

BEETHOVEN DUET

Setting the Scene in Prague

By Annette Dorgerloh and Anett Werner

One of the most impressive sequences in *Beethoven – Days in a Life* is the final scene; in it shaggy-haired Beethoven walks with his head down through dark, narrow alleyways and passes a ruined house in Vienna. These *Beethoven* location shots were mainly filmed in the streets and squares of the Old City of Prague, with the St. Vitis Cathedral there standing in for Vienna’s St. Stephen’s Cathedral. The exact filming locations in Prague, then the capital of Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic), can be found on an original map at the Potsdam Film Museum, labeled “Praha-Hradčany and Malá Strana” (Prague Castle District and Little Quarter, Fig. 1). Relatively few shots—mainly of landscapes—were filmed in and around Vienna. The winding streets of Prague were better suited to show the Austro-Hungarian atmosphere of Beethoven’s Vienna than the present-day city, with its pretentious late 19th-century ring road transformation. Another reason for transforming Prague into Vienna was certainly the DEFA Film Studio’s lack of access to Austrian currency.

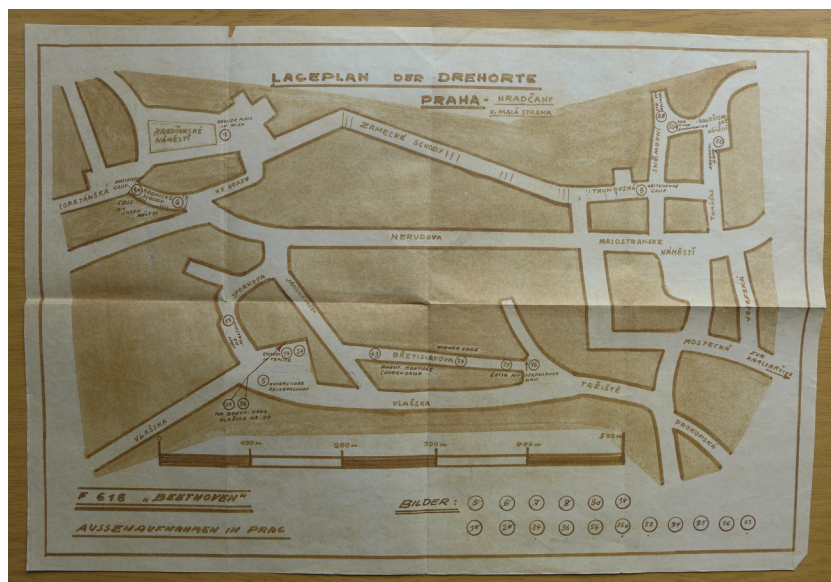


Fig. 1—Map with filming locations in Prague.
© Courtesy of the Potsdam Film Museum

Numbers 75 and 76 on the map mark the alleyway and the run-down house that Beethoven briefly passes in the final scene of the film, in which the composer hurriedly follows a horse and cart packed with his few belongings. Then, all of a sudden, Beethoven is no longer in 19th-century Vienna; instead, in an attempt to characterize him as a person without a homeland, he is in the center of 1970s-era East Berlin. The registry of film locations lists this place as “Modern Street in 1975/Alexanderplatz;” and, sure enough, Beethoven walks along the final phase of construction of the Karl Marx Allee, completed in the late 1960s, with its prefabricated buildings and shops. Trabant- and Wartburg-brand cars pass the composer, and in the background out-of-focus people in modern clothes turn to look at him. The scene is filmed in thin wintery sunshine, accompanied by Beethoven’s famous Ninth Symphony and the Piano Sonata No. 8 (“Pathétique”) that would later bring him eternal fame. The artist is so preoccupied by his inner voice and music that he does not notice his modern surroundings. Here we see the image of a free and unyielding artist transformed into a positive example for the contemporary GDR of the 1970s.

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The original script of *Beethoven* actually called for images of modern times in the opening scene as well, with images of neon signs for Stern Radio, the East German company that managed the production of radios, giving way to the battlefield at Vitoria in 1813, before moving into the theater where Beethoven's Wellington's Victory, Op. 91 (also called The Battle Symphony or The Battle of Vitoria) is being performed. As Mälzel comments in historical documents and in the film, this orchestral work marked a shift in the style of Beethoven's compositions. The film's original message thus intended to show Beethoven, the musical phenomenon on the radio, gradually taking shape and transforming into a role model and then a GDR contemporary.

The eight existing set design sketches and detailed drawings for the film were done by Paul Lehmann, one of East Germany's most important set designers and the one originally assigned to the film. Lehmann was born in Berlin in 1928. After an apprenticeship as a mechanic, he studied set design for the theater at the Academy for Applied Arts in Berlin-Weissensee from 1947 to 1949. After graduating, he worked as a set designer at various theaters, including in Stralsund, Weimar, Eisenach and Potsdam, before he joined the DEFA Studio in 1956 and started his career in film. He worked as a set designer on many films, including *Maibowle* (*May Wine*, 1959, dir. Günter Reisch), Kurt Maetzig's sci-fi-adventure *Der schweigende Stern* (*The Silent Star*, 1959) and the fairytale film *Die vertauschte Königin* (*The Swapped Queen*, 1983, dir. Dieter Scharfenberg).

