Bettina (Bettine) von Arnim

Birth name: Elisabeth Catharina Ludovica Magdalena Brentano

* 4 April 1785 in Frankfurt a. M., Deutschland
† 20 January 1859 in Berlin, Deutschland

Author, composer, singer, visual artist, salon lady, dedicatee

"Both lieder of Beethoven are enclosed here, the other two are by me; Beethoven saw them and said many nice things about them, that if I had dedicated myself to this art I could build up great hopes on it. But I just scratch the surface, for my art is laughing and sighing in a little bag, and no one else is above me in that."

(Bettina von Arnim to Goethe in her epistolary novel "Goethe’s Correspondence with a Child", Berlin 1835, p. 252.)

Profile

Bettina von Arnim was a central figure in German Romanticism who had a lasting influence on her epoch and left behind a highly versatile oeuvre. Through her relationships with Beethoven, Schumann and Liszt, she is also of music-historical significance. Her own musical production consists primarily of lieder. Her political and social commitment caused a great sensation.

Cities and countries

Bettina von Arnim was primarily active in Frankfurt und Berlin.

Biography

Her parents were Peter Anton Brentano (1735–1797), a Frankfurt merchant who hailed from Italy, and his wife Maximiliane von La Roche (1756–1793). Her maternal grandmother was the author Sophie von La Roche (1730–1807), who was gushingly esteemed by Goethe. The poet Clemens Brentano (1778–1842) was her brother.

After the early death of her mother, Bettina Brentano was raised at the Fritzlar Ursuline Convent from 1794 until 1797 and went to live with her grandmother Sophie von La Roche in Offenbach after the death of her father in 1797. She found numerous letters of Goethe there which caused her to seek out Goethe’s mother in Frankfurt. On 23 April 1807 she met the poet in Weimar for the first time and then maintained an intensive correspondence with him.

From 1807 onwards, Bettina Brentano again lived in Frankfurt for the most part, joining her elder sister Kunigunde Brentano (1780–1863), who was married to the jurist Friedrich Carl von Savigny (1779–1861). In September 1808 she followed the Savigny family to Landshut, for Savigny had been appointed Professor of Roman Civil Law at the university there.

Music played an important role in her life already at an early age. She received her first musical training in Fritzlar, where she participated in the choir of the convent. In Offenbach, Philipp Carl Hoffmann (1789–1842) taught her piano and music theory, and she frequently attended the theatre in nearby Frankfurt. In a letter to Savigny, she wrote in September 1804: "I am taking piano lessons again from Herr Hoffmann from Offenbach, malgré les tentations to which I am exposed; I am also learning singing rather diligently and, when operas are performed, I’m always at the theatre. Music is now my only resource und my refreshment." (Die Andacht zum Men-
In her Landshut period, she received instruction from the Munich kapellmeister Peter von Winter (1754–1825), who taught her singing and composition. According to a letter, she received two 90-minute lessons from Winter each day. (Die Andacht zum Menschenbild, see above, p. 104.) After six months, she had to return to Landshut and continued her musical education there. A canon named Eixdorfer instructed her primarily in thoroughbass. (Bettine und Arnim. Briefe der Freundschaft und Liebe, ed. Otto Betz and Veronika Straub, Vol. 2, Frankfurt 1987, p. 274ff.) In 1810 she was also assisted by the Landshut law student Alois Bíhler (1788–1857), about whom she wrote in March 1810: "He establishes the metre, I extend his melodies, he writes a bass line for me, I invent for him the contrary motion to the instruments." (Bettine und Arnim. Briefe der Freundschaft und Liebe, see above, p. 339.) Bíhler was especially fascinated by her singing performance: "Here she fully displayed her wonderful individuality. She rarely chose written songs – she composed poems whilst singing, and whilst composing poems – she sang a kind of improvisation with a magnificent voice. For example, she knew how to infuse a wealth of feeling and spirit into the simply performed scale, as into the solfeggios momentarily arising within her, so that I listened attentively to her creative genius. [...] Usually Bettina sat at a desk during her music-making and sang from above like a cherub out of the clouds." (Alois Bíhler, Beethoven und "das Kind", in: Die Gartenlaube, Jg. 18 (1870), p. 314ff, here p. 315.) She herself felt the learning of the theoretical fundamentals to be a hindrance to her imagination: "I also have my troubles with thoroughbass. I would like to blow up, sky high, this godparenthood of keys that maintain their priority over each other, and to stop anyone who navigates the flow of harmonies to pay toll." (Clemens Brentano’s Frühlingskranz, Vol. 1, Charlottenburg 1844, p. 172.)

