

**“Dedicated to Beethoven, the MAN”
Beethoven’s biographer
Alexander Wheelock Thayer**

**Special Exhibition at the Beethoven-Haus Bonn
19th May to 5th September 2010**

Alexander Wheelock Thayer (1817-1897) spent many years of his life producing a comprehensive Beethoven biography based on authentic primary sources. The first volume, published 1866, is preceded not by a foreword but by two letters, from the author to the translator and vice versa. In that letter he defines quite clearly his intentions: “It seems to me that Beethoven the COMPOSER is well enough known through his works, and upon that assumption I have devoted the many long and arduous years of work to Beethoven the MAN”. And indeed this quotation can be applied not only to his Beethoven biography, but also to his own life. Thus it is more than fitting that through this exhibition a wider public should be made aware of his manifold and intensely fruitful activities.

Room 7 (1st floor):

The *first two showcases* document the diversity of Thayer’s education, give an insight into his working life and demonstrate his growing interest in Beethoven. He was born in October 1817 in South Natick, Massachusetts, the eldest child of the doctor Alexander Thayer and his wife Susanna Biglow. After attending the Phillips Academy in Andover to prepare for the entrance examination for Harvard University, he enrolled there in 1839 to study philosophy, economics, physics and law. In 1843 he gained his Baccalaureus Artium with a thesis on “The Tendencies of Modern Philosophy”, followed that with a Master’s degree in 1846 and then, two years later, obtained a Law degree at the oldest still existing law school in the USA. During his time as a student he earned his livelihood as a proctor (supervisor) and as an assistant at the Harvard Library. A fervent lover of music, he attended many concerts in Boston, which was then the music metropole of the American East Coast, and wrote numerous reviews. He even occasionally composed works of his own, such as the Psalm C on display here, written to raise money towards the purchase for the town archives of Natick of a rare copy of the first bible to be printed in America in 1663. The British missionary John Eliot had founded the

first Indian church there in 1660 and had translated the bible into one of the Indian languages.

Showcase 2: Thayer was impressed by Beethoven's music and, in search of more information, read Anton Schindler's Beethoven biography (1841) and the biographic notes by Franz Gerhard Wegeler and Ferdinand Ries (1838). He noticed the numerous flaws and discrepancies and fashioned a plan to produce a biography of Beethoven based entirely on authentic sources and facts. For this purpose he travelled several times to Europe, his first journey bringing him to the city of Beethoven's birth, where he also learned the German language. His first article on Beethoven appeared in 1858 in "The Atlantic Monthly" magazine, its theme being the composer's childhood and youth. After extensive research he declared the house in the Bonngasse to indeed have been Beethoven's birthplace. Thayer supported himself by working as a journalist. He wrote regular articles for the Boston Courier, New York Tribune, and Dwight's Journal of Music, as well as articles on various composers for different American encyclopaedias. A London population register of 1861 cites him as pursuing a "literary occupation". In the following year he was able to take up a permanent post as an assistant at the American Embassy in Vienna and in 1864 he was appointed U.S. consul in Trieste. His letter of appointment, signed by Abraham Lincoln, and photos of his house in Trieste are displayed on the wall, his prestigious seal of office can be seen in *Showcase 2*. In those days Trieste was an Austrian protectorate and the monarchy's only seaport. In 1866 there was a plan to appoint him U.S. consul in Vienna, which would have greatly facilitated the balancing act between his professional duties and his research on Beethoven, but the Senate failed to approve the appointment.

Thayer's first publication in book-form – "Signor Masoni and other papers of the late I. Brown" – contains 10 musical short stories, which had previously appeared separately in Dwight's Journal of Music. The book is dedicated to Auguste Grimm, the daughter of Wilhelm Grimm, with whose family Thayer had become acquainted in 1855 during his stay in Berlin.

Showcase 3: After some years of corresponding regularly with Auguste Grimm, Thayer presented her with a fragment of a Beethoven manuscript. On display is a facsimile of the draft of the score of the Scottish song "Sunset" op. 108

no. 2, with his confirmation of its authenticity and his dedication. Next to it is the original engraver's copy, with the composer's corrections, of the Scottish Songs for the first German edition which was published by Schlesinger in Berlin.

Thayer's research on Beethoven led to the publication in 1865 of the first "Chronological Catalogue of the Works of Ludwig van Beethoven", which by contrast to the catalogue of works published in 1851 did not list the composer's works in the order of their opus numbers, but rather in the order of their composition. Instead of 138 works listed in the previous catalogue, Thayer's catalogue contained 298 works – some canons were actually published here for the first time. In addition Thayer included a list of Beethoven's musical estate together with the inventory prepared for assessment and auction, although he compiled it from a different source than the copy of the auction transcript which is on display here. The book on display is Thayer's own personal copy, embellished with hand-written amendments and interesting comments. As is evident from a number of self-critical observations in letters to his translator Hermann Deiters, the author was well aware that mistakes were inevitable in such a catalogue, and he hoped to be able to make corrections in a second edition. He had met Deiters, whose photograph hangs on the wall, in 1860 during a stay in Bonn.

