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**LEO KESTENBERG AND THE BEETHOVEN MYTH.
SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC CULTURAL POLICY
IN THE 20TH CENTURY**

In 1902, the glorious 75th anniversary year of Ludwig van Beethoven's death, Leo Kestenberg celebrated his 20th birthday. He had already completed his training as a pianist, which included lessons from recognized masters such as José Vianna da Motta, Hermann Scholtz, and Felix Draeseke, and had found an innovative role model in Ferruccio Busoni. Beethoven's piano works naturally belonged to the fixed canon of the repertoire, and the composer played a central role in the entire musical socialisation of the period. Socially, the romantic image of Beethoven dominated, and Kestenberg also liked to quote the dictum ascribed to Beethoven by Bettina Brentano: "Music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy"¹. Kestenberg had a special fondness for Beethoven's Piano Variations; his memoirs from 1961 still speak of the great reverence he had for Beethoven, especially for the "33 Variations on a Waltz by Anton Diabelli", op. 120:

If one can speak of transcendental essence, of transcendental art, of transcendental music, then it is here, especially when we are confronted with the 20th of these variations. Actually, it eludes realization on the piano. And the last one, the 33rd, the minuet, leads us straight into the realm of the blessed, into a nirvana based on the deepest philosophical wisdom².

What is unusual about Kestenberg's remarks is the apostrophization of Beethoven's Variations, since it was the sonatas that were traditionally considered, in the words of Hans von Bülow, the "New Testament" of the piano literature³.

¹ U. Mahler, *Vorwort* [in:] *Leo Kestenberg, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2.1: *Aufsätze und vermischte Schriften. Texte aus der Berliner Zeit (1900–1932)*, ed. U. Mahler, Freiburg i. Br.-Berlin-Wien 2012, p. 20, Note 12.

² L. Kestenberg, *Bewegte Zeiten. Musisch-musikantische Lebenserinnerungen*, Wolfenbüttel–Zürich 1961, p. 91: „Wenn von transzendentelem Wesen, von transzendentaler Kunst, von transzendentaler Musik gesprochen werden kann, dann hier, besonders wenn wir mit der 20. von diesen Variationen konfrontiert werden. Eigentlich entzieht sie sich der Realisierung auf dem Klavier. Und die letzte, die 33., das Menuett, führt uns schnurstracks in das Gefilde der Seligen, in ein auf tiefster philosophischer Weisheit basiertes Nirwana”.

³ H.-J. Hinrichsen, *Beethoven. Die Klaviersonaten*, Kassel u.a. 2013.

Especially the last variation of Opus 120 – which, as a sort of reminiscence in Tempo di Menuetto referring to the old aristocratic dance, has certainly led to incomprehension – represents the highest revelation for Kestenberg. The affinity for this variation corresponds to his high esteem for Mozart, whose value in comparison to Beethoven Kestenberg constantly sought to enhance. Nevertheless, Kestenberg still considered Beethoven “the undisputed Olympian among composers”⁴. While it is impossible to know whether he would count Beethoven among the 12 Olympic Gods or apostrophize him as Zeus, the religious nature of the emphasis, just as he had come to know it in his youth, is unmistakable. For many enlightened Jews who had turned their backs on their traditional religion and dedicated themselves to the propagation of social progress, the widespread notion that music was meant to function as an art religion of modernity held a particular appeal. (No one could have guessed that the new form of racial anti-Semitism would produce an extermination machinery unknown to mankind, organized with scientific precision on an industrial scale.) In the context of progressive evolution, enlightened people saw themselves on the path toward moral perfection; and artists, especially composers, were considered pioneers of the movement, at the forefront of evolution. With rather unusual clarity, Kestenberg expressed this view, which today sounds almost absurd, in his essay from 1900 “Versuch einer materialistischen Darstellung der Entwicklungsgeschichte der Künste” (“Attempt at a Materialistic Representation of the History of the Development of the Arts”):

As is evident from Schopenhauer’s deductions, we find in music the purest mirror of the inner life, the character, the attitude of its respective creator. And, as a matter of fact, the great and true artists were also great, pure, and holy people, as the biographies of Bach, Beethoven, Liszt, Wagner, Busoni, d’Albert prove⁵.