Her independent, creative treatment of music deeply impressed no less an observer than Beethoven. The encounter occurred in the spring of 1810, when Savigny was appointed to the newly founded Berlin University and moved with his family to the Prussian metropolis. The opportunity was used to make a visit to Vienna, where Bettina Brentano stayed in the villa of her sister-in-law Antonie Brentano on Erdberggasse with the Savignys from 8 May until 3 June. It was also Antonie who accompanied her to Beethoven’s flat in the Posaqualati House on the Mölkerbastei. Amongst the numerous reports that Bettina Brentano made about this memorable encounter, the earliest is a letter that she wrote on 8 June 1810 to her friend Max Prokop von Freyberg (1789–1851) who had remained behind in Landshut. In it, she wrote: "when I entered the flat, he approached me, looked at me fixedly, shook my hand, played upon my request, which he had not done for years; I stayed until 10 o’clock in the evening, when we parted he hugged me like someone whom one has loved for a long time, he came on two more evenings, the last ones that I spent in Vienna." (Beethoven aus der Sicht seiner Zeitgenossen, ed. Klaus Martin Kopitz and Rainer Cadenbach with the cooperation of Oliver Korte and Nancy Tanneberger, Munich 2009, Volume 1, p. 17.) Upon their parting, Beethoven gave Bettina Brentano a copy of his Goethe setting "Neue Liebe, neues Leben", Op. 75 No. 2.

As a result of this encounter, there developed a close friendship between Beethoven and Antonie Brentano, who wrote to Bettina on 11 March 1811: "He visits me frequently, almost daily, and then plays out of his own incentive because he has the need to relieve his suffering and he feels that he can do so with his heavenly tones; during such moments I must often wish you were here, Bettine, I didn’t know that such power lies in the tones as Beethoven has told me." (Beethoven aus der Sicht seiner Zeitgenossen, see above, p. 99ff)

In late July 1812 another encounter between Bettina von Arnim and Beethoven took place at the Bohemian spa Teplitz; this one was apparently more down-to-earth – perhaps because she had married during the previous year and was already the mother of a child. In addition, she had fallen out with Goethe, who was also in Teplitz during these days. Achim von Arnim wrote to Savigny around 26 July 1812: "Imagine, Göthe and Beethoven here, and my wife is not particularly amused; the former does not want to have anything to do with her and the latter cannot hear anything from her, the poor devil is getting more and more deaf and his friendly smile is really painful." (Beethoven aus der Sicht seiner Zeitgenossen, see above, p. 23.) In a later letter to her friend, Prince Hermann von Pückler-Muskau (1785–1871), Bettina von Arnim depicted this Teplitz encounter in a way that is probably only partially authentic. It culminates in the description of a scene in which Beethoven strides, without giving a greeting, through a group surrounding Goethe and Empress Maria Ludovica of Austria. (Beethoven aus
Bettina von Arnim appears to have harboured a certain lifelong jealousy towards Antonie Brentano, for the latter is never mentioned in her numerous statements about Beethoven. That this was not due to "forgetfulness" can be gathered from the fact that she "invented" two letters from Beethoven to herself, suggesting that Beethoven had been her friend from 1810 until 1812. (On the letter forgery, see Renate Moering, Bettine von Arnims literarische Umsetzung ihres Beethoven-Erlebnisses, in: Der "männliche" und der "weibliche" Beethoven. Bericht über den Internationalen musikwissenschaftlichen Kongress vom 31. Oktober bis 4. November 2001 an der Universität der Künste Berlin, ed. Cornelia Bartsch, Beatrix Borchard and Rainer Cadenbach, Bonn 2003, pp. 251–277.) In addition, she "altered" a spot in the once authentic letter from Beethoven to her. On 10 February 1811, Beethoven wrote: "Dear, dear Bettine! I already have two letters from you and see from your letter to To- nie, that you still remember me and much too favourably." (Ludwig van Beethoven, Briefwechsel. Gesamtausgabe, ed. Sieghard Brandenburg, Vol. 2, Munich 1996, p. 177ff) In the first printing of the letter, Bettina replaces Beethoven’s words "to Tonie" [Antonie] with "to your brother" [Clemens]. (Drei Briefe von Beethoven an Bettina, in: Athenäum für Wissenschaft, Kunst und Leben, January Issue 1839, pp. 1–7, here p. 3.)

Altogether, it is hardly possible to overestimate Bettina von Arnim’s enthusiasm for Beethoven and its influence on her contemporaries. In particular, the image of Beethoven that she sketched in her epistolary novel "Goethe's Correspondence with a Child" (1835), had a lasting influence on Beethoven’s reception during the 19th century.

