

Controversies are revived in reprint of primary sources on Beethoven

by David P. Goldman

Beethoven Remembered: The Biographical Notes of Franz Wegeler and Ferdinand Ries

Foreword by Christopher Hogwood.

Introduction by Eva Badura-Skoda.

Translated by Frederick Noonan.

Great Ocean Publishers; Arlington, Virginia,
1987.

224 pages, with 23 illustrations, footnotes and
index. \$16.95 hardbound.

In time for the 217th anniversary of Beethoven's birth this Dec. 16, Great Ocean Publishers has brought out a long-overdue translation of two memoirs of Beethoven's life by men who knew him; his friend from his Bonn youth, Franz Wegeler, and his piano student Ferdinand Ries. Although the standard Beethoven biographies incorporate most of the material in these brief works, English-speaking scholars and music-lovers may now consult the primary source.

On this joyful occasion, it seems almost peevish to focus attention on apparently obscure debates over the merits of differing accounts of Beethoven's life; indeed, the general reader, eager for every glimpse of the great man, prefers to ignore them entirely. But great issues of principle, bearing upon our ability to hear and reproduce Beethoven's music, underlie the controversies. The English edition of the Ries-Wegeler memoirs inherits the old quarrels; and these touch directly or indirectly on fundamental issues. The first of these involves Beethoven's youthful saturation in the music of J.S. Bach, which sheds light on the nature of his genius. Indirectly, but of first importance to our own era, the Schindler debate revived by the edition's introduction, bears on a fundamental issue of musical interpretation: Can Beethoven's music be performed with altered instruments, and altered tuning? Eva Badura-Skoda's comments are so outrageous that to ignore them would do disservice to Beethoven, who, after all, would have preferred to celebrate his own birthday with a good fight on issues of principle.

A. W. Thayer, whose 19th-century Beethoven biography survives as a standard source in a still-available paperback

edition, sought to discredit Wegeler's testimony *in toto*, attempting to prove that his claims of childhood friendship with Beethoven were false from the beginning. Later scholarship favored Wegeler, citing, among other evidence, the letter in which Beethoven confided his growing deafness to Wegeler, apparently the first person to whom he raised the issue. However, strong internal evidence supports Thayer's distrust of Wegeler's accuracy, and indeed his motives.

Of Beethoven's principal teacher Christian Gottlob Neefe, Wegeler writes only that he, "the former musical director of the Grossman Theater Company later employed as court organist and known as a composer, had little influence on the instruction of our Ludwig; indeed he complained about Neefe's excessively harsh criticism of his first attempts at composition."

Neefe, who came to Bonn from Leipzig, brought with him a copy of J.S. Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, copied by hand, since it was first published at the turn of the 19th century. His pupil Beethoven memorized the entire cycle, a point which Neefe emphasized in his famous advertisement for the 14-year-old Beethoven's first public concert. And this at a time when conventional scholarship claims that J.S. Bach was virtually unknown! On the contrary: Neefe's reference to J.S. Bach in that regard was a political declaration; Bach's most famous surviving son, C.P.E. Bach, was a close collaborator of the circle of German republicans (including Lessing and Voss) who laid the foundations of the Weimar "Classic" of Schiller and Goethe. J.S. Bach's music itself was a rallying-point for musicians of depth and conscience throughout Europe. At the same time (1784) Neefe's advertisement appeared, Mozart was first immersing himself in the same Bach fugues, thanks to Benjamin Franklin's collaborator Baron von Swieten.

Beethoven insisted throughout his life that J.S. Bach was the source from which all things in music flow, and his early immersion in Bach accounts for the astonishingly mature quality of many supposedly "juvenile" works. Contrary to the usual picture of Beethoven, the "late bloomer" verse Mozart, the "child prodigy," some Beethoven works written under Neefe's direction, e.g., his first (without opus) piano concerto written at age 14, stand up very well to what Mozart

composed at that age. The editor of the 1906 German edition of these memoirs, Alfred Kalischer, included in the translation, rebutted Wegeler as follows: "What is here said about Chr. Gottlob Neefe, however, is not to the point. Beethoven, as he himself acknowledged, owed much to this extraordinary teacher, particularly in composition instruction." Kalischer otherwise dismisses Thayer's attempts to discredit Wegeler as a source. But the slur against Neefe goes beyond the scope of permissible error, and the issue of Wegeler's credibility must remain open.

Did Ries sell out?

