Beethoven, Bonn and its citizens

by Manfred van Rey

The beginnings in Bonn

If ‘musically minded circles’ had not formed a citizens’ initiative early on to honour the city’s most famous son, Bonn would not be proudly and joyfully preparing to celebrate his 250th birthday today. It was in Bonn’s Church of St Remigius that Ludwig van Beethoven was baptized on 17 December 1770; it was here that he spent his childhood and youth, received his musical training and published his very first composition at the age of 12. Then the new Archbishop of Cologne, Elector Max Franz from the house of Habsburg, made him a salaried organist in his renowned court chapel in 1784, before dispatching him to Vienna for further studies in 1792.

Two years later Bonn, the residential capital of the electoral domain of Cologne, was occupied by French troops. The musical life of its court came to an end, and its court chapel was disbanded. If the Bonn music publisher Nikolaus Simrock (formerly Beethoven’s colleague in the court chapel) had not issued several original editions and a great many reprints of Beethoven’s works, and if Beethoven’s friend Ferdinand Ries and his father Franz Anton had not performed concerts of his music in Bonn and Cologne, little would have been heard about Beethoven in Bonn even during his lifetime.

The first person to familiarise Bonn audiences with Beethoven’s music at a high artistic level was Heinrich Karl Breidenstein, the academic music director of Bonn’s newly founded Friedrich Wilhelm University. To celebrate the anniversary of his baptism on 17 December 1826, he offered the Bonn première of the Fourth Symphony in his first concert, devoted entirely to Beethoven. Beethoven’s death, on 26 March 1827, only became known in Bonn in early June. The following July a concert was held in his memory, albeit without a single work from his pen. It was ultimately Breidenstein who, in the following year, combined Beethoven’s music with the plan to erect a monument to the great composer in Bonn, thereby laying the groundwork for his long-term veneration in that city. But the times were not propitious for a pan-European competition, and seven years had to pass before a ‘Beethoven Monument Committee’ was formed in 1835. Its first chairman was August
Wilhelm von Schlegel, followed later by Breidenstein himself; Franz Liszt was persuaded to become an honorary member. The Committee decided in favour of a larger-than-life bronze statue on a high pedestal. Seven sculptors submitted 13 designs. Liszt, an ardent champion of Beethoven, considered the meagre donations to be a disgrace and made by far the greatest financial contribution for the Beethoven Monument, which was duly created by the Dresden sculptor Ernst Hänel. King Frederick William IV of Prussia, Queen Victoria, Archduke Frederick of Austria and Alexander von Humboldt: all graced the monument’s unveiling with their presence on 12 August 1845. The occasion was chosen to honour Beethoven’s 75th birthday, celebrated in this case somewhat in advance.

The first Beethovenfest

The unveiling of the statue was framed by a four-day Beethoven festival under the direction of Franz Liszt and Louis Spohr. But the festival lacked an auditorium worthy of the composer and the occasion. The festival committee and the city of Bonn owed the existence of this ‘Beethoven Hall’ to 14 master artisans from Bonn who offered at the last minute, on 25 July, to build a wooden ‘concert locale’ within 14 days. The design was set down by the cathedral architect Ernst Friedrich Zwirner; Vinzenz Statz, foreman of the cathedral’s stonemasons, prepared the necessary drawings. In the event, the hall was built within the space of only 11 days – a feat barely conceivable even today. It was laid out in the form of a basilica with a length of 68 metres (223 feet) and a capacity for 3,000 concert visitors and participants. This, too, was only possible because Liszt declared himself willing to cover any deficit from the festival. The city of Bonn was not involved in this venture. Shortly after the end of the festival this first of Bonn’s three ‘Beethoven Halls’ was sold for scrap.

The first centenary of Beethoven’s birth

In 1870 the city of Bonn set out for the first time to mount a large festival in celebration of Beethoven’s 100th birthday. It provided 15,000 thalers and a piece of property on Vierecksplatz (known today as Berliner Freiheit) for a second ‘Beethoven Hall’. It also commissioned a building contractor with its construction, which, however, could only be accomplished with financial support from the citizenry. Lord Mayor Leopold Kaufmann praised the city’s ‘zealous and highly cultivated burghers’ who ‘again felt called upon to cultivate the arts’. Famed for its outstanding acoustics, the new Beethoven Hall was erected as a multi-purpose auditorium with seating for 1,500. At first, however, it served as a
military hospital during the Franco-Prussian War, and its inauguration had to wait until 17 December, the 100th anniversary of Beethoven’s baptism. Finally the second Bonn Beethovenfest took place from 20 to 23 August 1871, again lasting four days.