Kestenberg’s formulation demonstrates the vigour with which morality was ascribed to music as the highest of the arts, as the most important expression of human capabilities. In other words, music gained an ethical significance comparable to that of religion. Especially in the period before the First World War (but continuing up to Theodor W. Adorno), music was appropriated by a multitude of esoteric movements, all of which looked beyond music’s long apostrophized

⁴ L. Kestenberg, *Bewegte Zeiten...*, p. 91.

⁵ L. Kestenberg, *Versuch einer materialistischen Darstellung der Entwicklungsgeschichte der Künste* (1900) [in:] Ders., *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 2.1: *Aufsätze und vermischte Schriften. Texte aus der Berliner Zeit (1900–1932)*, ed. U. Mahlert, Freiburg i. Br.-Berlin-Wien 2012, p. 45–51, here 49f.: „Wie aus den Schopenhauerschen Deductionen hervorgeht, finden wir in der Musik den reinsten Spiegel des Innenlebens, des Charakters, der Gesinnung ihres jeweilige Schöpfers. Und in der That waren auch die großen, wahren Künstler eben so große, reine, heilige Menschen, wie die Lebensgeschichte eines Bach, Beethoven, Liszt, Wagner, Busoni, d’Albert beweist”.

potential for salvation, ascribing to it the religious quality of a revelation of truth. Here we find the starting point and rationale for the cult that worshipped composers as heroes and served as their key exponents. Kestenberg shared this view; as an artist of his time he must have been attracted to these ideas⁶. Times changed dramatically, however, and the Beethoven cult fell into a veritable crisis.

The romantic image of Beethoven was put at risk by the cultural criticism of the German Youth Movement opposing the individualistic, “bad 19th century” and by a collapse of all traditional values brought on by the First World War. Thus, it was no coincidence that the first critical analysis of the Beethoven image, by Arnold Schmitz, came in the anniversary year of 1927. Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht’s summary of Beethoven-reception in the 1920s was titled “Distance and emphasis and what they have in common”⁷. Eggebrecht points to none other than Ferruccio Busoni, Kestenberg’s primary role-model, as the forerunner of criticism. In 1922, Busoni had asked the critical question: “What did Beethoven give us?” His intention was to ignite “a discussion of a question that, for a century, we have faithfully answered in the affirmative, and yet have never examined; a question we have used as a standard by which we measure everything else, with the bias of its absolute superiority; one which we have allowed to enslave us, in opinions and in deeds”⁸. For Busoni, the bias is most evident in a common disregard for Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who, when compared with Beethoven, Busoni thought should be more appreciated. However, while the excesses of the Beethoven cult are denounced, the position of Beethoven is not fundamentally questioned. Busoni argues that with Beethoven, “the human condition [...] entered the central discourse over music for the first time”⁹ and criticizes: “A militant priesthood organized itself without any prior arrangements [...] and has henceforth stood guard over the work that had become a symbol of musical humanity”¹⁰. Busoni certainly saw Beethoven as exemplary, pointing to the “sincerity” of his music as well as “the retreat of the virtuoso in favour of the «idea»”¹¹. On the other hand, he also saw the expansion of mu-

⁶ G. Batel, *Musikerziehung und Musikpflege. Leo Kestenberg. Pianist – Klavierpädagoge – Kulturorganisator – Reformator des Musikerziehungswesens*, Wolfenbüttel u.a. 1989.

⁷ H.H. Eggebrecht, *Zur Geschichte der Beethoven-Rezeption. Beethoven 1970*, Mainz 1972.

⁸ F. Busoni, *Was gab uns Beethoven?* [in:] *Die Musik* 15 (1922), Erster Halbjahrsband, p. 19–23, here 19: „zur Diskussion über eine Frage, die wir ein Jahrhundert lang gläubig bejaht haben, ohne sie zu prüfen; an deren Maßstab wir alles übrige maßen, mit der Voreingenommenheit seiner unbedingten Überlegenheit; durch die wir uns knechten ließen, in Meinungen und Taten”.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 20: „Menschliche [...] zum erstenmal als Hauptargument in die Tonkunst”.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 21: „Eine militante Priesterschaft organisierte sich ohne Verabredung [...] und bewachte fortan das zum Symbol gediehene Werk der musikalischen Menschlichkeit”.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 22: „das Zurücktreten des Virtuosenhaften gegenüber der «Idee»”.

sical means as having a pernicious effect afterwards, since “the over-trumping, cultivated for its own sake, leads to decadence”. In the end, Busoni’s appreciation of Mozart resonated more deeply with Kestenberg than this sort of cultural criticism, with which he was already familiar, for example from the writings of Felix Draeseke and Hans Pfitzner.