Two of Lehmann's detailed color drawings show the horse and cart loaded with Beethoven's few belongings—a piano, music stand, books and chairs—barely covered by a tarpaulin (Fig. 2-3). The artist, wearing a top hat and carrying a framed painting under his arm, walks behind the cart just like in the finished film. However, the film used neither the tarp nor the top hat. The two watercolor drawings show different stages of the creation process. Only the cobbled street, sketched in gray, gives a sense of space. The furniture arrangement differs in the drawings; the furniture tower with the piano and music stand on top seen in the film was taken from the first, unfinished drawing.

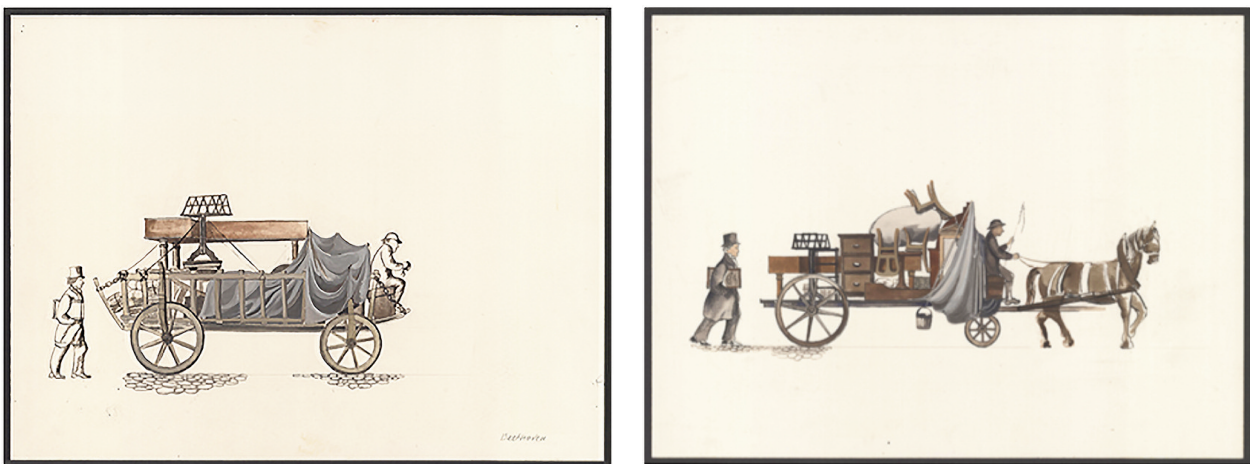


Fig. 2-3—Courtesy of the Potsdam Film Museum © N029_061 and N029_062 Potsdam Film Museum



Fig. 4—The final scene of *Beethoven – Days in a Life*

Paul Lehmann's sketches and drawings give insight into the design and furnishing of scenes in the film. But although most of Lehmann's ideas appeared in the finished film and he signed off on sketches for the *Beethoven* set design, his name is not listed in the final credits. Unusual for DEFA film history, Lehmann was replaced during the production process. A document in the German Federal Film Archive reveals that already on the first day of filming there were fierce disputes about the execution and configuration of the set design in Prague that led to a breakdown of relations between the director and the set designer. Hans Albert Poppe (1928-1999) was hired to replace Lehmann as chief set designer. Poppe too had studied stage set design at the Academy for Applied Arts in Berlin-Weissensee. As of 1949, he had worked at the DEFA Studio as a painter and trainee, as well as an executive architect for set designer Erich Zander. In addition to films about contemporary issues and biographies, such as *Der verlorene Engel* (*The Lost Angel*, 1966/71, dir. Ralf Kirsten) about the German sculptor Ernst Barlach, Poppe worked on a variety of other films at DEFA. In the 1950s and '60s, he created the set designs for several fairy-tale and children's films, including *Die Geschichte vom armen Hassan* (*The Story of Poor Hassan*, 1958, dir. Gerhard Klein), *Das Feuerzeug* (*The Tinderbox*, 1959, dir. Siegfried Hartmann) and *Schneewittchen* (*Snow White*, 1961, dir. Gottfried Kolditz). Poppe's artistic work was honored with several prizes, including the 1986 award for Best Set Design for *Die Frau und der Fremde* (*The Woman and the Stranger*, 1985), an intimate, play-like film directed by Rainer Simon, at the National Festival for Feature Films in Karl-Marx-Stadt. Although Poppe's extensive artistic estate is archived at the Potsdam Film Museum, there are no *Beethoven* set design sketches because of the special circumstances surrounding the production process.

