zweig MS 212) and a lock of hair (RPS MS 406) formerly owned by 'A. F.' (Aloys Fuchs). Franz Xaver Stöber's engraving of Beethoven's funeral procession provided a striking visual representation of the unprecedented scale of and public interest in the event. This was one of several contemporary images reproduced as backdrops in the exhibition, several of them drawn from the King's Topographical Collection.

A different visual approach was adopted for the final section in the exhibition, illustrating aspects of Beethoven's legacy. Given the riches of the Library's collections, this was undoubtedly the most challenging section to curate, with space allowing for only six objects and a series of linked wall quotations and images. A few examples could merely touch on the range and depth of Beethoven's influence in popular culture, the appropriation of his music by political and social movements of many hues, and his enduring impact on composers, writers and artists. Among the objects selected for display were a copy of Johann Nepomuk Schaller's Beethoven bust, May Byron's *A Day with Ludwig van Beethoven*, published in 1910 (Hirsch 2376), and a pamphlet of songs broadcast by the BBC to Nazi-occupied France in the 1940s, including a reworking of the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony that told the French that 'they must not stop resisting, don't forget the letter V. Write it, Sing it, the V V V V' (X.439/3767).

While there was no printed catalogue, images of most of the content featured in the exhibition are available via the British Library's digitized manuscripts portal (www.bl.uk/manuscripts). A series of essays by seven UK academics on aspects of Beethoven's life and output, drawing on the Library's holdings and intended for a wide general readership, was also published on the BL's Discovering Music webpages (www.bl.uk/19th-century-music).

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