After 1871 Bonn’s veneration of Beethoven once again came to a temporary standstill. In August 1888 a heated feud broke out in the letters section of Bonn’s leading newspaper, the Bonner Zeitung, published by Hermann Neusser. The bones of contention were the state of Bonn’s musical life and, in particular, the shameful condition of Beethoven’s birth house in Bonngasse. It was threatened with dereliction, having degenerated into a ‘low-grade pub’ with a ‘burlesque show, the only one in the city’, and housed some 60 occupants. On 24 February 1889 several well-to-do burghers convened at Neusser’s instigation in the building at Münsterplatz 12, the so-called Breuning House, joined later by two others. They resolved to establish an association with the goal of purchasing and worthily maintaining Beethoven’s birth house – a project that Lord Mayor Doetsch had previously dismissed with an ironic smirk. Swift action was necessary, and before the ‘Beethoven House Association’ could be formally constituted in April the founders had formed a building commission. Beethoven’s birth house was promptly restored to the condition it had known in Beethoven’s day, and initial acquisitions for it were purchased.

The first centenary of Beethoven’s death

Then in 1927 came the ‘musical event in grand style nourished by a genuinely German spirit’. Lord Mayor Dr Falk had reminded Imperial Chancellor Dr Wilhelm Marx in good time of the impending 100th anniversary of Beethoven’s death: ‘The government of the German Reich, the country of the birth of this greatest of all the world’s composers, must not let pass the day of its commemoration’. He took it as ‘self-evident that Germany’s Beethoven celebrations would be held in the city of his birth’. Imperial President von Hindenburg and the President of Austria assumed responsibility for the patronage of the ‘German Beethovenfest’. The pianist Elly Ney, an ardent admirer of Beethoven and an honorary citizen of Bonn since 1927, took part for the first time. In 1931, together with her former husband, she mounted ‘three popular Beethoven days in Bonn’, one of whose goals was, to quote the city’s official bulletin, ‘to make the immortal creations of this greatest of Bonn’s sons accessible at low cost to the broader strata of the populace, and to contribute to the maintenance of the city’s orchestra by achieving maximum receipts’. Although Elly Ney was the impetus for this first city-wide Beethovenfest (it was held 35 times by 1997), the events
were and remained the responsibility of the city. At least in its early years Ney and the other artists performed without fee, thereby helping the city’s orchestra to survive. Yet the close ties between Ney and the Beethovenfest soon became a burden, for shortly after Hitler’s accession to power, on 30 January 1933, she embraced National Socialism and became one of the Führer’s most perfervid champions.

A fresh start

After a war-related interruption in 1945, Bonn’s Beethovenfest resumed the following year. It now took place at two-year intervals. The old Beethoven Hall of 1870 was no longer available, having burnt to the ground during a heavy bombing raid by the Royal Air Force on 18 October 1944. Soon after the cessation of hostilities the ‘Friends of Music at Home and Abroad’ sought to create new concert hall worthy of the city of Beethoven. In 1951 the ‘Beethoven Hall Donors Association’ was established, revealingly under the auspices of the managing director of Bonn’s Chamber of Industry and Commerce. Bonn’s honorary citizen Elly Ney, though excluded from participating in previous Beethovenfests, collected funds for the new building by holding benefit concerts throughout the world, as the famous pianist Andor Foldes was to do later.

An architectural competition for the third Beethoven Hall, held in early 1954, attracted no fewer than 109 designs. The jury awarded the first prize to the Berlin architect Siegfried Wolske, then only 29 years old. The Hall was designed from the very outset as a multipurpose building, and the costs of its construction were borne primarily by the city. It was solemnly inaugurated in September 1959 in the presence of Germany’s president, Professor Dr Theodor Heuss. The fact that a great many party conventions were held in this building, and especially four elections of Germany’s president before the Parliament moved to Berlin, has made the building a major monument to German history. As a result, in 1990 it entered the official register of historic buildings in North Rhine-Westphalia.

