



January 14, 2009

Listening to Schroeder: 'Peanuts' Scholars Find Messages in Cartoon's Scores

By APRIL DEMBOSKY

SANTA ROSA, Calif. — In a "Peanuts" strip from the mid-1950s, Charlie Brown walks through the first panel and finds Schroeder sitting in front of an adult-size hi-fi, his ear to the speaker. "Shh," Schroeder says, "I'm listening to [Beethoven's Ninth](#)." Charlie Brown inspects Schroeder's outfit. "In an overcoat?" he asks. Schroeder leans even closer to the speaker and responds, "The first movement was so beautiful it gave me the chills!"

In the world of "Peanuts," of course, Schroeder was the Beethoven-obsessed music nerd who lost patience when Lucy interrupted his practice and who called time-outs as a baseball catcher to share composer trivia with the pitcher. Yet musicologists and art curators have learned that there was much more than a punch line to [Charles Schulz's](#) invocation of Beethoven's music.

"If you don't read music and you can't identify the music in the strips, then you lose out on some of the meaning," said William Meredith, the director of the Ira F. Brilliant Center for Beethoven Studies at San Jose State University, who has studied hundreds of Beethoven-themed "Peanuts" strips.

When Schroeder pounded on his piano, his eyes clenched in a trance, the notes floating above his head were no random ink spots dropped into the key of G. Schulz carefully chose each snatch of music he drew and transcribed the notes from the score. More than an illustration, the music was a soundtrack to the strip, introducing the characters' state of emotion, prompting one of them to ask a question or punctuating an interaction.

"The music is a character in the strip as much as the people are, because the music sets the tone," Mr. Meredith said. To understand what gave Schroeder chills, he said, you have to listen to the musical passage. "When you actually hear the symphony, the whole thing feels completely different."

That linkage is the central theme of “Schulz’s Beethoven: Schroeder’s Muse,” an exhibition at the Charles M. Schulz Museum and Research Center here, which was jointly organized with the Beethoven center. (It continues through Jan. 26 at the museum and will reopen on May 1 at the center in San Jose.)

Mr. Meredith spent more than a year identifying the compositions, gathering recordings and reinterpreting the strips; Jane O’Cain, the museum’s curator, researched Schulz’s artistic process and music-listening habits.

In the resulting show visitors can gaze upon the Beethoven strips, then tap a number into their audio guide and hear the music Schroeder is playing.

In a strip from 1953 Schroeder embarks on an intensive workout. He does push-ups, jumps rope, lifts weights, touches his toes, does sit-ups (“Puff, Puff”), boxes, runs (“Pant, Pant”) and finally eats (“Chomp! Chomp!”). In the last two panels he walks to his piano with determination and begins playing furiously, sweat springing from his brow.

The eighth notes above Schroeder’s head are from the opening bars of Beethoven’s “Hammerklavier” Sonata (Op. 106), a piece so long, artistically complex and technically difficult that it is referred to as the “Giant” Sonata. When Beethoven delivered it to the publisher in 1819, he is believed to have said, “Now you will have a sonata that will keep the pianists busy when it is played 50 years from now.”

According to the exhibition notes, classical music was as much a priority for Mr. Schulz as drawing was when he attended art school in the 1940s. He once said of his classmates, “We all collected classical albums, which we frequently shared on evenings when we got together to listen to music and challenge each other in wild games of hearts.”

Sue Broadwell, who worked as Schulz’s secretary from 1963 to 1967, said he played classical and other records — “he had a weakness for country western,” she said — in his studio while he worked. “He encouraged me to take a music appreciation course, which I did,” she said. “Every once in a while, as I was learning different pieces, he’d whistle some for me and I had to guess them.”

Mr. Schulz also regularly attended classical music concerts here with his family.

“He could sit almost perfectly still the whole time, without squirming, without crossing his legs,” said Jeannie Schulz, the cartoonist’s widow, who helped found the museum and serves as president of its board.

During concerts, she said, “he would pull a notebook out of his breast pocket and write something down,” adding: “Later in the car, he would say, ‘How would it be if Marcie and Peppermint Patty were at a concert, and ...’ He was always thinking about his characters.”

Although Schulz greatly admired Beethoven, his favorite composer was actually Brahms. He simply found that the name Beethoven — the way it sounded and the way it looked on the page — was funnier, the exhibition notes remark.

Accuracy and authenticity are hallmarks of the strips, whether they deal with music, sports or medical conditions, Ms. O’Cain, the museum’s curator, said. “With figure skating, he would carefully study books to make sure the jumps or spins that he had characters portraying, that they were correct,” she said. He would add subtle twists or inside jokes for readers familiar with skating or surfing or shorthand.

Mr. Schulz also mined Beethoven’s life for material. He had numerous books in which he underlined details about Beethoven’s love life, clothing, even his favorite recipe (macaroni with cheese).

“I have read several biographies of Beethoven — being strangely fascinated by the lives of composers, much more so than the lives of painters,” he said in 1975. As a result, Schulz fans like to point out, the strips are as educational as they are entertaining.

“What you thought was a funny tagline was an absolutely true story out of Beethoven’s life,” said Karen Johnson, the Schulz museum’s director.

Beethoven’s birthday was a perennial “Peanuts” event. Schroeder appeared in “Peanuts” for 49 years, and the composer’s birthday was acknowledged in 27 of them. Sometime in the 1960s Mr. Schulz hosted a real-life birthday party for Beethoven in his home in Northern California, according to Ms. O’Cain’s curatorial research. He drew Beethoven sweatshirts for each of the guests, two of which have been tracked down. One with the composer’s portrait is in the show.

The other, owned by Lee Mendelson, the producer of the Peanuts animated specials, features a full-body drawing of Beethoven — in a Schroeder sweatshirt.

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