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Beyond Beethoven: performing early nineteenth-century compositions for piano and the natural horn

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BEYOND BEETHOVEN: PERFORMING EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY COMPOSITIONS FOR PIANO AND THE NATURAL HORN

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by **Anneke Scott**

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Reports and Commentaries

If horn players learn one piece on the natural horn it is invariably Beethoven's Sonata in F, op. 17. This work was premiered in 1800, at a time when the fame of the horn soloist, Giovanni Punto (1746–1803), far outshone that of the composer: one reviewer of an early performance asked 'Who is this Herr Bethover [sic]?'^[1] Not foreseeing the significance this short work was to have for future generations of horn players, Beethoven appears to have only just begun composing the day before its first performance. This was not wholly unusual for him, as Ferdinand Ries recounted:

Beethoven almost always postponed the composition of the majority of his works due by a certain date until the very last moment. He had, for instance, promised Ponto [sic], the famous horn player, that he would compose a sonata for piano and horn and would play it with him at a concert given by Ponto. The concert with the sonata was announced, but the sonata was not yet started. On the day before the performance Beethoven began the work and had it ready for the concert.^[2]

Beethoven, a highly regarded improviser, may have still been in the process of completing the composition during its first performance.^[3] Despite this 'rushed job', or perhaps, given Beethoven's ability to extemporize, as a result of this element of spontaneity, the premiere was successful and the two musicians went on to perform this work a number of times.

Beethoven had rushed into the world the first complete sonata for piano and horn, but this would not be the sole specimen for long; many composers followed suit. Regrettably, this sizeable outpouring of new repertoire from the first three decades of the nineteenth century has been neglected by more recent horn players. There are several reasons for the Beethoven Sonata to have enjoyed popularity: for horn players coming to the natural horn for the first time it has the advantage of being extremely well known, it is the key of F, the modern horn's home key and one familiar and far less challenging than the remoter tonalities of other crooks – and, of course, despite the attitudes of Beethoven's Viennese audience in 1800 ('Who is this Herr Bethover?'), it is tempting to patronize audiences by assuming their tastes are dictated by their familiarity with the names of the composers in their programme.

The four works for my upcoming CD were chosen partly due to the connections between the composers and Beethoven, and partly in order to demonstrate how Beethoven's peers exploited the variety and versatility of the natural horn. With this recording, I endeavour to dispel enduring modern myths about the instrument offering 'limited options' that lead composers to be 'rather conservative and sometimes embarrassed'.^[4]

Pianist, cellist and composer Ferdinand Ries (1784–1838) was born in Beethoven's hometown of Bonn. His father, Franz Anton Ries, was a violinist who had had a notable career in Vienna before settling in Bonn where he had been one of Beethoven's early teachers. Ferdinand Ries initially studied violin and piano with his father, taking cello lessons from Bernhard Romberg from the age

of five. The French seizure of Bonn in 1794, which dissolved the electoral court, closed the normal

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After a short period of composition study with Peter Winter in Munich, in 1801, Ries departed Bonn for Vienna. Once in Vienna Ries studied

composition with Johann Georg Albrechtsberger and piano with Beethoven, also serving as Beethoven's secretary and copyist. Beethoven secured a number of useful appointments for Ries including temporary roles as pianist to Count Johann Georg von Browne in 1802 and Prince Lichnowsky in 1805. Ries repaid Beethoven's generosity by becoming a significant interpreter and advocate of Beethoven's piano works.

Given the uncertainty as to exactly when Ries arrived in Vienna it is hard to be sure that his famous account of Beethoven composing his op. 17 sonata at the last minute was drawn from Ries's first-hand experience, but undoubtedly Ries would have been very much aware of this groundbreaking work. Ries's own Grande Sonate in F major, op. 34, was composed in 1811, while Ries was in Kassel.