The crisis of the romantic image of Beethoven in the 1920s, limited to only a few exponents, was hardly profound¹²; thus it was soon eclipsed by the old apotheosis. Kestenberg did not take up the criticism either. He was much more a representative of musical continuity: Instead of going along with the supposed break in 1919, he adapted the musical convictions and values of the old system to the new age. Even the much invoked New Objectivity and the politically committed music of the Weimar Republic retained the basic conviction of the status of music as an art religion of modernity in the sense of a “holy sobriety”¹³. One exception was Kurt Weill, who will probably never be forgiven by German music historians for the fact that, as a successful proponent of socialism after his emigration, he wrote French chansons and American Broadway musicals with the same sort of conviction as earlier (this was considered a “betrayal” of his “mission”). The continuity of the Beethoven apotheosis can be found in Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s Zurich speech on Beethoven from around 1920, in Hermann Stehr’s words (a veritable creed) before a Beethoven celebration in 1927, and in Alfred Rosenberg’s article “Beethoven” in the *Völkischer Beobachter*.

In the meantime, Leo Kestenberg had made the transformation from performing artist to cultural politician, applying his Beethoven view to his commitment to cultural policy. As a socialist, he took part in social democratic education committees; as a Prussian ministerial official, he devoted himself to the education of the people. He was successful in exerting influence on the Prussian Academy of Arts in Berlin, initiating a far-reaching reform of the old singing lessons in schools¹⁴. Kestenberg lent a significant impulse to the work of public music schools¹⁵. Kestenberg not only supported the *Freie Volksbühne Berlin* association – with its motto “Art for the People”, which goes back to Lenin – at

¹² Vgl. *Beethoven in der Meinung der jungen Musiker (1927)* [in:] *Zeitgemäßes aus der „Literarischen Welt“ von 1925–1932*, ed. W. Haas, Stuttgart 1963, p. 89–93.

¹³ Vgl. H. Loos, *Heilige Nüchternheit. Der Komponist in der Moderne. Kontinuität statt Bruch* [in:] *Nova glasba v »novi« Evropi med obema svetovnima vojnama – New Music in the „New“ Europe Between the Two World Wars*, ed. J. Weiss, Koper–Ljubljana 2018, p. 51–62.

¹⁴ W. Gruhn, *Wir müssen lernen, in Fesseln zu tanzen. Leo Kestenburgs Leben zwischen Kunst und Kulturpolitik*, Hofheim 2015.

¹⁵ M. Holz, *Musikschulen und Jugendmusikbewegung. Die Institutionalisierung des öffentlichen Musikschulwesens von den 1920ern bis in die 1960er-Jahre*, Münster–New York 2019, p. 105–123.

its main venue, the *Volksbühne* at Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz (formerly Bülowplatz), but, as its “spiritus rector”, he also championed the establishment of the Kroll Opera as a *Volksopernhaus* (People’s Opera House), whose modern repertoire soon generated accusations of cultural Bolshevism¹⁶. The zeal with which he carried out his educational task corresponded to the social plans for democratic equality across broad sections of the population, plans that stood in opposition to the educated middle class’s claim to leadership. The aim was to seize the bourgeoisie’s cultural assets and claim equal rank. With the advent of social democracy, workers’ choral societies emerged in the name of education for the people and workers. These developed into a powerful workers’ singing movement that would compete with the *Deutscher Sängerbund*. On New Year’s Eve 1918, the General Workers’ Education Institute in Leipzig organized a performance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony under Arthur Nikisch in the Albert Hall, beginning the annual tradition that continues to this day. Numerous examples of musical education projects that originated from the labour movement could be provided here, many of which were continued by the social democratic government after the November Revolution. And it was Kestenberg, in an influential position under the President of the Reich Friedrich Ebert, who was largely responsible for this institutional realisation of the movement¹⁷.