An impression of the copiousness of the correspondence between Thayer and his translator and assistant Deiters may be gained from the file with 125 letters and cards addressed to Deiters, on display in *Showcase 4*. The philologist, lawyer and musicologist had already been intensively involved in work on the famous Mozart biography produced by his teacher Otto Jahn. In 1866 the first volume of the Beethoven biography was published, dealing with Beethoven's life in Bonn and his first years in Vienna up to 1795. The letter to the translator, which supercedes the book's foreword, contains not only the quotation which is the title of this exhibition, but also the author's affirmation that his "one and only intention had been to uncover and communicate the exact truth". Thayer dedicated the book to his aunt Mrs. Mehetabel Adams and to the composer and founder of the Boston Music Academy Lowell Mason, whose musical collection he had catalogued. Both had been generous in their financial support of Thayer's research.

In *Showcase 5* an example can be seen of how methodical Thayer was in his work. For instance he systematically questioned contemporaries of Beethoven, such as the singer Joseph August Röckel, who sang the role of Florestan at the premiere of the second version of *Fidelio*, and the actress Antonie von Arneth, whom Beethoven had met while composing the music to Goethe's drama "Egmont", in which she played the role of Klärchen in the Viennese premiere. He also repeatedly visited places where Beethoven had been, in order to find contemporary witnesses, sift through documents or further his investigatory work.

The publication of the second volume of the biography was delayed until 1872, due to a prolonged illness of Thayer and the pressure of his consular duties. It deals with Beethoven's life between 1796 and 1806. The third volume, covering the period 1807-1816, did not appear until late 1879, because Deiters in his capacity as headmaster of a grammar school had difficulty finding enough time for his elaborate spare-time occupation.

Thayer continued his critical examination of existing literature on Beethoven and published his conclusions on fact and fantasy in "A critical contribution to Beethoven Literature". This was based on two lectures he gave to the Schiller Society, which devoted itself to nurturing German music and literature in Trieste. Three years before his death Thayer was made an honorary member of that society and in 1896 President of the Sing-Verein of the Schiller Society.

His Beethoven biography made Thayer into author who was greatly respected throughout Europe. The biographical summary, written in the third person, is possibly intended as a self-compiled entry for an encyclopaedia.

The letter to Hermann Deiters in *Showcase 6* contains a further resumé, written as the basis for an article on Thayer in the encyclopaedia "Meyers Konversations-Lexikon" (1893-1897). Thayer, who was long since a recognised authority on Beethoven, wrote around twenty articles for the most ambitious music encyclopaedia of the time: "Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians" (1879-1889), all of which were connected in some way with Beethoven. He previously contributed for Appleton's "The New American Cyclopædia" (1863) with articles on Beethoven and Bachs.

Thayer, whose health had been poor for some years, suffered further due to the pressure of all the work – his

research always had to be done adjacent to his professional duties – and complained increasingly of physical ailments and headaches. His doctor recommended him to put Beethoven to one side and find an easier topic. So he did research into the exodus of the Israelites out of Egypt and published a few articles on the subject and two books. He also wrote a fairy tale for children, that was never published, containing songs which he composed himself.

Although Thayer had in 1882 resigned from his post as U.S. consul in order to concentrate entirely on his Beethoven biography, it nevertheless made slow progress. His working efficiency was greatly reduced by his poor health, and he now also had more and more difficulty financing his research. He wrote to Deiters that his problems with the continuation of the biography were also of a factual nature, since he was finding it increasingly difficult to understand Beethoven's behaviour, particularly in the later years of his life, and to portray his characteristic traits, which were often much less than positive, in a truthful way. He found it extremely strenuous, but absolutely necessary to read Beethoven's conversation books, which the Royal Library in Berlin sent to him in Trieste, another demonstration of his excellent reputation as a Beethoven scholar. The extent of his hopelessness and despair is expressed clearly in his last still existing letter to Deiters (written at Christmas 1891).

