

EPTA Conference Germany 2020

Beethoven as student and teacher

Nils Franke

Dean of Higher Education, University Centre Colchester, UK

nils.franke@colchester.ac.uk

1. Beethoven as keyboard student

Until just after the beginning of the 21st century, musicological studies of Beethoven as a student have focused predominantly on two elements: the first is the likely influence that Beethoven's father Johann, himself a professional musician, may have had on his son's artistic development. The second component was concerned with Christian Gottlob Neefe's teaching of the young Beethoven, for which on very few surviving sources remain.

The significance of young Beethoven's parental home tended to focus on his father's occupation as a professional singer, and, given the practices at the time, private music tutor. In contrast, Neefe's output as a court musician was more tangible in its relevance to Beethoven's subsequent achievements by ranging from conducting to playing the organ and composition.

What was shared by both scenarios was a lack of academically credible sources that offered sufficient information for a more detailed picture of Beethoven's initial studies to emerge. This changed in 2006 when the diaries of Gottfried Fischer (1780-1864) became available in an annotated scholarly edition, a master baker in Bonn whose family owned the house in which Beethoven's parents rented an apartment. Fischer compiled his diaries between 1837 and 1857, but drew heavily on observations written down by his sister Cäcilie (1762-1845), who was eighteen years his senior and would thus have been in a position to witness some of the musical activities that formed part of the lives of the Beethoven family in the late 1770s and early 1780s.

Cäcilie Fischer documented the initial musical learning of Beethoven:

*'.. as his father introduced him to the clavier, he [Ludwig] had to stand on a small bench and play.'*¹

¹ Wetzstein, M. (2006). *Familie Beethoven im kurfürstlichen Bonn*. Bonn: Verlag Beethovenhaus, p.45. Translation Nils Franke.

Her brother Gottfried reports that Johann van Beethoven was critical of his son's attainment at school and therefore

*'put him in front of the piano so early, and taught him firmly.'*²

What appears to have undermined the credibility of these diary entries in the eyes of some Beethoven scholars are two aspects that make the diaries equally fascinating and relevant: the author's non-musical background and the seemingly indiscriminate narrative that moves between trivial day-to-day events, general comments and musical observations.

On reflection, this should call for a re-evaluation of the Fischer diaries: the writer's lack of musical expertise appears to lead to the reporting of events without offering any explanation, which, in my view, reduces the risk of being shaped by an unconscious bias. This in turn repositions the diaries as a potentially highly relevant contemporaneous account, which includes a plethora of information about Beethoven's early days as a musical learner.

Fischer's recollections are written in an anecdotal style in which the use of the past tense is compensated by a sense of situational immediacy in which educationally significant information is left to the reader to interpret.

Ludwig van Beethoven appears to have practiced repeatedly without using musical notation, much to the consternation of his father:

*'Listening to (Ludwig) playing the violin, his father noticed again that he was playing what came to his mind, and without the music. He then went in, saying 'are you not listening at all to what I am saying?' Continuing to play, (Ludwig) asks his father whether this is not nice? His father replies that what only comes from your head is something, for which you are not ready yet. Work hard on the clavier and the violin, and use notation, which is more appropriate. When you have mastered that, you can and will need to work using your head, but do not do it now because you are not yet ready.'*³

Although the notion of 'messing around' at an instrument isn't in itself an unusual activity for any young student, Beethoven's question to his father whether or not what he is experimenting with '*isn't nice*', is potentially significant. It suggests the searching for sounds or effects that are subjected to a process of experimentation and decision-making, which is clearly an ingredient of a musically active mind.

It seems, therefore, that the value of Fischer's observations lie not in any conclusions that are drawn by their author; instead, Fischer offers key pieces of information about Beethoven's early musical experiences, which can be cross-referenced with both the composer's subsequent works and his teaching. For example, the importance of improvisation in Beethoven's early development cannot be underestimated, partially

² Ibid., p.45

³ Ibid., pp.46-47

because it was part of the training of musicians at the time, and partially because Beethoven left clear evidence of improvised passages in quite a few of his compositions.