Most of Lehmann's set design drawings focus on interiors. Great importance was attached to Beethoven's living space. In several of the sketches, as in the film itself, Beethoven sits at his piano, while his guests sit around the table listening to his latest composition (Fig. 5).

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Paul Lehmann signed this drawing with his initials, "pl," and [19]75, the production year of the film. The furniture and general condition of the apartment demonstrate that the artist lives in modest circumstances. The rooms are shown in shades of beige and brown; a bust positioned on the bureau also appears as a prop in a second drawing of the apartment.



Fig. 5—Beethoven's First Apartment
© N029_059 Potsdam Film Museum



Fig. 6—Beethoven's Third Apartment
© N029_063 Potsdam Film Museum

Beethoven sits working at the piano, with sheets of music scattered on the floor, a music stand and a small round table. Little light finds its way through the closed shutters, and the dominant colors of the room are blue and gray. In the film the apartment walls are mostly painted white. In the corresponding film scene, Beethoven lies on the wooden floor and, by candlelight, fills the pages that are chaotically strewn about him with notes, meanwhile singing full-throatedly and drumming the rhythm on the floor. The deaf artist takes no notice of the neighbors who come to complain about the nightly disturbance.

In the picture's right-hand margin, there is a casual pencil sketch of a curved backrest (Fig.6). Such chairs can be found in other drawings, as well as in the film. At the beginning of the film, before the viewer sees Beethoven's studio for the first time, the backrest of the rococo chair is even broken, with the middle section lying on the upholstery. In the beginning of the first episode—the film tells the story in nineteen loosely connected episodes, each introduced by an inserted title—the broken chair and the title "Love of Art" are shown. This juxtaposition makes clear the artist's priorities in life. The maid who quits working for Beethoven and flees at the start of the film removes this piece of the backrest so that a guest can sit on the dirty, ripped, red seat cushion. Even Beethoven's guest tries unsuccessfully to repair the chair.

The design for the apartment is repeated on the upper half of a second watercolor drawing (Fig. 7). On the lower half of the same sheet Beethoven, in a nightgown, sits on a bed in a little room with a window and a sloped roof; the film leaves out the slope of the roof.

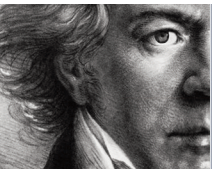


Fig. 7—Beethoven's Third Apartment, Beethoven Sitting on His Bed.
© N029_064 Potsdam Film Museum

On the right side of the drawing are lightly penciled sketches of two dressers, one with a washbowl on top, the other with a mirror. Above is a double window with shutters. All the apartments are rather sparsely furnished and conform to the tops of a brilliant and strong-willed, but poor artist who cannot afford any luxuries. The humble living conditions that already appear in Lehmann's room designs are complemented by the costume design. At home Beethoven wears a threadbare housecoat; and the opening of another episode juxtaposes the holes in the artist's socks with the title "Material Circumstances"—an ironic commentary on his awkward financial situation. The depiction of Beethoven as a poor artist calls to mind Carl Spitzweg's famous painting *Der arme Poet* (*The Poor Poet*, 1839), which depicts a poet in a nightcap in a meagerly furnished, leaky attic, trying to protect himself from the incoming water with an umbrella.

An appendix to the final report for the film production, written by the DEFA Studio, once again notes the difficulties encountered during production. Director Horst Seemann was hired at the last minute after production was stopped on a planned film about Karl Marx. Negotiations with Mosfilm Studio in Moscow for the much-sought-after main actor, Donatas Banionis, had also not been easy. Finally, it was unfortunate that concerns raised by musicologists about Günter Kunert's script could not be smoothed out, as tensions with expert advisors led to a three-week interruption in shooting while in Prague in the fall of 1975. The change in set designers after the return from Prague added further costs to the bottom line. In the end, however, the film came in well below the budgeted 800,000 East German marks.

From today's perspective the concerns of the musicologists seem well founded. The film was conceptualized as a story about Beethoven's role as an oppositional artist, however, not a story about him as a composer and his music. A 1976 description by the filmmakers reads: "Through different situations and people the headstrong character and living conditions of the famous and unique artist L. van Beethoven are revealed from a contemporary perspective." His inability "to make compromises of any kind, even though people would have understood and accepted them," makes Beethoven a modern hero. He is comparable to historic and literary figures, such as the author Georg Büchner, the poet and novelist Joseph von Eichendorff, or



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Goethe's Werther, who through DEFA films of the 1970s became the contemporaries and chosen companions of a new generation of romantics with their own *Sturm und Drang*. From this point of view, setting the end of the film in Berlin in 1975 is only logical. But only one year later—the year of the film's premiere in 1976—a new era began for artists and art in the GDR with the forced expatriation of singer and singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann.

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