The Beethoven-Haus Society had been founded in February 1889 with the objective of buying the birthplace, restoring it and preserving it as a place of memorial. Thayer gave his support to the society with a large benefit concert in Trieste, and he wrote numerous letters to American friends asking them for financial contributions to the Bonn project. For the society it was self-evident that Thayer's great contribution to the world's knowledge of Beethoven's biography should be rewarded with an honorary membership. His research into Beethoven's years in Bonn had led to the birthplace being identified and its symbolic value being recognised. Thayer's thankful and moving letter of reply is on display in *Showcase 7*. In the spring of 1890 the opening of the place of memorial was celebrated with a first concert of chamber music, with top-class musicians and directed by the society's honorary president, the famous violinist Joseph Joachim. In the hall of the Reading and Leisure Society there was the most comprehensive Beethoven exhibition that there has ever been, with exhibits loaned from all parts of Europe, and to

which Thayer contributed. He was always delighted when visitors came to Trieste to see his extensive Beethoven collection, which is why he limited the number of articles he lent for the exhibition. In addition to five letters written by Beethoven to his friend Nikolaus Zmeskall – one of which is on display here and another in the lower exhibition room – he provided two sketch sheets and an engraved portrait of Beethoven (a copy hangs on the wall), as well as his copy of the famous picture by Mähler, which portrays Beethoven in 1804 in an idyllic landscape. The photographs on display were taken by Emil Koch, who at that time was the best photographer in Bonn. Three years later Thayer presented the Beethoven-Haus with a copy of his bust by Francesco Pezzicar.

Deiters' widow offered out of his estate the Thayer letters to the Beethoven-Haus Society. She also made available a photograph of her deceased husband, which she wished to be displayed next to that of Thayer. Today we gladly fulfil that wish in our gallery of honorary members on the ground floor.

Showcase 8: Alexander Wheelock Thayer died at the age of 79 on 15th July 1897 in his house in Trieste. In his will he made his niece Susan Thayer Fox, the daughter of his brother Henry, as his principal heir and executor. Other heirs were his three nephews. Thayer left a respectable library of thousands of books on music, more than 100 of which were connected with Beethoven. The collection was put up for auction on 8th and 9th February 1898 by C.F. Libbie & Co. in Boston. His Beethoveniana was sent by Susan Fox to Sotheby's in London, where it was auctioned on 18th February 1899. Numerous newspapers and magazines carried the news of Thayer's death; in the Bonn General-Anzeiger Eric Prieger wrote a detailed obituary. In contrast to his work, Thayer's grave sank into oblivion, and it was not until 1964 that it was rediscovered by John Sabec, the American consul's assistant.

Thayer was thus unable to complete his Beethoven biography. In the summer of 1898 Susan Fox handed over all his research material to Hermann Deiters. Thayer himself had often called for a revised edition of the volumes which already been published, so in 1901 Deiters brought out a new edition of Volume 1. He then decided, however, to first complete the biography before revising the other volumes. He soon realised that one volume would not be sufficient to cover the last years of Beethoven's life and an appraisal of

his main works, and therefore he extended the biography to five volumes. When Deiters died in 1907 he had just been able to see the proof sheets of Volume 4. In the meantime the publishing rights had been bought by Breitkopf & Härtel, who entrusted the final revision of Volume 4 (it appeared in 1907) and the editing and publication of the last volume, due to appear in the following year, to the respected musicologist and lexicographer Hugo Riemann. In 1910/11 he also brought out the revised editions of Volumes 2 and 3, and finally in 1917 published a further revised edition of Volume 1.

Room 12 (ground floor), Showcase 1:

Thayer himself had tried many times to have an English language edition of his biography published. There is a tenuous but interesting clue regarding an English or better American edition of Thayer's Work in the form of a book that may have been published in Boston by Little, Brown & Co. in 1869 and entitled "A Biography of Ludwig van Beethoven". It is only a title page, held in the Library of Congress in Washington, and it was probably submitted to the Federal Court in Boston by an editor from Little, Brown & Co. for copyright purposes, but for any number of reasons he would never actually publish the book. After Thayer's death, Susan Fox pursued his wish when she handed over Thayer's manuscripts and his transcripts of Beethoven's conversation booklets to the musicologist Henry Edward Krehbiel, with whom Thayer had previously cooperated. His edition of three volumes was finally published despite some funding difficulties in 1921 in New York. The copyright certificate is on display on the wall, next to the portrait of Krehbiel. In the showcase are Krehbiel's own volumes, which possess an outstanding feature: Thayer's niece had also given Krehbiel 30 letters from contemporaries of Beethoven, written to Thayer, which were a source of invaluable information. He had these letters included in his edition. The book is opened here to show the letter from Anselm Hüttenbrenner, who was present when Beethoven died and who reports on his death.

The *last three showcases* contain Beethoveniana from Thayer's collection. By happy coincidence several of his manuscripts are today in the possession of the Beethoven-Haus. For instance Hans Conrad Bodmer, who in 1956 bequeathed his entire Beethoven collection to the Beethoven-Haus, had purchased some of the treasures.