It seems that articulating oneself musically soon became a way of life for the young Ludwig, whatever the circumstances:

*'When visitors called on Johann van Beethoven, Ludwig also came into the room and moved around the clavier, putting his right hand on the keyboard. His father said what are you tinkering with now? Go away or I'll give you a clip around the ear.'*⁴

Fischer's diaries evidence that Beethoven's progress at the keyboard was such that Ludwig *'felt about music and the clavier that he played what masters played'*⁵, which *'gave him the courage and put him in the mood to play the organ and take lessons.'*⁶ This too appeared to be going well:

*'As Ludwig van Beethoven became more adventurous on the organ, he enjoyed playing on a larger organ in Bonn, in the Minorite Monastery.'*⁷

Fischer describes the gradual process that led to Beethoven's father handing over the teaching of his son to other musicians:

*'... Johann van Beethoven taught his son Ludwig well in his teaching [of] music at the clavier. When in the end he could play accurately whatever was placed in front of him, his father could not take him any further.'*⁸

Two observations seem pertinent here: that the teaching of music centered around the keyboard instrument and that the criterium for not being able to teach Ludwig any more was the latter's ability to read accurately at sight.

Fischer goes on to observe that

*'His father believes that he might have the talent to lean musical composition' and thus set about finding a suitable teacher.'*⁹

What followed now was a period of diverse musical influences on the young Beethoven, in which the teaching of two musicians in particular, Tobias Friedrich Pfeiffer (n.d.) and Christian Gottlob Neefe (1748-98) can be traced.

Johann van Beethoven seems to have approached Tobias Friedrich Pfeiffer, a singer, oboe and keyboard player, who was part of a theatre group in Bonn for the season

⁴ Ibid., p.46

⁵ Ibid., p.52

⁶ Ibid., p.52

⁷ Ibid., p.54

⁸ Ibid., p.64

⁹ Ibid., p.64

1779/80 before moving to Frankfurt around Easter 1780. Fischer reports that Pfeiffer lived in the Beethoven household as a lodger, who gave the young Beethoven lessons, much to Johann's delight, who, according to Fischer, regarded Pfeiffer as '*an excellent musician and composer from whom his son has the good fortune to learn a lot.*'¹⁰

It remains unclear when exactly Beethoven first came into contact with Christian Gottlob Neefe, but church records indicate that Beethoven helped Neefe with church services as an assistant organist by 1782, and that his role had formalized two years later, when he became a salaried employee as a court musician. Neefe's autobiographical notes of 1789 capture their musical collaboration in a very brief statement:

*'I am now taking playing the organ in turn with the young Beethoven, who possesses an excellent talent.'*¹¹

Neefe's own musical development, and teaching, was heavily influenced by the works of Johann Adam Hiller (1728–1804) and the compositional and literary output of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714–1788). Neefe openly acknowledged the importance of the latter in the foreword of his *Twelve Keyboard Sonatas* (1773), which he dedicated to CPE Bach:

*'... by dedicating [the sonatas] to you, I am doing so to convince you publically of my gratitude for the enlightenment and pleasure, both of which I have received from your theoretical and practical works.'*¹²

What Neefe's comments document, is that his musical development was, to a considerable extent, the result of self-study of the scores and treatises of a number of composers, including CPE Bach. This is relevant to Beethoven's development, because CPE Bach's treatise, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, was not only in Beethoven's own library, he recommended the purchase of the book to Carl Czerny's father, ahead of young Carl commencing lessons with him. It means that Beethoven later used CPE Bach's *Essay* as a teaching resource that he was likely to have encountered at the latest as part of his own lessons with Neefe in the early 1780s.