For the most part, she lived separately from Achim von Arnim, whom she married on 11 March 1811 in Berlin. Whilst she remained in Berlin, he cultivated the inherited Märkisch properties Bärwalde and Wiepersdorf. The correspondence of the couple that resulted from this, published in its entirety for the first time in 1961, is astonishingly unromantic and contains only very few references to artistic interests and activities. "It is a collection of requests to visit, announcements of visits, explanations why the visits (primarily Achim's in Berlin) did not occur, a succession of amiabilities and complaints". (Der Spiegel, No. 18/1962, pp. 83–87, here p. 83.) Nonetheless, the marriage appears to have been intact. In the years 1812 to 1827 Bettina gave birth to seven children, whom she raised by herself for the most part.

It was only after the deaths of Achim von Arnim (1831) and Goethe (1832) that her own literary activity began. Already her first book, "Goethe's Correspondence with a Child", dedicated to Prince Hermann von Pückler-Muskau, made her immediate fame and won her many admirers, including the Berlin author Karl Gutzkow (1811–1878). He visited her in 1840, describing the 54-year-old as follows: "There seemed to me to be something demonic in her appearance; I felt that she was closer to nature than I was. A grey nightdress, without any elegance, enclosed small, nimble extremities. Bettina is of medium height, nimble, slender, in her youth like a gazelle. She still has the beautiful eyes of a gazelle, but also the trembling, uncertain quality of the animal eye; in this respect, too, she is closer to nature than we are – we who rein back our glances and do not let them shoot out before our thoughts. Beautiful black hair, I would like to say Roman Catholic hair, is revealed by two curls that glide in front over her forehead and have the appearance of a burnt toupee that dissolves, having become damp, in the fog. The curls did not want to hold; they could just as well have become two pigtails. With restless agility, Bettina ran from one little reliquary to the next in the almost unfurnished room; there was Goethe painted in the circle of his parents, there were plaster casts of Schinkel’s and her bas reliefs, there were folders with cards and drawings, a piano stood nearby and when Bettina did not leap from one thing to the other in order to explain something to me, she sat restlessly on the sofa and plucked apart one wafer after the other during the conversation, reaching for them from a small box. Such feverish excitement lies within her! Everything is life in her – and the life-sign of life is destruction. During the two hours when I spoke, she never stopped plucking wafers to pieces."
(On 20 June 1842 she wrote to Franz Liszt (1811–1886) in Weimar: "I have kept my promise to Spontini by having engraved seven lieder, together with their very original accompaniments dedicated to Spontini by having engraved seven lieder..." (Deutschland, Hamburg, No. 12 of 20 January 1840, p. 45ff)

In 1842 the Leipzig publishers Breitkopf & Härtel issued a booklet with her lieder; out of solidarity, she dedicated it to the Berlin chief music director Gaspare Spontini (1774–1851), who had been suspended from service for "insulting His Majesty". On 20 June 1842 she wrote to Franz Liszt (1811–1886) in Weimar: "I have kept my promise to Spontini by having engraved seven lieder, together with their very original accompaniments dedicated to Spontini by having engraved seven lieder..." (Deutschland, Hamburg, No. 12 of 20 January 1840, p. 45ff)
Arnim, Bettina (Bettine) von

Her fame as an author created for her a nearly unassailable position which she also used for political activities. Thus, in courageous writings, she denounced the lack of democracy as well as the misery of the lower classes. In particular, her work "This Book Belongs to the King" (1843), representing an open letter to King Friedrich Wilhelm IV (1795–1861), created an uproar. The appendix, in which a Swiss teacher reports from the Berlin poorhouses, is simultaneously the first social commentary in German literature. In his discussion, Gutzkow writes: "The new King's Book by this strange woman is not a book in the sense that it rustles for a while like autumn leaves and will be forgotten under the winter snow; it is an event, an action that goes far beyond the conception of a book. This book belongs to the King, it belongs to the world. It belongs to history, like Dante's Comedy, Machiavelli's Prince, like Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. It says things that no one has ever said before, but which had to be said because they are felt by millions." Gutzkow summed up: "It is sad enough that only a woman could say what every man would have said under lock and key." (Karl Gutzkow, Diese Kritik gehört Bettinen, in: Telegraph für Deutschland, Hamburg, No. 165 of 14 October 1843, pp. 657–659 and No. 166 of 16 October 1843, pp. 661–663, here p. 657.)

