

MUSEUM FÜR MUSIKAUTOMATEN SEEWEN SO

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Seewen, in December 2020

Special exhibition from 16 December 2020 to 1 August 2021

Roll over Beethoven

Automaton music marking the composer's 250th birthday

The name of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) became a byword for classical music in the 19th century. That being so, the fact that his compositions feature widely in mechanical musical instruments comes as no surprise. Over 150 rolls of music by the composer have been tracked down for the Welte Mignon reproducing piano alone. On the other hand, his music rarely appears on Swiss music boxes. To mark the 250th anniversary of the composer's birth, the Museum of Music Automats is looking for musical items of interest featuring Orchestrions, mechanical pianos and organs, as well as music boxes and other automatons.

Ludwig van Beethoven is a representative person in a 19th century increasingly looking back with nostalgia. Although the virtuosic piano pieces by Romantic composers such as Franz Liszt and Frederic Chopin were particularly effective and more widely available on reproducing pianos, the major manufacturers of music scrolls for music automatons reproduced almost all of Beethoven's piano works as well as arrangements of his main orchestral and chamber music works.

Beethoven in mechanical music

The 150-plus rolls of music by Beethoven for the Welte Mignon reproducing piano were recorded by famous artists such as Eugen d'Albert, Ferruccio Busoni, Frederic Lamond and Alfred Grünfeld. These pianists embodied disparate, powerful traditions of Beethoven interpretation that competed with each other in the 19th century for sovereignty of interpretation of the composer's piano works. Amongst the artists whose playing was thus captured was Carl Reinecke, who was born during Beethoven's lifetime. Exerting the strongest influence on the history of interpretation was a group of Liszt students who, through the Beethoven-Czerny-Liszt teacher-student lineage, claimed a particularly authentic understanding of Beethoven, although they exhibited markedly different results in their playing. Compare this with piano rolls originating from the circle that



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included Clara Schumann, Carl Reinecke and Johannes Brahms, whose playing embodied contrary understandings. It is also fascinating to observe how performances captured on piano rolls exhibit styles that disappeared only a few years after they were made, as well as those that have endured: Wilhelm Backhaus and Edwin Fischer, for example, had a formative effect on Beethoven interpretation in the 20th century.

Ludwig van Beethoven is also well represented on rolls for the Welte Philharmonie, the Britannic organ, which is surprising in that he composed almost nothing for the organ. That said, the organ is of course better suited to the performance of orchestral works than the piano, so the orchestral transcriptions – some arranged, some captured on rolls – are well worth hearing.

Swiss music boxes

The repertoire of 19th century Swiss music boxes is characterized by contemporary opera and operetta. It is dominated by overtures and arias by famous composers such as Gioachino Rossini, Gaetano Donizetti, Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner, whose latest compositions were performed in opera houses from Naples to Paris and London. Ludwig van Beethoven's music, on the other hand, is rarely represented – for example by his Egmont and Fidelio overtures.

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Photos of the museum, the Britannic organ, other objects etc. can be downloaded from the website under „Media“.