There is another, though admittedly more speculative point of interest. Neefe's dedication of his keyboard sonatas to CPE Bach references the impact Bach's book has made on him in his own development through self-study. It is perfectly possible, if not likely, that a tutor with a record of successful self-teaching would also expect his own students to work, at least partially, independently. And it is this that offers an insight into Beethoven's learning in his formative years. The view expressed by scholars recently, that Neefe's influence on Beethoven's development may have been rather

¹⁰ Ibid., p.65

¹¹ Neefe, *Lebenslauf*. Available at: <https://www.musicologie.org/theses/neefen.html#1> (accessed 11/10/2020)

¹² Neefe, *Zwölf Klavier-Sonaten*, Engelhart Benjamin Schickert, Leipzig, 1773.

limited due to potentially infrequent lessons, is therefore questionable, given the way in which musicians in the late 18th century acquired skills.¹³

Although impossible to prove conclusively, such a position would explain that Beethoven's letter to Neefe, dated 1793, was possibly far more than a courteous acknowledgement of his former teacher's input:

*'I thank you for your advice, which you gave me frequently in the progressing of my divine art. If I ever become a great man, you will have a part in this ...'*¹⁴

The exact details of Beethoven's early musical training continue to pose many unresolved questions. On the one hand, there is clarity about who some of Beethoven's initial instrumental, compositional and musicianship teachers were, and several of them taught him more than one instrument or subject. On the other hand, timelines are hard to establish with certainty, except for key events that are documented through public performances, the relocation of tutors, or the dates of publication of several of Beethoven's early compositions. The most elusive aspects of his early musical experiences are the teaching materials used, and any information about a teacher's curriculum of study, with the exception of CPE Bach's *Essay*, which had an impact on his teacher Neefe, at the latest by 1773. To assume, therefore, that it was part of Beethoven's lessons with Neefe is at least probable.

2. Beethoven as piano tutor

Thanks to the reports of Franz Gerhard Wegeler (1765-1848), a lifelong friend of Beethoven's, some information has survived about Beethoven's keyboard teaching in the late 1780s and early 1790s. Nevertheless, the two most detailed accounts of Beethoven as a keyboard tutor in the early 1800s were documented by Carl Czerny (1791-1857) and Ferdinand Ries (1784-1838). It is worth noting that both men encountered Beethoven at different stages of their own development: Czerny was 10 years old when he first played to Beethoven, and Ries commenced his studies with Beethoven aged 17.

There is also a difference between the writings of both composers with regard to Beethoven. Ries' commentaries come principally from his book, *Remembering Beethoven*, co-authored with Franz Gerhard Wegeler, and published in 1838, making it one of the earliest detailed musical sources by those who knew Beethoven personally.

Czerny on the other hand, though equally closely connected to Beethoven, continued to write about his contact with Beethoven almost until his death in 1857.

¹³ Skowronek, T. (2010) *Beethoven The Pianist*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 42-44. Skowronek's excellent study of Beethoven's development as pianist raises questions about Neefe's role in the absence of detailed information.

¹⁴ Beethoven, L.v. (1996). *Briefwechsel, voll1*, ed. by Sieghard Brandenburg. München: G. Henle Verlag, p.11

For the purpose of the current presentation I will restrict myself to some key recollections from both pianist-composers; recollections that relate directly to their experiences of having been taught by Beethoven.

2.1 Carl Czerny

Describing his musical background pre-Beethoven, Czerny explained that

*'my father, rather than train me as a superficial recitalist, wanted me to develop a sense for music through the constant study of new works and proficiency in sight reading.'*¹⁵

In his Memoires, Czerny recalled first playing to Beethoven:

*'... because I was reluctant to start with one of his compositions, I played Mozart's big C major concerto [K. 503], which starts with chords. Beethoven soon took note, came closer to my stool and played with his left hand the orchestral melodies in those sections where I only had accompanying passages.... He was pleased, which encouraged me to play the recently published Sonata Pathetique and finally Adelaide, which my father sang with his rather good tenor voice. When I had finished, Beethoven turned to my father and said: "the boy has talent, I will teach him myself and accept him as my pupil. Send him to me several times a week. Above all, get him Emmanuel Bach's teaching book, which he needs to bring with him next time".'*¹⁶