Showcase 2: The print of Johann Peter Lyser's lithography from Thayer's estate was until recently in the possession of Thayer's family, whereas Lyser's letter is part of the Bodmer Collection. The sketch sheet for the Goethe song "Mignon" was already on display in the 1890 exhibition in Bonn. Edward Speyer, who knew Thayer well, had purchased it in the London auction and latterly it had also been in Bodmer's possession. Among the souvenirs was a white linen shirt which was made for Beethoven a year before his death and which Thayer received in 1864 from Joseph Hüttenbrenner, the brother of Anselm Hüttenbrenner. Thayer acquired the locks of Beethoven's hair separately from the Viennese music publisher Jeremias Bermann and from the composer Anton Halm, who in 1826, at the urgent request of his wife, had been given the locks by Beethoven himself. The shirt and the locks of hair are today part of a private collection in the USA.

The sketch for the score of the first movement of the String Quartet in B flat major op. 130, on display in *Showcase 3*, was originally part of a whole bundle of sketch sheets. The previous owner Alexander W. Thayer confirmed in the bottom right hand corner the authenticity of the handwriting. Beethoven's letter of November 1802 to Nikolaus Zmeskall (Collection H.C. Bodmer) was most probably also displayed in the 1890 exhibition in Bonn. Beethoven's bookcase stands today in the music library of the University of Pennsylvania. According to the note Thayer purchased it around 1860 from the music publisher Franz Glöggel, who in turn had acquired it from Ferdinand Piringer. The director of the Viennese Concert spirituel had purchased the bookcase at the auction of Beethoven's household effects. Of much greater interest is however the inside of the bookcase, where there is an exact plan of the layout of Beethoven's last residence in the House of the Black Spaniard (Schwarzspanierhaus). This plan was drawn by Thayer and annotated in detail by Gerhard von Breuning. It was probably made during a joint visit to the apartment to celebrate the anniversary of Beethoven's funeral on 29th March 1860. A digital reconstruction of Beethoven's last residence can be purchased as a CD-Rom in our shop.

Showcase 4: Beethoven's letter to the librettist of his opera „Fidelio“, Friedrich Treitschke, was also in Thayer's possession. He produced an expertise and a transcript. Beethoven's handwritten amendment of the trombone parts

in the 2nd and 4th movements of his 9th Symphony was originally in the possession of Franz Schubert. In 1862 Thayer offered on behalf of the widow of Schubert's brother Ferdinand sheet music from the estate of her brother-in-law to the Friends of Music Society in Vienna. Presumably that is when he came into possession of the manuscript on display.

The exhibition closes with a reference back to Thayer and his relationship with the Beethoven-Haus. Edward Hennel, a friend of the cellist of the Joachim Quartet and a member of the Beethoven-Haus Society, produced an elaborate and comprehensive commemorative album about his stay in Bonn on the occasion of the Chamber Music Festival in 1890. He reports that during the subsequent gala dinner Thayer had been "naturally the hero of the occasion". On the flyleaf Thayer autographed a portrait photo and added: "And now, is it at the Bonn or Bayreuth festival that the heart is the more touched, and the noblest emotions of the soul the more awakened and stirred to their very depths?" Hennel was also introduced to the honorary president Joseph Joachim, who had once arranged for the original so-called Leonore Sketchbooks to be sent to Thayer in Trieste (something entirely unthinkable today!), so that he could study them at leisure. The album is open at a page containing music incipits for Beethoven's later string quartets, written down and signed by the members of the Joachim Quartet. On the 4th day of the Chamber Music Festival they performed three Beethoven quartets. The etching on the wall by Ferdinand Schmutzer after his own drawing shows the Joachim Quartet performing the String Quartet op. 59, no. 3.

Also in display is a reproduction of the only existing oil portrait of Thayer, painted in Berlin in 1886 by the artist Margarete Auguste Fritze. It is today part of the comprehensive private collection of the Thayer scholar and musicologist Luigi Bellofatto. As Thayer devoted his life to Beethoven, similarly Mr. Bellofatto has effectively devoted his life to Thayer. Without his exhaustive research – published as three articles in the *Bonner Beethoven-Studien* vols. 5, 6 and 8 (2006,07,09) – his invaluable advice and his willingness to loan important objects and documents, it would have been impossible to put together this exhibition. We should like to express our grateful thanks for his uncomplicated cooperation!

N.K. / M.L.



*Alexander Wheelock Thayer joining
the first Chamber Music Festival in Bonn in 1890*

Beethoven-Haus Bonn
Bonngasse 20
D-53111 Bonn
www.beethoven-haus-bonn.de