Following the inauguration of Beethoven Hall, the festival was held biennially in the autumn until 1967. Then the largest and most important of all Beethovenfests took place in 1970 in celebration of the composer’s 200th birthday. It featured three cycles with the most famous orchestras, conductors and soloists of the day. Later the 28th to 34th festivals were held at three-year intervals. However, an analysis of the festival’s visitors in 1992 came to the dispiriting conclusion that it was, in effect, a local Bonn event with little regional impact, no
nationwide impact and almost no resonance abroad. Worse still, Parliament decided on 20 June 1991 to move the nation’s capital to Berlin. It was a decision much to Bonn’s detriment; the city suffered a financial decline and faced an uncertain future. The city council and administration lost the courage to hold a municipal festival at all in 1995, even though it would have marked a dual anniversary – Beethoven’s 225th birthday and the sesquicentennial of the unveiling of the Münsterplatz monument.

Given the bleak prospects for 1995, a non-profit volunteer association was formed in 1993: ‘Citizens for Beethoven’. Around the 225th anniversary of Beethoven’s baptism, on 17 December, the association launched its first ‘Beethoven Marathon’. It lasted 53 hours from Friday to Sunday, ‘pure round-the-clock Beethoven’, with 20 concerts and public lectures. Lord Mayor Bärbel Dieckmann praised the Marathon’s high artistic quality and organisational success, remarking that it demonstrated the capabilities of civic commitment: ‘To dispense with such a potent initiative would be a certificate of bankruptcy that the city must not countenance’. She then announced a grand project: a Beethoven festival with more Beethoven than ever before – but not until 1998.

Citizens for Beethoven did not want to wait that long. The very next year they held a Second Beethoven Marathon with 20 concerts, this time lengthened to nine days and including a ‘Long Night of Beethoven’. It led to ‘fantastic results compared to similar cultural ventures’. For 1997 it was clear that Citizens for Beethoven would not plan a marathon, for the 35th Beethovenfest was scheduled to take place that year. In the event, it turned out to be an ‘economy-size festival’. Finally in February 1997 the die was cast for a completely fresh start, beginning in 1999 with the foundation of the ‘Internationale Beethovenfeste GmbH’ and the appointment of Professor Dr. Franz Willnauer as managing director. This again raised the question of a Beethovenfest in 1998. Citizens for Beethoven again leapt into the breech and held their third highly successful Beethoven Marathon, now lasting a full two weeks. With this the association viewed its mission statement of 1995 as accomplished. Nevertheless, it declined to disband.

**A venue for the Jubilee Year**

In 2002 Professor Willnauer embarked on a mental journey to the distant Beethoven Jubilee Year, 2020. In his ‘visions’ of a Beethoven city, he referred to Beethoven’s 250th birthday as a decisive target with opportunities to transform Bonn into a ‘beacon to the whole of
Europe’. Until that happened the city’s main task was, he felt, to create a performance venue with optimum architecture, acoustics and technical furnishings – in short, to build a new Beethoven Hall as the festival’s home. From the very beginning the project was supported by Citizens for Beethoven and other civic associations, such as ‘Fest.Spiel.Haus.Freunde’. Ilona Schmiel, who took over the directorship of the Internationale Beethovenfeste Bonn in 2004, likewise made passionate appeals for a new festival hall. Three Bonn-based corporations of global scope – Telekom, Deutsche Post DHL and Deutsche Postbank – declared their willingness to underwrite the building of a festival hall. An international architectural competition produced two favourites: ‘The Diamond’ by Zaha Hadid, and ‘The Wave’ by Hermann & Valentiny. But there was a serious hitch: both designs required the demolition of Beethoven Hall, which was under a preservation order as an architectural monument. As late as December 2009 Lord Mayor Jürgen Nimptsch proclaimed that a ‘Beethoven Festival Hall is a unique opportunity. The possibility that three Bonn corporations will finance the construction, and the willingness of the German federal government, the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, the Rhine-Sieg District and other sponsors to extend endowment capital, are one of a kind’. But in April 2010 he put the project on ice when two of the three companies – Deutsche Telekom and Postbank – jumped ship. A citizens’ initiative ‘5000x5000’ was launched by the president of Bonn’s Chamber of Industry and Commerce with the goal of raising 25 million euros to compensate for the two companies’ cancellation. But progress was slow, and the city council lost heart. The grand project came to nought. As a result, the city of Bonn had to renovate the Beethoven Hall of 1959 by itself in order to give the Jubilee Year of 2020 a venue remotely befitting the great composer.

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