Two observations in Czerny's description are significant. Firstly, Beethoven's habit of playing alongside his students, which has also been reported by Ferdinand Ries. Secondly, the recommendation of CPE Bach's *Essay*, and the way in which Beethoven went on to use it during subsequent lessons. It should be remembered that the standard of Czerny's playing was such that he had performed Mozart's concerto K.503 within 12 months prior to meeting Beethoven, and that he had learnt, by his own admission, much of the (then known and available) piano music of Bach and Clementi. The content of Beethoven's first few lessons might therefore have come as a bit of a surprise:

*'During the first few lessons Beethoven made me work solely on the scales in all keys and showed me many technical fundamentals, which were as yet unknown to most pianists, e.g. the only proper position of the hands and fingers and particularly the use of the thumb; only much later did I recognize fully the usefulness of these rules.'*¹⁷

It seems Beethoven took Czerny back to basics without the reasons being fully clear to Czerny at the time. Czerny's singling out the thumb as a topic of special consideration may even suggest that his previous way of playing was still heavily influenced by an

¹⁵ Czerny, C. (1968). *Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben*. Baden-Baden: Verlag Valentin Koerner, pp.8-9

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.15

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.15

approach to playing the fortepiano that had its roots in a modified keyboard technique, based on playing the harpsichord. Progressing to the application of such a change in playing technique appears to have happened after what Czerny called the *'first few lessons'*:

*'He [Beethoven] then went through the various keyboard studies [exercise pieces] in Bach's book and especially insisted on legato technique, which was one of the unforgettable features of his playing; at that time all other pianists considered that kind of legato unattainable, since the hammered, detached staccato technique of Mozart's time was still fashionable.'*¹⁸

The precise timelines of Czerny's studies with Beethoven remain somewhat ambiguous. According to Czerny's *Recollections*, he auditioned for Beethoven aged 10, which must have been in 1801. Lessons continued for at least one, maybe even two years, often several times a week. Czerny recalled that Beethoven would at times offer his apologies for not giving a lesson, because he was busy composing. Czerny also noted that this led to *'a longer break after a while, and I was again left to my own devices.'*¹⁹ It seems, therefore, that the notion of what nowadays is called self-directed study was as much part of Czerny's early development as it had been Neefe's and Beethoven's.

During 1804 and 1805 Czerny gave performances for Count Lichnovsky, often playing Beethoven's music on demand and from memory, much to Lichnovsky's satisfaction. Beethoven was present at one such event, and according to Czerny, whom he had not seen for two years *'was cross with my father for having interrupted the lessons'*, but was *'seemingly pleased with my progress.'*²⁰ Czerny also reported that Beethoven approved of his sight-reading of the sonata op.53.

2.2 Ferdinand Ries

Ries studied piano with Beethoven from 1801 until 1805, and once again from 1808-1809, while also working as a copyist for Beethoven, at least at the beginning of his second time in Vienna. What makes his accounts of studying with Beethoven so significant is that, at least partially, they overlapped with Czerny's, and thus allow posterity not only a partial comparison, but arguably a more fruitful juxtaposition of both students' recollections.

From a pianist's point of view, Ries' recollections may well be the only substantial, detailed account of Beethoven's piano teaching that (to date) has stood the test of time, and its generations of researchers.

