

The Life of Beethoven -

filming documentaries for BBC2 in 1970

In 2020 the BBC is celebrating the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth. 50 years ago Ian Carson was employed found himself working on documentaries to mark the 200th.

In 1969 I was a studio manager at the BBC in Bristol, rubbing shoulders with personalities such as Peter Scott, Johnny Morris, Arthur Negus and Freddy Grisewood. Then I gained what the BBC termed an 'attachment' to BBC television music, a short term appointment - cheap labour or career opportunity depending on your POV - working as an assistant producer. I was assigned to a dynamic producer, Barrie Gavin, with whom I was able to enjoy a creative working relationship, but just as the Beethoven project started he became temporarily unavailable. At very short notice I found myself on a plane to Hanover to set up the filming, trying desperately to recollect a year of A level German studied at a time when bar billiards in the pub seemed a greater priority and afternoon lessons were somewhat 'getrunken'.

Challenge number one came at the Avis desk at Hanover airport, as I went to collect the basic VW the BBC in its largesse had hired for me. 'I'm sorry, we don't have one, we only have a Mercedes 280S.' I didn't fancy touring the other car hire desks late evening trying to negotiate another vehicle, so I agreed the Mercedes would 'do'. Mercedes did things differently from most car manufacturers, and there was neither handbook nor anyone to guide me. So I got in and looked for the lights. I found a switch with an icon of rays coming out of a circle, pressed it, and the roof slid open. Good start.

I have no memory from that point until I found myself drinking alone in a Hanover bar,

where the barmaid practised her English on me. For whatever reason she felt obliged to give me the directions to the local Treffpunkt (meeting place), thoughtful but no thank you!

Onwards next day to Bielefeld, home town to the pianist Hans Richter Haaser - of whom it is said that he once sat down with an orchestra to rehearse Brahms 2nd Piano Concerto, when the conductor announced 'Brahms1' - 'er no, Brahms 2' 'No Brahms 1', 'OK Brahms 1' - one of the biggest concertos, without batting an



eyelid. My mission in Bielefeld was to check out his local Rudolf-Oetker Halle (concert hall) of which he was justifiably proud, and where he wished to play Beethoven - a mission quickly accomplished and we moved on to more important subjects, like food. Most of my time with Hans was spent listening to him enthusing over Indonesia, particularly Bali, and his endorsement of a meal named the 'Indonesian Rice Table' was not lost on me. 'Go to Amsterdam for the best Indonesian cooking' he said. I never have, but I pass on the tip.



So to Beethoven's birthplace, 'a small town in Germany', and in 1969 its seat of government,



Bonn. It was a chance to become used to the speeds on West Germany's Autobahns. I was plodding along at a stately 150 kph, far faster than I would ever drive at home, but even at that speed a distant dot in the rear mirror would become a Porsche filling the frame in no time at all. Scary!



At the Beethovenhaus I was greeted by the director, and allowed to play Beethoven's Graf piano. I had Beethoven's *Waldstein* Sonata in my memory at the time,

probably because Count Waldstein's parting words when Beethoven left Bonn were: -'May you receive the spirit of Mozart from the hands of Haydn.' - which was pretty spot on really. Everyone who plays Beethoven's piano



music should try it on an authentic instrument. It was an absolute ear-opener to me, if only because the timbres varied so much according to the zone of the keyboard being played.

I hoped for shots of buildings from Beethoven's time, but they had all gone - through bombing or development - so the Beethovenhaus director recommended the village of Unkel, a short distance up the Rhine, as providing similar houses - I must admit I enjoyed the prospect of portraying Beethoven as *The Man from Unkel*.

