

**Beethoven's Conversation Books. Volume 1: Nos. 1 to 8 (February 1818 to March 1820).**

Edited and translated by Theodore Albrecht. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2018. [xxxvii, 384 p. ISBN 9781783271504 (hardcover), \$80; ISBN 9781787442412 (e-book), \$24.99.] Music examples, maps, bibliography, index.

**Beethoven's Conversation Books. Volume 2: Nos. 9 to 16 (March 1820 to September 1820).**

Edited and translated by Theodore Albrecht. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2019. [xxxvii, 411 p. ISBN 9781783271511 (hardcover), \$80; ISBN 9781787446212 (e-book), \$24.99.] Music examples, maps, bibliography, index.

In the lead-up to the year 2020, a veritable smorgasbord of Beethoven-themed concerts, conferences, recordings, music editions, and other publications and events were announced that sought to capitalize on the increased momentum surrounding the composer's 250th birth year. Several commentators, myself included, have questioned the utility of some of these undertakings and have criticized publications that have added little of substance. (See for instance Marten Noorduyn, "What Scope Is There for Another Edition of Beethoven's Piano Sonatas?" *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, 4 June 2019, 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409819000053> [accessed 16 December 2019].) In that context, the appearance of the first two volumes of a new English edition of Beethoven's conversation books, which describes itself as a licensed edition of the German publication from 1972 and 1976, might seem like a symptom of the above disease. Luckily, Theodore Albrecht, the editor and translator of the planned twelve volumes, has added enough context to the material in the conversation books that this series is more than just a translation and is overall a welcome and long-awaited addition to the literature.

There is evidence that Beethoven's associates had been writing down confidential communications as early as 1816, the year in which his gradual loss of hearing forced him to withdraw from giving public concerts as a pianist. The earliest surviving conversation books date from the beginning of 1818, and Beethoven seems to have used these books until the end of his life. Nevertheless, as Albrecht shows in the general introduction and elsewhere, there are a number of books missing between 1820 and 1822 when Beethoven lost a trunk with his possessions while moving his home (Theodor Albrecht, "Anton Schindler as Destroyer and Forger of Beethoven's Conversation Books: A Case for De-criminalization," in *Music's Intellectual History*, ed. Zdravko Blažeković and Barbara Dobbs Mackenzie [New York: RILM, 2009], 169–81). The conversation books in the two volumes under review here precede the incident.

The majority of the entries in the books consist of short conversational statements by Beethoven's friends and associates, who wrote what they otherwise would have had to say so loudly that they might be overheard. In most cases, Beethoven apparently answered vocally, but when discussing especially sensitive matters in public he often chose to write down his part of the conversation too. Whenever there were no other people around to overhear him, however, such as on occasions when he invited his friends over to his apartment, Beethoven seems to have preferred people to simply speak loudly, which was evidently still an option for communication during that period. Accordingly, the conversations in these first two volumes represent only a small subset of Beethoven's social interactions. The other types of content include shopping lists, arithmetic calculations, copied advertisements that interested the composer, drafts of letters, and a small number of musical extracts. Together, this material forms a picture, albeit fragmentary, of what occupied the composer on a day-to-day level during the last nine years of his life.

The only complete edition of the conversation books, produced between 1968 and 2001, contains a fairly diplomatic transcription of their contents (Ludwig van Beethovens

Konversationshefte, ed. Karl-Heinz Köhler, Grita Herre, and Dagmar Beck, 11 vols. [Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1968–2001]). The German transcription, however, is not the most user friendly publication, in part due to the situation that only with the publication of volume 7 in 1978 did the editors begin to identify the falsified statements by Anton Schindler in the previous volumes (see Peter Stadlen, “Schindler’s Beethoven Forgeries,” *Musical Times* 118, no. 1613 [July 1977]: 549–52). Furthermore, the conversation books contain many references that are difficult to understand without extensive context, which makes the volumes hard to use for all but the most specialized readers. Finally, many of the volumes are now very difficult to obtain outside research libraries, so it is arguably time for a new edition that is both more accessible and that draws on the latest scholarship.

Albrecht’s translation from early nineteenth-century German to modern American English will undoubtedly lower the threshold that aspiring Beethoven researchers sometimes experience when attempting to engage with this material, at least in the English-speaking world. On the whole, Albrecht’s translation is serviceable, but there are a few awkward phrases, particularly in puns and wordplay. For example, the first word of the wordplay on “Echtes” and “Schlechters” wine is translated as “authentic” rather than “real” (vol. 1, p. 70). Furthermore, inevitably there are cases in which the original has meanings not reflected in the translation (e.g., vol. 1, p. 117, “common” for “Gemein,” which could also be translated as “mean”). None of these, however, radically change the original meaning, and the German is usually included in the footnotes whenever there is an ambiguous translation.

Perhaps the biggest change—especially for scholars for whom the language was less of an impediment—is the inclusion of more extensive explanations. The German edition already contained some of these annotations, which Albrecht has substantially expanded; there are few pages on which the footnotes take up less than a quarter of the space. These include short biographies of people mentioned and their relationship to Beethoven, discussions of events referred to in the conversations, and other information that aids in the understanding of the entries, with many references to the contemporary Viennese press as well as modern relevant scholarship. Albrecht gives particular attention to geographical locations and reserves many footnotes for the precise addresses referred to in the conversations, as well as their subsequent re-numberings in later years. Seemingly excessively but probably judiciously, he gives the names of floors in both European and American style every time.

Based on this new research, a concerted attempt has been made to triangulate more precisely the times and places of the conversations. Since these determinations generally depend on an understanding of Beethoven’s habits—where he was both before and after the entry in the book was made, as well as circumstantial evidence—these necessarily are often somewhat speculative and are therefore presented with several caveats. On page 124 of the first volume, for instance, Albrecht dates an entry by the tutor Karl Peters as “probably at mid-day dinner, possibly at Zur Stadt Triest after leaving Blöchlinger’s Institute; ca. 2 p.m. on Sunday, December 12 [1819].” Some of these considerations approach the limits of reasonable speculation, such as on page 115 of volume 2, where Albrecht speculates on the road that Beethoven might have taken to visit an acquaintance. On the whole, however, this edition provides plausible interpretations of the times and places for the entries, although alternative readings of the information are definitely possible.

This edition nevertheless has one strange aspect; it does not include any facsimile pages from the original conversation books, so the reader can come away without a clear impression of what the pages actually looked like. Albrecht compensates for this by referring back to the old German edition, but that seems counterproductive. It may have been better to point the reader to the websites of the archives of the Beethoven-Haus in Bonn and the

Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin–Preussischer Kulturbesitz, which between them host images of all of the conversation books. Particularly in the case of the drawings, doodles, and cartoons that appear on the pages (see for instance pp. 70 and 75 of vol. 1), which are now only described in text, this would have been helpful. This extremely minor blemish notwithstanding, these volumes are welcome additions to the literature. They contain much of value for those interested in the last decade of Beethoven's life, particularly concerning his social circle, his daily routine, and his ideas and beliefs. One can only hope that the remaining ten volumes are published soon.

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