Ries' memory of one lesson in particular seems to have enabled him to extract some of Beethoven's priorities in piano teaching. Above all, the striving for expressiveness must have made Beethoven most insistent:

¹⁸ Ibid., pp.15-16

¹⁹ Ibid., p.16

²⁰ Ibid., p.19

*'When Beethoven gave me lessons, I must say that contrary to his nature he was extraordinarily patient. I could attribute this, and his almost unfailingly amicable behaviour towards me, mainly to his love and affection for my father. Thus he occasionally made me repeat something ten times or even more often. In the Variations in F major, dedicated to the Princess Odescalchi (Opus 34), I had to repeat the last Adagio variations entirely seventeen times. Still he was not satisfied with the expression in the little cadenza, even though I thought I had played it just as well as he did. I received nearly two full hours of instruction that day.'*²¹

From this situation, Ries deduces what sounds like a hierarchy of relevance, in which expression is clearly positioned above accuracy in performance:

*'If I made a mistake somewhere in a passage, or struck wrong notes, or missed intervals – which he often wanted strongly emphasized- he rarely said anything. However, if I lacked expression in crescendos, etc. or in the character of a piece, he became angry because, he maintained, the first was an accident, while the latter resulted from inadequate knowledge, feeling, or attention. The first happened quite frequently to him, too, even when he played in public.'*²²

Beethoven's creative imagination, and what seems almost like a need to work through ideas immediately, was captured by Ries in the following situation:

*'On day we were talking about themes for fugues after the lesson was over, I sat at the piano and he sat down beside me. I played the theme from the first fugue from Graun's Death of Jesus. He began to imitate it with his left hand, then added a voice with his right hand, and continued on without the slightest interruption for a good half an hour. I still cannot understand how he managed to remain in such an uncomfortable position for so long. His own enthusiasm rendered him insensible to external conditions.'*²³

Praise for Beethoven as an improviser is not restricted to Ries' observations, but what he managed to capture so eloquently are the different situations in which Beethoven improvised: as part of his lessons, amongst friends and colleagues and in public. In fact, Ries' references to Beethoven as an improviser raise valid questions about the interlinking and cross-fertilisation between improvisation and composition in Beethoven's works. What is clear is that Beethoven did not actually teach improvisation as part of his lessons, other than by demonstration.

Most of Ries' observations appear to be written from the perspective of an admiring, yet not entirely uncritical, participant who describes Beethoven the teacher as an absorbed, and absorbing, artist whose all-round musicianship was as alive in his lessons as it was in performance and composition.

²¹ Wegeler, F. and Ries, F. (1988). *Remembering Beethoven*. London: André Deutsch Limited, pp.82-83

²² *Ibid.*, p.83

²³ *Ibid.*, p.88

2.3 Beethoven's masterclass: Ignaz Moscheles

Moscheles' autobiographical notes contain a description of his youthful attempts to play repertoire that was evidently beyond his skills at the time, and that involved Beethoven:

*'Although but seven years old, I actually ventured upon Beethoven's Sonate Pathétique. Imagine if you can how I played it; imagine also the Beethoven fever, to which I fell victim in those days – a fever which goaded me on to mangle the other great works of the immortal author.'*²⁴

1814, and evidently after having sorted out his piano technique, seems to have been the year in which Moscheles finally met Beethoven. On 11 April he attended a matinée performance where he heard:

*'...a new trio by Beethoven. It was no less than the Trio in B flat, and Beethoven himself played the pianoforte part. In how many compositions do we find the little word 'new' wrongly placed! But never in Beethoven's compositions; least of all in this work, which is full of originality. His playing, apart from the spirit prevailing in it, satisfies me less, for it lacks clearness and precision; still I observed several traces of the grand style of playing which I had long since recognised in his compositions.'*²⁵

The same year the music publisher Artaria decided to issue a piano reduction of Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*, and suggested to Beethoven that Moscheles, some of whose music was already published by Artaria, should produce the arrangement. Moscheles recalled the events surrounding the commission:

*'The proposal is made to me, he writes, to arrange the great masterpiece, 'Fidelio,' for the piano. What can be more delightful?'*²⁶

Moscheles' wife Charlotte summarises her husband's diary entries at the time:

*'We now come across constant short notices in the diary; for instance, he tells how has taken two numbers at one time to Beethoven, then again two others; next come occasional notes – such as, 'he altered little,' or 'he altered nothing,' 'he simplified such and such a passage, or 'he strengthened it.'*²⁷