Reference to Beethoven can be found time and again in Kestenberg’s programmatic writings. In 1921, he wrote in the journal *Musikerziehung und Musikpflege* that Beethoven ushered in a new era “that thinks primarily of the professional musician and places high demands on the technique of the performer”; but he also asserted that this had led to the division of musical life along the lines of “serious, great, intellectual literature” and “shallow salon music”¹⁸. “Whereas, in the past, the creative musician worked within the confines of his position of employment”, a tremendous change had occurred, after which the composer “created his works in complete freedom without any professional obligation”¹⁹. Although Beethoven, like others, had also “continued to write utility music for the most diverse purposes”²⁰, he had already thought of the fact that “a non-profit institution could relieve the composer of the demands linked

¹⁶ D. Schenk, *Leo Kestenberg und die Zwanziger Jahre. Neue Musik, Kroll-Oper, Rundfunkversuchsstelle und andersers* [in:] *Leo Kestenberg und musikalische Bildung in Europa*, ed. D. Sagrillo, A. Nitschké, F. Brusniak, Weikersheim [2016], p. 259–290.

¹⁷ Ch. Rhode-Jüchtern, *Die „Musikerziehungsidee“ von Leo Kestenberg (1882–1962). Zur Aktualität seines Reformkonzeptes für die musikalische Bildung* [in:] *Leo Kestenberg und musikalische Bildung in Europa*, ed. D. Sagrillo, A. Nitschké, F. Brusniak, Weikersheim 2016 (Würzburger Hefte zur Musikpädagogik 8), p. 13–61.

¹⁸ L. Kestenberg, *Musikerziehung und Musikpflege*, Leipzig 1921, p. 48f.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 103.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 106.

to publishing and royalties”²¹. Here, Kestenberg used Beethoven as a witness to social legislation for musicians, while elsewhere he attacked the social institution of the concert. In an article on music, celebration, and community from 1924, he referred to Beethoven:

It is a profound tragedy that the same Beethoven who, in his work, wants to embrace the whole of humanity, is the decisive factor in establishing subjectivism, the importance of the expression of the individual human being for the entire century. Beethoven’s symphonies justify the social institution of the ‘concert’, whose relevance today was, of course, first established by the virtuoso. However, the concert hall impairs the artistic atmosphere from the outset. As much as music can have a community-building effect in church, on the march, in assembly, in school, its power over the deepest instincts is not felt in the concert hall. It is only by observing the stiff form of the concert hall that one can understand how music seems to be loaded with a ballast of erudition and boredom for many²².

The cultural criticism of the Youth Movement is evident in Kestenberg’s rejection of the subjectivist, non-community-building concert form. The concert is associated with Beethoven, but at the same time is presented as a tragic distraction from his essential concern for the brotherhood of mankind. Kestenberg demonstrates his fundamental veneration of the hero Beethoven in the suggestions for a Beethoven celebration in the anniversary year 1927, which he wrote especially for the *Verband der Deutschen Volksbühnen-Vereine*. On the 100th anniversary of Beethoven’s death, the aim was to perform his works as perfectly as possible and to honour him in a variety of ways in order to shed due light on his significance “for artistic, human, national and international development”²³. The special mission of the *Volksbühne* was not the unconditional takeover of secured art possessions and its popularization as “broad beggar’s soup” for the uneducated; its goals were “set higher” as they proclaimed a “second renaissance” of the humanistic movement of the time around 1800. The historical

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 140.

²² L. Kestenberg, *Musik, Feste und Gemeinschaft (1924)* [in:] Ders., *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2.1: *Aufsätze und vermischte Schriften. Texte aus der Berliner Zeit (1900–1932)*, ed. U. Mahlert, Freiburg i. Br.–Berlin–Wien 2012, p. 103–109, here p. 104: „Es ist eine tiefe Tragik, daß derselbe Beethoven, der in seinem Werk die ganze Menschheit umarmen will, den Subjektivismus, die Bedeutung der Äußerung des einzelnen Menschen für das ganze Jahrhundert entscheidend begründet. Beethovens Symphonien erklären die gesellschaftliche Einrichtung des ‚Konzerts‘, das freilich erst durch den Virtuosen seine heutige Bedeutung erhält. Der Konzertsaal beeinträchtigt aber von vornherein die künstlerische Atmosphäre. So gemeinschaftsbildend Musik in der Kirche, auf dem Marsche, in der Versammlung, in der Schule wirken kann, so wenig wird im Konzertsaal ihre Macht auf die tiefsten Instinkte spürbar. Durch die steife Form des Konzerts wird es allein verständlich, wie Musik mit einem Ballast von Gelehrsamkeit und Langweile für viele beladen zu sein scheint”.

²³ L. Kestenberg, *Beethoven-Feier. Anregungen (Verband der Deutschen Volksbühnen-Vereine: Schriften des Verbandes der deutschen Volksbühnen-Vereine 12)*, Berlin 1926, p. 1.