Awaiting me at Vienna airport was a VW Beetle, in line with the BBC budget, and with its own unpredictable views on how to negotiate corners. Through the good offices of John Culshaw - the Head of BBC TV music and formerly the Decca producer of the Solti 'Ring' cycle - I had the assistance of the late Helga



Schmidt - Arts Administrator at the Vienna Opera, and later at Covent Garden. She invited me to meet her for a meal, and I managed to lose her phone number before fixing

a time and place. In the era before modern phone technology what could I do? I wrote down what I thought was her phone number, went to a phone box, dialled it and - phew! There she was, my introduction to Schnitzel

and Strudel later that evening. She opened the doors to exclusive filming venues in Vienna for me between expeditions to the Viennese countryside to exercise her dog, which I recall as having a familial resemblance to a Rottweiler - all drama and drool.

Filming the Beethoven documentaries for BBC2 was scheduled for the early autumn of 1970 in Germany and Austria. Production secretary Angela Filkin and I drove down through Europe to Vienna. An optimistic gauge led us to run out of fuel on the autobahn, so I trudged down the hard shoulder to the not-too -distant services, practising my German for 'emergency fuel canister' en route. As a result we reached Munich late enough to discover our hotel rooms had been re-let, but in compensation we were offered the luxury penthouse to share, single man and married woman - must have amused whoever processed our expenses claims!

On to Vienna, where Helga Schmidt had been making preparations. First off was the Palais Lobkowitz, residence in 1803 of Beethoven's



friend and financial supporter Prince Joseph Franz von Lobkowitz, who lavished imprudent sums on the support of music. An orchestra including his servants gave the first run-throughs of Beethoven's *Eroica*, and here we were, filming in the very room in which those took place.



We were there to film the Eibner trio playing a Beethoven piano trio, employing a fortepiano, on which Franz Eibner also played the *Rage over a lost penny*. I do recall him getting into a tizz over a retarded tempo as I attempted to sight read it so that he could hear the audio balance. The generous acoustics of this and other rooms prompted a



debate as to whether wall tapestries would have dampened them in the time of the composer, but with or without them, a piano trio filled the room, and small wonder that a contemporary critic wrote of the large-scale symphonic *Eroica* that it was "for the most part so shrill and complicated that only those who worship the failings and merits of this composer with equal fire, which at times borders on the ridiculous, could find pleasure in it".

A trip out of Vienna to Burgenland, and the little town of Eisenstadt, location for the summer palace of Haydn's patron, who enjoyed hunting in the marshes yearly until the insects got the better of his retinue.



We went to visit the Bergkirche, an extraordinary domed church which was the location for the premiere of Beethoven's *Mass* in C. My impression was that the volume of sound must have been overwhelming in that relatively small building. If you think that Austria is all Alpine, then this church is in Burgenland, a flat area on the edge of the great Hungarian plain which simply must be explored. You could divert to the nearby Neusiedlersee, a lake where the frogs chorus like barracking MPs at Question Time, and where the booming of the bitterns is a gamelan orchestra of empty Coke bottles being blown across their mouths. Soberingly we remembered that our then BBC colleague Robert Vas escaped his native Hungary by



walking across the frozen lake in winter. A diversion on the return took us to the charming town of Rust, where platforms on the chimney pots, like miniature helicopter



landing pads, provide homes for families of nesting storks. Charming, not to be missed.

Back in Vienna, and on to the Akademie der Wissenschaften (Academy of Sciences), a magnificently appointed building entirely surrounded by roads, and location for the first performance of Beethoven's 7th Symphony at a charity concert for wounded soldiers. We



were there to record a Beethoven piano concerto, with members of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and pianist Jörg Demus. Helga Schmidt had arranged for traffic around the Akademie to be diverted. Unfortunately some other official decided this was the night to start work on the Vienna underground, and all the traffic was diverted to around the building instead of away from it. Our sound recordist, I only recall him as



'Spud', was tearing his hair out, but Roland Berger, principal horn, opened a door onto a balcony

and blasted Siegfried's horn call (Wagner) down the street, which if nothing else, relaxed the atmosphere.