Judging by Moscheles' account, his direct contact with Beethoven was restricted to producing the piano arrangements of *Fidelio*, for which he received feedback from Beethoven himself, and, in the process, was able to witness Beethoven's pianism and skills as an improviser first hand, although the details of Beethoven's corrections were

²⁴ Moscheles, C. (2014). *Life of Moscheles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.4

²⁵ Ibid., p.12

²⁶ Ibid., p.14

²⁷ Ibid., p.14

not revealed by Moscheles. Nevertheless, his experience of working alongside Beethoven, almost in a masterclass setting, make Moscheles' cadenzas the Beethoven's third and fourth piano concerti noteworthy.

Conclusion

An evaluation of the available material regarding Beethoven as a teacher and student inevitably raises a number of questions, ranging from concerns about authenticity to relevance in today's world. It is possible to dispute the accuracy, even motivation, of those who wrote down their experiences. There is also the question of potential student bias, which in this case, could be borne out of a deep-rooted admiration for Beethoven.

What is shared between the observations of Czerny, Ries and Moscheles are individual declarations of recalling situations to the best of their abilities, or faithfully reporting events as they remember them, in other words, conscious efforts to underline that their accounts were not coloured by the desire to idealise, or exaggerate. These statements, made in light of more fanciful claims by others, most notably Anton Schindler, were designed not only to distance themselves from such publications, they emphasised that their personal musical participation in events described afforded them a perspective not offered by others. All three pianists are clear about the extent (and limits) of their contact with Beethoven, often giving dates (even if some of them were not quite accurate) that contextualised their observations. Czerny mentions Ries as a fellow student, Ries refers to Czerny, and Moscheles corresponds and collaborates with Ries on Beethoven projects. In other words, there is as much of a possibility of all three having influenced one another in their accounts as there is for researchers to triangulate information.

With the help of some of Beethoven's letters, and additional information from other musicians of the time, it is possible to assemble a narrative of Beethoven as teacher. The final word about musical priorities and the overall aim in piano teaching should therefore go to Beethoven himself. In a letter of his to Carl Czerny about teaching Beethoven's nephew, Carl, Beethoven set out a hierarchy of musical relevance in piano teaching he himself appears to have adopted:

*'With regard to his playing to you, I am asking you -once he uses the appropriate fingering, plays in time as well as the notes largely without mistakes - only then to encourage him with regard to performance, and at this point not to let him stop because of smaller mistakes, but to comment on them at the end of the piece. Although I have taught little, I have always followed this method, because it soon educates musicians...'*²⁸

Nils Franke

²⁸ Beethoven, L.v. (1996) *Briefwechsel, vol.3*, edited by Sieghard Brandenburg. München: G.Henle Verlag, pp.236-238. Translation Nils Franke.

Reference List

Beethoven, L.v. (1996). *Briefwechsel, vol.1*, edited by Sieghard Brandenburg. München: G.Henle Verlag

Beethoven, L.v. (1996). *Briefwechsel, vol.3*, edited by Sieghard Brandenburg. München: G.Henle Verlag

Czerny, C. (1968). *Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben*. Baden-Baden: Verlag Valentin Koerner

Moscheles, C. (2014). *Life of Moscheles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Skowroneck, T. (2010). *Beethoven the Pianist*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Wegeler, F. and Ries, F. (1988). *Remembering Beethoven*. London: André Deutsch Limited

Wetzstein, M. (2006). *Familie Beethoven im kurfürstlichen Bonn*. Bonn: Verlag Beethovenhaus

Online Resources

Neefe Lebensauf

<https://www.musicologie.org/theses/neefen.html#1> (accessed 11/10/2020)

Sheet Music

Neefe, C. G. (1773) *Zwölf Klavier-Sonaten*. Leipzig: Engelhart Benjamin Schickert