Carl Czerny was to applaud Ries as a 'distinguished' writer for the horn, going on to describe the instrument as 'especially adapted for calm sustained notes, for tender or melancholy ideas, or for an expression of energy and grandeur, in powerful, single blasts'.^[5] Czerny's description feels highly appropriate as a description of the Ries Sonata. In many ways Ries's Sonata could be seen as the sonata Beethoven might have written had he given the compositional process more time. This can be seen most clearly in the atmospheric Andante: could the rumbling bass notes in the piano be a reference to the rumbling double basses in the Marcia funebre of Beethoven's 'Eroica' Symphony? Ries had a strong connection with this work and the horn players involved, having allowed himself to be ridiculed in his recollections of the first rehearsal of this symphony when he mistakenly berated the second horn player for his inability to count bars' rests:

During the first rehearsal of this symphony, which went appallingly, the horn player did come in correctly. I was standing next to Beethoven and believing the entry wrong said: 'That damned horn player! Can't he count? – It sounds terrible!' I believe I was very close indeed to having my ears boxed. – Beethoven was a long time in forgiving me.^[6]

Oboist, pianist and composer Friedrich Eugen Thurner (1785–1827), born in Montbéliard, is likely to have been named after the local Duke, Frederick II Eugene of Württemberg, employer of his Viennese-born father, flautist Anton Thurner. Orphaned at the age of four, young Thurner was sent to Kassel to be raised by a family friend. Initially studying keyboard, the seven-year-old Thurner made his public debut performing Mozart piano concertos, and he was praised for his extraordinary skill and vivid expression. Wishing to follow in his father's footsteps he began to study the flute. He quickly mastered the instrument, but at the age of twelve turned to the oboe, claiming that he would only gain happiness through achieving greatness on such a difficult instrument (something many horn players may very well recognize!).

In 1804 Thurner travelled to Vienna, where he was deeply influenced by Beethoven and his compositional style. Having returned to his hometown of Kassel in 1807, Thurner composed his Grande Sonate op. 29 during a fruitful time of his life. Given Ries's presence in Kassel the previous year, could Ries's op. 34 have inspired Thurner to compose his op. 29? The composition was premiered in a concert given on 18 October 1812 by Friedrich Ernst Fesca. The *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* reviewed both this performance as well as the Sonata's eventual publication by Peters in 1818.^[7] Notably the work was dedicated to one Charles Fesca 'from Vienna', presumably a relative of Friedrich Ernst Fesca from Kassel. In live performance the sonata was described as 'elaborated with a lot of art and diligence; but more for the connoisseur than for the general

public.^[9] The review of the publication was more open-minded as to the appeal of this work, **MUSIC & PRACTICE** wrote on both instruments the opportunity ... to arouse pleasure through pleasant, cheerful melodies, and also to shine through imposing

passages!^[9] The review goes on to praise the 'fast, interesting Allegro in E major which forms the first movement', and the subsequent 'Largo molto in E minor, which serves at the same time as an introduction to the Rondo', noting the 'excellent effect' of the 'swelling tones of the horn and the tremolo accompaniment in the piano'. The Rondo in E major is deemed to have 'a friendly theme' which 'remains the motif of the very successful work'. As with the Ries Sonata it is hard to be certain which of the Kassel horn playing Schuncke brothers this Sonata was written for, as the performer is only identified by his surname. The review describes the horn part as virtuosic, pointing to the particularly large horn range as well as the sonata 'requiring a skilled pianist', going on to recommend that any efforts pianists put in to learning this work 'will be amply repaid by making a very brilliant impression in the ensemble'.

Punto was not the only horn player with whom Beethoven played his op. 17 Sonata. Horn player, pianist and composer Friedrich Starke (1774–1835) was born in Elsterwerda. After military service and musical roles in various parts of Saxony he settled in Vienna in around 1814, where he studied with Albrechtsberger. Starke was on familiar terms with Beethoven to the extent that the two were regular dining partners. Ludwig Nohl's recollections of one such meal were recounted by Thayer:

Starke was often invited to a meal and after it often had the soul-satisfying experience of hearing Beethoven improvise. The most remarkable and pleasant time was an invitation to a breakfast which for Starke was a real spiritual breakfast ... After breakfast which consisted of very good coffee (and which Beethoven made himself in a glass machine), Starke requested a breakfast for his heart and mind, and Beethoven improvised in three different styles, first restrained, second fugal, where a heavenly theme in sixteenth notes was developed in the most wonderful way, and third in chamber style in which Beethoven knew how to combine the greatest intricacies in projecting his special mood.

Starke brought along with his horn and offered to play Beethoven's horn sonata in F with him, which Beethoven accepted with pleasure. When it was discovered that the piano was a half-step too low, Starke offered to play the horn down a half-step; but Beethoven said that the effect would be spoiled and that he would rather play it up a half step.