Another trip out of Vienna to the autumnal woods and some shots for the *Pastoral Symphony*, a job for the assistant cameraman. He later became a hugely respected pre-eminent wildlife photographer and director - Hugh Miles. The *Scene by the brook* in the *Pastoral* was conceived by a stream that flows

through the village of Heiligenstadt, now a suburb of Vienna. Beethoven was staying in that village in 1802 when he wrote the heart-rending document recognising the effect of his growing deafness. Director Barrie and I



went there and found the house in which he had been staying. The concierge was quite doolally and as she waddled up the stairs she pointed to an obviously modern screw sticking out of a beam. 'Beethoven put that screw there', she assured us, then ripped it out with a strength you wouldn't want to argue with before handing it to Barrie as a memento.

Another village features in the prelude to Beethoven's final illness, Gneixendorf, where he sought to recuperate at his brother's home in 1826. The place is not where I would go for a rest cure; with (when I reced it) peasants who spoke the German equivalent of broad Zummerzet and a bleak little airstrip. The war film *Stalag 17* was apparently made there. Beethoven likened the name *Gneixendorf* to the sound of a breaking axle, ironic since he returned to Vienna and effectively to his death bed on an ox cart, but the rural surroundings brought back reminiscences to him of the Rhineland of his youth. It was the *da capo* before the final *coda*.

Back in Vienna our next palace was the Kinsky, formerly the Spanish Embassy, but at the time the base of some obscure American cultural organisation, whose staff in ill-fitting suits and with eyes that never quite looked at me, left me wondering whether I was dealing with the

CIA or scientologists. In a circular hall we filmed the *Heiliger Dankgesang* from Beethoven's Op 132 string quartet, deeply personal music from that last period of his life, thankful for his recovery from illness. The Tátrai Quartet performed the 15 minute plus movement in a single take, which meant loading the camera with an exceptionally large magazine of film, and very expensive if it went wrong. 15 minutes of one shot was a bold directorial move at that time, but it was done to match the mood of the music, which it did perfectly.



Barrie and I stayed in a flat close to the opera house found for us by Helga Schmidt, and often used by stars of the opera. This had its hazards. We were awakened several times late at night by phone calls from women of passion assuming the *heldentenor* with whom they were besotted was still residing there - they were most reluctant to ring off. It seems that in the world of opera at least telephone sex is not a modern phenomenon - Gian Carlo Menotti had already made the connection in his opera *The Telephone*. One night we heard the most appalling screams from a dingy building across the road called the *Hotel Moderne*. Was it Alban Berg's operatic heroine *Lulu* meeting her end at the hands of Jack the Ripper? We called the police, only to be told that the hotel was actually something else, and that clients were paying to be forced to emit those blood-curdling sounds.

Our final filming trip outside Vienna was to the forgotten border country between the Danube and the Czech border called *Thayatal* - again off the tourist map and well worth a



visit. Our task was to find ruined castles where we could film scenes to accompany the *Prisoners' Chorus* from Beethoven's only opera *Fidelio*, at the point where they emerge from the

dungeons into the light. It was the *Heurigen* or new wine season, and the peasants (they really were) celebrated in peasant style. I vividly recall one inn, where the door of a dining room was ajar, and I glimpsed inside to feel that I was walking into Breugel's *Peasant wedding* painting. It was a truly medieval scene.



The location for filming Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* played by Jörg Demus was



the Palais Schönburg in Vienna. The family had fallen on hard times and parts of the



palace were in ruins. Head of the house was Princess Karolina von Schönburg, unattached but out of our league - radiating noble breeding, and with - dare I say - smouldering but

socially filtered Aryan blue eyes. She eventually married - and divorced - a very wealthy Colombian diplomat. She had a mother who was disabled, and who patrolled the Palais grounds in a motorised carriage, with an ammonia gas gun concealed about her person. Between filming sessions we enjoyed picnics in the palace grounds, washed down with *Heurigen* wine, naturally.