A quite close relationship bound Bettina von Arnim with Robert Schumann (1810–1856) and his family. In 1837, at a concert in Berlin, Schumann's later wife, Clara Wieck (1819–1896), met Bettina von Arnim for the first time. She wrote in her diary: "Very witty, fiery woman – nothing but wrong judgements as far music is concerned. She overflows with humour." (Berthold Litzmann, Clara Schumann, ein Künstlerleben, Vol. 1, Leipzig 1903, p. 106ff.) After several attempts of Schumann to also come into contact with her, he himself turned to Bettina von Arnim on 15 June 1839 and asked her – in vain – for compositions and essays for his "Neue Zeitschrift für Musik". (Zwickau, Schumann-Haus, Briefbuch, No. 560a, see also Briefe und Gedichte aus dem Album Robert und Clara Schumanns, ed. Wolfgang Boetticher, 2nd printing, Leipzig 1981, p. 214.) Proofs of contacts with Schumann during the following years remain scanty, but on 28 October 1853 Bettina and her youngest daughter Gisela von Arnim (1827–1889) visited the family in Düsseldorf. Schumann noted in his household book: "Frau v. Arnim (Bettina) and her daughter Gisela." (Robert Schumann, Tagebücher, Vol. III, Part 2, ed. Gerd Nauhaus, Leipzig 1982, p. 640.) Schumann dedicated his last piano cycle "Gesänge der Frühe" (Songs of Dawn), Op. 133, based on poems of Friedrich Hölderlin, to the "high poetess"; this work was published in December 1855 when Schumann was already living in the "insane asylum" ENDENICH near Bonn. Bettina von Arnim visited him there and reported on this in a letter to Clara Schumann. In June 1855 Schumann thanked Bettina for her visit and concluded his letter with the words: "I would be delighted if you, esteemed one, would hear the 'Songs of Dawn' from my Clara. She will also send you the Songs." (Briefe und Gedichte aus dem Album Robert und Clara Schumanns, see above, p. 215ff) Through Schumann, Bettina von Arnim also became acquainted with Johannes Brahms, who dedicated his Six Songs, Op. 3 to her in 1853.

The place that music occupied in the life of the poetess is also impressively shown by the watercolour "Quartet Evening at Bettine's", painted by Carl Johann Arnold (1829–1916) around 1855. (Colour reproduction in Klaus Günzel, Die Brentanos. Eine deutsche Familiengeschichte, 3rd printing, Düsseldorf-Zürich 1998, p. 144.) Amongst the many musicians who played a role in her life, the violinist Joseph Joachim (1831–1907) must also be mentioned. Bettina's daughter Gisela, namely, felt attracted to him beginning in 1849; but she married the German literature scholar and art historian Herman Grimm (1828–1901) in 1859, after her mother's death.

Bettina von Arnim's own musical production is not very extensive, consisting primarily of lieder and duets with piano accompaniment. Not all of her works are finished. Several fragments were carefully completed by Joseph Joachim. Her musical oeuvre was printed for the first time in 1920, complete for the most part, in the fourth volume of the Bettina von Arnim Edition of Works. Its editor, Max Friedlaender, massively intervened in the compositions, however, "revising" both melodies and accompaniments according to his own wishes. (Bettina von Arnims Sämtliche Werke, Vol. 4, Berlin 1920, pp. 253–307.) Through the commendable new edition by Renate Moering, based on the manuscripts and first printings, the few works are meanwhile accessible in their original musical texts.

In addition, two packets with sketches and drafts have be-
en preserved; today they are being kept in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York (The Dannie and Hettie Heineman Collection, MS 30 and MS 9B 69).

Appreciation

Bettina von Arnim’s lieder are orientated on folksongs and on the works of Carl Friedrich Zelter and Johann Friedrich Reichardt. They are primarily laid out in strophic form, with the piano accompaniment kept simple and easily playable.

Reception

A reception of the musical work of Bettina von Arnim has, so far, only taken place to a limited extent. There is also a lack of a critical investigation of its interrelations to the contemporary musical context as well as ambitious, standard-setting interpretations.

Research

Bettina von Arnim is one of the most extensively researched women of her time, but it has not been easy for biographical researchers to separate poetry and truth from each other. Due to her exuberant imagination and great poetic talent, the boundaries are often fluid. Individual aspects of her biography, for example her encounters with Goethe and Beethoven, will probably continue to be controversial. Her musical production has been well researched and made accessible.

Need for Research

A complete edition of all the letters of Bettina von Arnim would be desirable, including the letters directed to her. Some letters are unfortunately still unpublished.

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