“heroes of our German culture”, but especially Beethoven, “champions of a truly national freedom, want «all men to become brothers», wish for the idea of the human, the natural, to be placed above convention and authority”. He was not thinking “of a select audience of «educated people», but of humanity as a whole”²⁴. It was only in the 19th century that “the cultural needs of new, unencumbered social classes” had freed the old humanistic ideas from the shackles of “false romanticism and sentimentality” and created a new “lifestyle” that placed the experience of art at the centre and “everyday sanctified life through «art»”²⁵. Thus, it is the task of the *Volksbühne* not only to disseminate artistic works, but also to “shape people in an artistic sense”. This would require new forms of celebration and general public holidays. Kestenberg thus took up ideas of Richard Wagner – whom he called upon as a witness and quoted as a prophet of the current rebirth of German music – that the Beethoven Symphony be perceived beyond national borders as a “new religion, as a world-redeeming proclamation of the most sublime innocence” and that the composer be celebrated as a “benefactor to the world” and “world-conqueror”²⁶. He also mentions Busoni’s critical essay on Beethoven but only refers to the required sincerity and the retreat of the virtuosic element opposite the ‘idea’.

With detailed references to the importance of folk music or folk singing schools, as well as youth music schools and orchestral schools, Kestenberg links the demand for a “generous, adequately funded cultivation of the arts”, which should also include a revitalization, transformation, and promotion of existing music organizations²⁷. Kestenberg then gives concrete instructions on how to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Beethoven’s death. It is to be “remembered with all love and devotion”, so that it becomes clear “that a whole nation celebrates its hero”. “Singing academies and folk choirs, bourgeois and workers’ choral societies” were to perform together and not set themselves too narrow limits in their programming, but rather, they were to place value on “the achievement of great, stirring, solemn effects in the sense of Beethoven”²⁸. The whole day was to be filled with festivities in public places in every larger city, so that the entire population would come together for a “true folk celebration”.

In any case, the *Volksbühnen* was to cooperate with all local cultural and educational institutions to achieve this great goal. Kestenberg enumerates all possible areas of cultural life and then puts the emphasis on the concerts. Here, too, it was important not to get stuck in the old moulds with “evening gowns in

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

the audience” and “tails on the podium”, but to flee from the “concert hall with its inevitable vanities” like the “singing youth movement, the «musicians» guilds, the «young» choirs”. Only then could the “community spirit” inherent in the works come to the fore in the sense of “announcing objectivity” and in the “spirit of the «Bauhütte»”²⁹. However, Kestenberg’s concrete proposals for Beethoven concerts then contain an exaggeration of the educational idea, which had previously been found only in exceptional cases. For example, he recommends cyclical performances of the symphonies in order to convey a “coherent impression of Beethoven’s personality, his poetic, human-artistic mission”³⁰. Furthermore, he refers to the relevant well-known works of all genres and recommends, for example, in a song recital, to avoid “the choice of unimportant and uncharacteristic songs”³¹. After having previously proclaimed that “basically every work, and now even every symphony, is characteristic of Beethoven” and has its special merits, he shows here that he is completely committed to the traditional image of Beethoven with his specific canon of works³². Thus Kestenberg also ends his suggestions with a fiery appeal to the *Volksbühnen* to perpetuate the efforts of Beethoven celebrations and to create permanent institutions “that help a people, aided by its great fighters, to liberate itself in the spirit of its immortal heroes”³³.

Kestenberg’s suggestions for a Beethoven celebration, which were presented in *Die Kunstgemeinde. Blätter der Volksbühne* and reprinted in excerpts for the *Volksbühne* audience and in the *Deutsche Sängerbundeszeitung* during the anniversary year³⁴, illustrate very well the efforts of the socialist movement to appropriate the cultural values of the bourgeoisie and, at the same time, adapt them to their needs. The art community not only reaffirms Kestenberg’s suggestions most emphatically³⁵, it also provides a biographical outline full of stereotypes from the romantic image of Beethoven³⁶. The fact that fundamental principles of modernism have been preserved here is most striking in the perpetuation of the male hero cult. That evolution and progress also continued to form decisive categories of values can be seen in Kestenberg’s selective trumping of bourgeois

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

³⁴ U. Mahler, *Editorische Anmerkungen* [in:] L. Kestenberg, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 2.1: *Aufsätze und vermischte Schriften. Texte aus der Berliner Zeit (1900–1932)*, ed. U. Mahler, Freiburg i. Br.-Berlin-Wien 2012, p. 166f.