It was begun and Beethoven played it in a wondrously beautiful way; the passages rolled along so clear and fine that one couldn't believe at all that he was transposing. Beethoven also had praise for Starke because he had never heard the sonata performed with shading; he found the *pp* especially fine. The whole thing was a heavenly breakfast.^[10]

In 1812, thanks to Beethoven's endorsement, Starke joined the orchestra of the Kärntnertor Theatre and in this capacity was fourth horn for the premiere of Beethoven's revised *Fidelio* in 1814. For a short period around 1815 he was also tasked with teaching the piano to Beethoven's troubled nephew Karl. He wrote a considerable number of compositions, including at least two works for horn – a currently lost Grand Sonata in F and the Adagio and Rondo op. 105 (published c. 1821).

The dramatic, brooding Adagio introduction, exploiting tremolos in the piano and chromatic passages in both horn and piano, quickly gives way to an expansive cantabile melody. Starke incorporates a typical *cor basse* trope of arpeggio passages, calls and echoes that hint at effects to come later in this work. The *poco allegro* Rondo theme perhaps bears a passing resemblance to one of the themes in the Overture to Rossini's *L'Italiana in Algeri* (1813).

Throughout this work Starke calls for special timbral effects from both the horn and the piano.

Horn calls, grounded in the instrument's hunting origins, which evoke 'the great outdoors' are a **MUSIC & PRACTICE** ~~feature~~ a fashion for a different horn call effect, that of the *Ranz des vaches* or *Kühreihen*, the Swiss alphorn calls – more pastoral, less blood sport. Unlike

the hunting horn calls, which serve to spur the listener on to action, these calls evoke space, tranquility, awe and the sublime. Think, for example, of the final movement of Beethoven 'Pastoral' Symphony (1808). In order to arouse these reactions, composers play with the sense of space and distance, as in Berlioz's use of an onstage cor anglais and the replying (and later silent) offstage oboe in the 'Scène aux champs' in his *Symphonie fantastique*. During the 1820s a number of solo works for horn, including Starke's Adagio and Rondo, incorporate muted passages to create these distant echoes. It is notable that these muted passages often occur after tumultuous stormy passages, thus further evoking a sense of peace and calm. As early nineteenth-century horn mutes were often made of papier-mâché, few, if any survive, so one was made specially for my recent recording of this work. Its design was based on descriptions found in nineteenth-century texts such as those by Bernsdorf (1856), Fröhlich (1811), and Wirth (1877), describing such mutes as consisting of a six-inch diameter ball with an open tube neck which fits into the bell of the horn (Figure 1). A passage from the CD, employing this mute, can be heard in Audio 1.



Figure 1 A replica of the horn mute in papier-mâché.



Music & Practice – Extract – Muted Passage From Starke Performed By Annek...

SOUNDCLLOUD

Starke published his *Wiener Pianoforte Schule*, op. 108 at about the same time as the Adagio and Rondo. In part nine of the first volume of this work he explores the timbral effects possible on Viennese pianos of the time.^[11] The piano, as described by Starke in his *Wiener Pianoforte Schule*, had up to seven pedals and, if we conclude that the indications in the Adagio and Rondo correspond directly with those described in the *Schule*, throughout the Adagio and Rondo he includes directions to alternate between the second pedal, the *Fortezug* or forte pedal and the fifth pedal, the *Pianissimozug*, at times leading to a blurring affect. In the tempestuous passage prior to the muted echo passage (bars 184–86), Starke apparently contradicts his own advice from the *Pianoforte Schule* in which he recommends that the *Fortezug* is used only in slow passages with relatively static harmony and especially recommends it for ‘pastoral, tender and melancholic arias, romances, religious compositions and all the soulful passages where the song flows slowly and seldom falls out of modulation’.^[12] While this description does not seem immediately appropriate for this turbulent passage, such a description is perfect for the alphorn-like passage that follows, as does Starke’s description of the *Pianissimozug* as recommended for ‘distant play, or echo’.^[13] The Fritz fortepiano belonging to the Richard Burnett Collection of Historical Keyboard Instruments which was used in the recent recording has four pedals (1. una corda, 2. moderator, 3. sustain and 4. the *Janissary* or Turkish percussion of drum and bells) plus a knee lever (bassoon or Fagott mechanism).



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Figure 2 The fortepiano used in the recording. Johann Fritz, Vienna, 1815. Photo: The Richard Burnett Collection of historical keyboard instruments.

