

Beethoven on Stamps

March Meeting:

Display lecture given by Miss Marcelle Bartolo (*abridged*)

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen:-

To many, Ludwig van Beethoven is the greatest composer that ever lived. He succeeded in closing the classical period in music and opening the romantic age in such a way, that he became the leading representative of both periods. His career was of decisive importance both in music and in the world of the arts as a whole, and shows the development from the world of formal classicism to the threshold of high romanticism. His figure overshadows the whole of 19th. century music and his influence on musical writing was unthinkable. He evolved the symphony, piano sonata and string quartet from the many restrictive mannerisms of Mozart's time to the liberated and free-flowing movements, all inter-related to one another. His profound revolutionary spirit, coupled with his extraordinary musical gifts, affected all those who came after him; he all but exhausted the symphonic medium and the younger generation of composers accordingly felt themselves obliged to seek new methods of musical expression, feeling more than a little inhibited by the greatness of his symphonies, sonatas and chamber music. Indeed, in art, he was neither a classicist nor a romanticist but a realist and truth of expression was his constant aim.

Born in Bonn on the 16th December, 1770 of Flemish ancestry. At eight years of age, Ludwig made his debut as a pianist at a concert held in the Academy Hall. In 1792, Beethoven went to Vienna where he was greatly acclaimed and subsequently went on extended concert tours as pianist and composer.

By 1798 the first signs of deafness started to appear and in 1802, Beethoven wrote his famous "Testament of Heiligenstadt". Though during the following years it was increasingly difficult for him to play in public, most of his masterpieces were written when he was virtually stone-deaf. He died on the 27th March, 1827 in his lodgings in Vienna.

This great composer was, and is still being, commemorated on numerous stamps and other philatelic items. The first cinderella to honour him was the Altona local of 1889, while the first stamp depicting him in one of a set of seven, issued on the 24th April, 1922 as part of Austria's Charity Series. This set created a precedent inasmuch as it showed composers on stamps and its postal validity was one of only 28 days. Proceeds from this set were to go into a Fund especially set up to help needy musicians.

For his death centenary in 1927 we find the 8 pfennig German stamp which is part of a set of fourteen, showing portraits of different personages. This stamp shows the authentic 1818-19 portrait in oils of Beethoven as painted by Ferdinand Schimon while the composer was at work on the *Missa Solemnis*. This stamp can also be found imprinted on German postal cards issued during that year. Another postal card showing the Schimon portrait is the commemorative one issued by Austria. This card additionally shows various houses at Baden, Heiligenstadt, Moedling and Nüssdorf together with the



wording of an old poem, reading as follows:-

“Still stands many an old house,
 honoured as his place of work;
 No new will be erected
 which will not re-echo his songs”.

In 1947, the Rhineland Palatinate zone in Germany, issued two stamps also depicting the Master. These show a portrait closely based on the life mask made by Franz Klein in 1812. Though this mask is the one realistic portrayal of the composer, which has come down to us, it is to be noted that no stamps reproduce the authentic life mask as such, all being designer’s portraits, closely or freely based. This issue also has various plate varieties and errors like set-offs with paper creases and even gum prints. The total amount of these errors are not more than one sheet.

To commemorate the 125th. Death Anniversary in 1952, stamps with designer’s portraits were issued by West Berlin and East Germany. Coincidentally, on Czechoslovakia’s issue for the International Prague Music Festival, can also be seen portraits of Beethoven by Karel Svolinsky. The first-day-cover additionally shows the motive of the chorale development of the Ninth Symphony.

In the 1961 Celebrities’ Series of West Germany and West Berlin are also two portraits based on the 1823 oil painting made by Ferdinand Waldmüller. These form part of the Famous Germans’ sets and the West German stamp of Beethoven was issued in two different shades: dark green and grey-green respectively.

In 1962, Austria issued a definitive set depicting various buildings and the 2 schillings 20 stamp shows the house in Pfarrplatz 2, Heiligenstadt. This residence is the place where Beethoven lived and worked during 1802 and wrote the "Testament of Heiligenstadt".

To celebrate the birth bi-centenary in 1970, about 18 countries recognized by FIP issued commemorative stamps of Beethoven, this apart from the many handstamps and special cancels used for the occasion. Those issued by Greece, India and Niger show designer's portraits with the latter's design including an allegory to the "Ode to Joy". While the Monaco stamp also has a designer's portrait, it additionally shows the first four bars of the Ninth Symphony, whilst on the first-day-cover is the Schimon oil portrait. This latter painting was also the basis for the West German issue.

Surinam also issued a set of designer's portraits and these are based on the Neesen silhouette of 1786 - taken when Beethoven was 15 years old, the 1803 ivory miniature by Christian Horneman, the 1812 bronze bust by Franz Klein, the engraving by Hoefel and the bust by Joseph Danhauser. The 1818 pencil sketch made by August Kloeber is not literally reproduced on stamps but the portraits of the Dahomey issue are closely based on it.

The stamp and miniature sheet of East Germany show portraits freely based on the oil painting of 1819-20 by Joseph Stieler. The first-day-cover also shows the opening of the Fifth Symphony on its handstamp and a fragment from the 1st sketch for the chorale section of the "Ode to Joy". This fragment is also shown on the Mexican stamp together with Beethoven's signature. Other portraits based on the Stieler oil painting can be seen on the Albanian, Bulgarian and Cameroun issues.

Two stamps showing faithful reproductions are those of Czechoslovakia and Russia. The Czech stamp shows the Svolinsky portrait while the Russian one has a painting by Anatoly Kalashnikov, in addition to the first three notes of the Appassionata sonata.

Another authentic reproduction is that of Hungary which shows a statue of Beethoven made by Janos Pasztor, now to be found at Martonvasar in Hungary. This stamp also contains the opening bars of the piano sonatina No. 5.

The Trucial States of the United Arab Emirates also took part in the birth bi-centenary commemorations but erroneously issued their stamps in 1971 instead of 1970. Though most issues of these states are not recognized by the FIP, some of them have really good portrait reproductions which cannot be found on any other philatelic items. A good example of this is the set of six stamps of Ras al Khaima which faithfully reproduce the 1804 portrait by Joseph Maehler, the Neugass oil portrait of 1806, the 1812 bronze bust by Franz Klein, the 1815 Maehler painting in its first version (this exists in 3 versions), and the more realistic Beethoven portrait made by Johann Christoph Heckel. Other previously unmentioned drawings and sculptures can be found in the Sharjah and Dependencies set of five. Having a value of 3 dirhams each, these show the photographic reproduction of the bronze bust by Dietrich of 1821, Beethoven's birthplace in Bonn, a drawing and a facsimile reproduction of the manuscript for the orchestral overture "The Consecration of the House". Most of these stamps can also be found imperforate.

(to be continued)