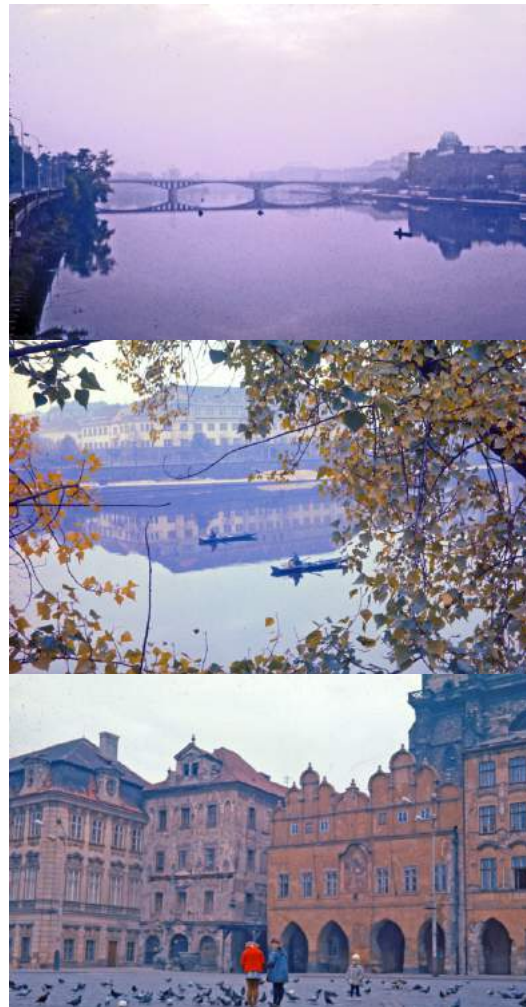
We had two weekend breaks. On the first the whole crew travelled to Budapest. The Hungarian border was intimidating. Watch towers overlooking us and cars being literally stripped in the search for escaping refugees; then we passed through the mined area on the far side. We stopped later to enjoy a lunch of authentic *goulash*. The waiter, in spattered dowdy suit, emerged with a *coup-de-théâtre* flourish and Chaplinesque dignity through the kitchen swing door, plates of goulash

balanced all up one arm as well as in both hands. Sadly it was a banana-skin moment and he tipped backwards through the swing door which promptly closed on him to the sound of smashing crockery beyond. Later we



enjoyed a magnificent meal in the Fisherman's Bastion, overlooking the Danube in central Budapest, where the T-bone steaks were so huge we shared them (well some of us did). The down side was emerging from our rooms on Sunday morning to discover someone had scrawled an anti-Jewish slogan in the dust on our car, and let one of the tyres down. I stopped in front of an imposing building with a red star on top to change the wheel, but was waved on by a guard with the enforcing politeness that comes with brandishing a sub-machine gun. I didn't know it was the communist party HQ.

After their Hungarian experience, the crew were largely not disposed to visit Prague in Soviet lockdown the next weekend, so Angela and I were the only ones to go. Huge weekend queues were reported at the main border crossing between Vienna and Prague, so we chose an obscure crossing point and entered without problems. As the only Ford on a road entirely populated by butt-of-joke model Skodas we were conspicuous, and it was not long before a 'student' with perfect English invited himself into our car for a lift. He asked us some interesting questions and left us wondering who he really was. Prague



was sombre and colourless - so different today - and it was a measure of the austerity that our flimsy table napkins were cut in half. I was too much of a coward to photograph the Russian tanks at the ends of the Charles

Bridge in the calm of a Sunday morning where incongruously there were fishermen in punts on the Vltava (the river featured in Smetana's



famous tone poem). Russian officers flaunted their impressive uniforms fearlessly in town; they had the air of the insuperable. How the world changes! We paid our respects

to Jan Palach at the statue of King Wenceslas, where he self-immolated in protest at the Russian take-over the previous year.



To celebrate the end of our filming trip we all indulged one of my whims - a meal in a Hungarian gypsy restaurant in Vienna. It was here that Graham the cockney 'grips' came into his own when a gypsy violinist serenaded our table, all glissandi and pizzicatos. Graham had a brilliant line in whistling loudly through his fingers, and the two performed an impromptu duet - 'Glug, are the Viennese bourgeoisie going to complain?' - I wondered - no they loved it - laughter and spontaneous applause - thank you Graham, you made my trip!

Crew relaxing!