Pianist, composer, publisher and salesman Heinrich Conrad Steup (1778–1827) was born in Dillenburg, part of the Landgraviate of Hesse-Kassel. Little is known of his early life before his arrival in Amsterdam, in 1801, where he participated in many aspects of music making, undertaking what many modern musicians would recognise as a ‘portfolio career’. In an 1814 article exploring the status of music making in Holland the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* refers to Steup as both a composer (whose piano concertos ‘have not yet become well known’) and as a performer (‘Steup also has a great deal of skill and a pleasant manner of performance’).^[14]

In addition to the concertos singled out in the *AMZ*, Steup composed solo works for piano, sonatinas for violin and piano and small-scale chamber music for piano with winds and strings, among other works. Steup’s Sonata op. 11 was published under his own imprint in 1820. The frontispiece includes a *nota bene* informing us that ‘the six first bars recall the theme of a Sonata by Beethoven’, the sonata in question being none other than the op. 17 horn sonata, but now in E flat, a darker key than original F major. The opening fanfare nods to Beethoven’s brazen introduction, then follows the recognizable first subject from the op. 17. Steup swiftly moves on, developing the theme in his own unique fashion. Throughout the first movement flashes of Beethovenian references appear. The tender Andantino espressivo slow movement is subtitled ‘Les Adieux’, though it has no connection with Beethoven’s piano sonata bearing the same title. It is followed by a cheerful Rondo Allegro.

The background to this piece is unknown, as is the horn player whom Steup had in mind for the work. One candidate is Nicolaas Josef Potdevin (1798–1866), principal horn of the Felix Meritis and the Stadsschouwburg in Amsterdam, though the Dutch musical scene of the day boasted a number of excellent horn players.

Endnotes

[1] ‘Today [7 May 1800] Academy of Herr Bethover [sic] and Herr Punto ... Who is this Bethover? The history of German music is not acquainted with such a name. Punto of course is very well known’. *The Ofener und Pesther Theatertaschenbuch*. Quoted in Elliot Forbes, ed., *Thayer’s Life of Beethoven*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 256.

[2] Frederick Noonan, *Remembering Beethoven: The Biographical Notes of Franz Wegeler and*

the moment, even when producing his grand Concertos in public, probably rendered him good service on this occasion'. Forbes, ed., *Thayer's Life of Beethoven*, vol. 1, 256.

[4] Smith, David, 'Richard Watkins on The Romantic Horn', Presto Classical, 14 March 2019, www.prestomusic.com/classical/articles/2451-interview-richard-watkins-on-the-romantic-horn, accessed 1 July 2020.

[5] Carl Czerny, *School of Practical Composition*, op. 600 (London: Cocks, 1865), vol. 1, 146.

[6] *Remembering Beethoven*, 69.

[7] 'Briefe über die Musik in Kassel', *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* 15/8 (24 February 1813), 134
'Kurze Anzeigen', *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* 20/26 (1 July 1818), 474–5.

[8] 'Briefe über die Musik in Kassel', 134. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

[9] 'Kurze Anzeigen', 474–5.

[10] Forbes, *Thayer's Life of Beethoven*, vol. 1, 525–6.

[11] Friedrich Starke, *Wiener Pianoforte Schule*, op.108/I (Vienna: Starke, n.d. (ca.1820)): 'Vom Gebrauche der Züge (der Mutationen)', 16–17.

[12] Starke, *Wiener Pianoforte Schule*, 16: 'Dieser Zug, und diese zarte Behandlung gehört demnach für reinen harmonischen Gesang mit lange haltenden Tönen, wie z.B. in Pastorale, zärtlichen und schwermüthigen Arien, Romanzen, religiösen Compositionen, und überhaupt in allen gefühlvollen Stellen, wo der Gesang Langsam dahin fließt, und selten aus der Modulation fällt.'

[13] Starke, *Wiener Pianoforte Schule*, 16: 'es lässt sich durch diesen Zug ein entferntes Spiel, oder Echo, sehr gut darstellen.'

[14] 'Ueber den Zustand der Musik in Amsterdam'. *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* 16/26 (29 June 1814), 440: Steup hat Klavier-Concerte, (welche aber weiter nicht bekannt worden sind); 437: 'Hr. Steup besitzt auch viele Fertigkeit und einen angenehmen Vortrag'.