Ferdinand Ries, the pianist prodigy who made his fortune in London, remains just as problematic. Eva Badura-Skoda's introduction consists largely of an attack against the authority of biographer Anton Schindler, Beethoven's personal secretary during his final years. Schindler reports Beethoven's conviction that Ries had sold out to the London Philistines. Badura-Skoda writes, "Schindler was less interested in conveying actual facts and impressions than in giving a censored picture of Beethoven according to his own limited understanding of the master." Indeed, she attacks the English translator of Schindler's biography, out of "concern about the possible harm this new edition might do because the editor had neglected to emphasize Schindler's questionable character and his tendency even to forge evidence if he considered it 'necessary' or 'advisable.'"

Schindler made a somewhat pathetic career out of his relationship to Beethoven (satirized by Heinrich Heine, among others). Although the systematic Thayer had a high opinion of his biography, Schindler is far from reliable, especially on matters pertaining to his own relationship to Beethoven, who appears to have merely tolerated him.

But who was, in fact, loyal to Beethoven? Ries's London took the lead in ruining performance of Beethoven's music by raising concert pitch, to achieve a supposedly brilliant sound; indeed, Covent Garden's concert "A" had risen to almost 460 cycles per second (against Beethoven's 427 cycles), before the great soprano Adelina Patti forced its reduction to the late-19th-century "French" standard of 435 cycles per second.

In the standard histories of musical pitch, none other than Anton Schindler emerges as a public campaigner for the lower pitch. His 1855 article in the *Niederrheinische Musikzeitung* on "The Present High Orchestral Pitch and Its Future," demanded a return to the lower "A" prior to 1816, when the elevated tuning of the military bands gathered at the Congress of Vienna began to force pitch higher. Indeed, Schindler's attack on the high pitch is the only one mentioned by these sources during that period. Schindler and his friends organized the first so-called "old instruments" concerts, playing with woodwinds manufactured earlier in the century at the lower pitch. In this respect, Schindler agreed with such of Beethoven's friends as Paris

Conservatory director Luigi Cherubini.

Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr. has demonstrated why the higher pitch destroys classical composers' music: classical counterpoint derives from the register-shifts of the human voice, which classical instruments (including the Beethoven-era wooden-frame piano) imitate. No development was more destructive to musical composition than the elevation of pitch which began in the 1820s. Schindler may not have understood much, but he understood the fundamentals, namely that Beethoven's music could not properly be performed at the London pitch. There is no record of Ries having complained about this.

Schindler understood something else fundamental to Beethoven's character; he devotes a chapter of his biography to Beethoven's relationship to Plato. The great composer immersed himself in Plato's work on music, less in the physics of the *Timaeus* than in the moral strictures set down in the *Republic*, Book VI, Schindler reported. Beethoven's motto, "All True Art is Moral Progress," puts him squarely in Plato's camp in this regard, and makes him an enemy of the Romantics (starting with Rousseau), who have attempted to abduct Beethoven's posthumous reputation.

Eva Badura-Skoda should know about these issues; indeed her husband, pianist Paul Badura-Skoda, on whom hangs flapping the giant mantle of his teacher Edwin Fischer, styles himself a specialist in the Beethoven-era fortepiano. Indeed, the Wegeler-Ries edition sports an introduction by the cult-leader of the "old instruments" movement, British conductor Christopher Hogwood, who seems to believe that all means of music expression, e.g., string vibrato, are to be excised from classical performance as "musicologically imprecise." Hogwood's dour band does, however, play more or less at Beethoven's pitch, because the old instruments cannot stand any higher. They dislike music too much to understand its significance.

Eva Badura-Skoda makes no mention, however, of the issues of principle between Schindler and Ries. Instead, she calls upon "Austria's most gifted and best-known graphologist," a certain Robert Muckenschnabel, to compare Ries's and Schindler's handwriting! Muckenschnabel "wrote a shockingly negative character analysis of Schindler," but described Ries as "a reliable, extraordinarily diligent and faithful person."

Graphology is a kooky obsession heavily funded by the late S.G. Warburg, who believed (among many other weird things) that one could read men's characters through their handwriting. That such idiocy could make its way into supposedly reputable scholarship is a scandal by itself, and the choice of Eva Badura-Skoda for the new volume's introduction represented poor judgment on the publisher's part.

Nonetheless, the newly available translation gives English-speaking readers the chance to better work through the controversies in Beethoven scholarship for themselves, and that is contribution enough.