³⁵ *Beethoven-Ehrung* [in:] *Die Kunstgemeinde. Blätter der Volksbühne* (1926/27), no. 7, p. 49f.

³⁶ L. Sender, *Ludwig van Beethoven* [in:] *Die Kunstgemeinde. Blätter der Volksbühne* (1926/27), no. 7, p. 50–54.

educational zeal, for example, when he proposes cyclical performances of certain groups of works. In fact, Arthur Schnabel played all 32 of Beethoven's piano sonatas cyclically for the first time in 1927 at the Beethoven celebration in the Volksbühne's main building on Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz. The string quartets were also performed cyclically. Kestenberg had been working intensively on the arrangement of the concerts from the very beginning and had already arranged a piano sonata cycle with Schnabel in 1916/17; Beethoven was already – as was the case in bourgeois concert life – the most frequently performed composer of the concerts³⁷. The Kroll Opera, whose takeover by the *Freie Volksbühne Berlin* e. V. as *Volksopernhaus* Kestenberg supported in 1920, was inaugurated after great efforts in 1927 with Beethoven's *Fidelio* under Otto Klemperer³⁸.

In his suggestions for a celebration of Beethoven, Kestenberg obviously strove for a great, unifying synthesis. Just as he continued the traditional topoi of the Romantic Beethoven image, he also incorporated keywords of the new music movements such as the youth movement, musicians' guilds, "young" choirs, objectivity, the Bauhütte, and community spirit. The effects of his activities can be felt to this day³⁹.

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³⁷ A. Dümling, „Die Kunst dem Volke!“ *Kestenberg als Konzertveranstalter an der Freien Volksbühne* [in:] *Leo Kestenberg. Musikpädagoge und Musikpolitiker in Berlin, Prag und Tel Aviv*, ed. S. Fontaine, U. Mahlert, D. Schenk, Freiburg i. Br. u.a. 2008, p. 29–46, here p. 41–44: Beethoven-Feier 1927.

³⁸ D. Schenk, *Leo Kestenberg und die Zwanziger Jahre. Neue Musik, Kroll-Oper, Rundfunkversuchsstelle und anders* [in:] *Leo Kestenberg und musikalische Bildung in Europa*, ed. D. Sagrillo, A. Nitschké, F. Brusniak, Weikersheim [2016], p. 259–290.

³⁹ F. Brusniak, *Über Grenzen hinaus: Eine Musikpädagogik der Vielfalt und Offenheit im Zeichen Leo Kestenbergs* [in:] *Würzburger Beiträge zur Kestenberg-Forschung. Festgabe für Andreas Eschen zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. F. Brusniak, A.-Ch. Rhode-Jüchtern, Th. Weber-Lucks, Weikersheim 2019 (Würzburger Hefte zur Musikpädagogik 10), p. 151–168.

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LEO KESTENBERG AND THE BEETHOVEN MYTH. SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC CULTURAL POLICY IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Abstract

Leo Kestenbergs (1882–1962) was a German pianist, music teacher and music politician of Jewish descent. After the First World War he became the leading social democratic cultural politician of the Weimar Republic. In his famous “Kestenbergs-Reform” he carried out essential educa-

tional reforms in Prussia, above all reorganizing the entire musical life and music education system. The foundations of his reforms become clear in his musical outlook, especially in his reception of Beethoven. Leo Kestenberg celebrated his 20th birthday in the glorious anniversary year of 1902, 75 years after Ludwig van Beethoven's death. He had already completed his training as a pianist and had enjoyed the lessons of renowned masters such as José Vianna da Motta, Hermann Scholtz and Felix Draeseke, and had found Ferruccio Busoni to be a pioneering role model.

Beethoven's piano works naturally belonged to the established canon of the repertoire, just as the composer played a central role in the entire musical socialization of this period. The romantic image of Beethoven dominated society, and Kestenberg also liked to quote the dictum attributed to Beethoven by Bettina Brentano: "Music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy". To this day, the "Kestenberg Reform" is celebrated in music pedagogical circles as groundbreaking.

Keywords: Leo Kestenberg, romantic image of Beethoven, Volksbühne, German Youth Movement, cultural policy