

Haydn, Beethoven, and the Viennese Fine Artists' Pension Society

Although neither Haydn nor Beethoven was a prolific composer of music for social dancing, it is well known that both composers contributed dances for the Viennese Fine Artists' Pension Society (Pensionsgesellschaft bildender Künstler) in the 1790s. The society held an annual charity masked ball in the imperial ballrooms on the Sunday before St. Catherine's Day (25 November) every year between 1792 and 1870, and in the early years it was customary for new minuets and German dances to be donated by a local composer. Haydn composed the Minuets Hob. IX: 11 and German Dances Hob. IX:12 for the inaugural ball shortly after returning from his first highly successful visit to London, and Beethoven composed his dances WoO 7 and WoO 8 for the 1795 ball at the age of only 24.

The unpublished archives of the Fine Artists' Pension Society (Stadt- und Landesarchiv, Vienna) contain numerous details of the composers' involvement with the annual balls, including payment receipts, promotional posters and ticket lists. While the archive material relating to Haydn's contribution in 1792 has received ample attention, notably from H. C. Robbins Landon and Günter Thomas, many other details of the music at these balls have yet to be explored. These details reveal a number of hitherto unknown aspects of both Haydn's and Beethoven's involvement with the society. Beethoven's association with the society, for instance, continued as late as 1818, when his 1795 dances were revived and he was allocated six free tickets for that year's ball. And at the 1868 ball, Haydn's minuets of 1792 (still in the society's possessions) were revived, with the dance performed by a group of ladies and gentlemen accompanied by an orchestra directed by Carl Michael Ziehrer (one of Vienna's foremost waltz composers). Closer consideration of the range of composers who contributed music to the society (who in the 1790s also included Beethoven's own brother Carl as well as Wilhelm von Lichnovsky, brother of the famous music patrons Karl and Moritz) furthermore yields important insights into relationships and networks between Vienna's music and art worlds at the turn of the Nineteenth Century. Information from the society's archives will here be presented in order to gain a clearer picture of Haydn's and Beethoven's involvement with the Fine Artists' Pension Society both in the 1790s and in subsequent decades.