Beethoven in Wien

Nathaniel G Slaughter IV [a],*

[a] slaughternat@gmail.com

* Corresponding author

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Abstract:

While listening to a radio programme in 2020, during the 250th anniversary year of Ludwig van Beethoven's birth, I overheard a surprising fact that was given about the composer's life — Beethoven moved approximately 76 times throughout his life in Vienna. Was Beethoven's eccentric behaviour the cause of the number of relocations? Was he kicked out a lot? Was he sensitive to interior space and light? Or, was this simply normal behaviour for someone living at the turn of the 19th century in Vienna? Along with these curiosities, I was also hearing about the role walking played in Beethoven's life. The radio programmes suggested that Beethoven walked to clear his mind, to let his mind wander and to connect with nature. Beethoven would walk to develop his art; I heard several recollections from acquaintances of seeing Beethoven rambling about, gesticulating, shouting and singing throughout the city. And he refused to use carriages to move around Vienna, preferring to walk. I had been led to two major prompts, which I suspected to be a compelling mapping project — where did Beethoven live in Vienna, and how did he move through the city?

"Beethoven in Wien" is an ongoing project that presents the approximately 50 residences of Beethoven, and several city corridors well-travelled by the composer. The project has been considered in three parts: gathering of the residence addresses and related attributes, along with routes frequently walked; the development of base maps that successfully represent the city throughout the thirty-five years that Beethoven resided in Vienna; and a series of visualisation strategies – speculative and sketch-like at this point in time – that look to both preset the data and stories of Beethoven in the city, but also look to how best represent data over a large span of time, and within a quickly-evolving cityscape.

Constructing a database of addresses largely relied on previous endeavours by the Center of Beethoven Studies (CBS) and the Beethoven Haus. Information was gathered, pieced together and confirmed with a handful of publications and through direct collaboration with the CBS. In addition to the Viennese residential addresses, places Beethoven resided outside of Vienna were gathered, as well as other cities the composer travelled to for performances. A timeline was generated as both a way to process and understand the information, as well as a tool in the confirmation process with the CBS.

Once the address list had been generated and the project moved into a spatial visualisation phase, the question of 'what Vienna' to use emerged as an important prompt, as well as compelling design challenge. While Beethoven was residing in Vienna, the city's numerical address system changed twice, meaning that for each home, there were three numerical addresses — Konskriptionnummern 1770, 1795 and 1821. And more than these system changes, the actual city itself was physically changing — medieval walls were removed, Napoleon invaded and destroyed sections of the city, and the urban footprint was growing with the emergence of a middle class and a general population increase. How does one cartographically represent a city over thirty-five years with these types of changes?

Four maps were identified as helpful, informative resources, as well as cartographic sources; to physically trace elements of Vienna from discrete moments during Beethoven's life. It was critical to find cartographic elements representing the urban form, mostly blocks and roads, and buildings with address numbers, as well as maps that showed extents of the surrounding suburban environs, as well as consisting of orthogonal, top-down view positions. More for its information than as a source for tracing, Huber's "Vogelschauplan" from 1778 presented the 1770 numerical addresses, and the city in a dramatic oblique view with beautiful architectural detail. For tracing sources the following maps were identified: Grimm's 1810 plan of Vienna showing the 1795 addresses, Artaria and Co.'s city plan from 1824, and Armbruster's plan from 1826, both showing the 1820 addresses.

Although the project's final form(s) is still in development, it was clear that geometries representing Vienna at three different points in time would be needed. As of late April, two maps are in the process of being geocoded and traced, with a focus on block and building polygons. This process is comprised of image preparation in an image-editing application — all of the maps scanned had been cut and applied to linen cloth, needing to be stitched together. Other steps include geocoding using GIS software and manually drawing blocks and buildings in a vector graphics application.

Studies have also begun on static and dynamic visualisation strategies for how to represent a city over a span of time. One path that is being explored is a print map that overlays minimal, urban-form maps from three dates — 1792, 1810 and 1826 — with residential and walking route information annotated on the juxtaposed blocks and buildings. Another path that is being explored is an interactive map where blocks and buildings, through polygonal morphosis, fluidly appear, disappear and change their shape as one scrubs through a timeline affordance. This timeline would also control the display of Beethoven residences and walks, and residence annotations could potentially be interactive for the display of additional information specific to each residence.

If the project is selected for presenting at the 2024 Euro Carto conference, the project will be presented 'in process,' with visual examples of both static and dynamic visualisation techniques that are being explored.