

# Beethoven's Head: Phrenology and Material Culture in 230 Years of Beethoven Reception

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The bust of Ludwig van Beethoven by sculptor Franz Klein and the life mask on which it was modeled are perhaps the most widely discussed examples of portraiture in Western music history (Comini 2000). Commissioned around 1812 by two friends of Beethoven, the piano maker Nannette Streicher-Stein and her husband Andreas Streicher, Klein's severe depiction of the composer established a reference point for subsequent Beethoven iconography. The bust has furthermore come to be viewed as the composer's "truest representation" (Steblyn 1993). Despite its iconicity, the bust's origins and the significance of those origins for the reception history of the visual Beethoven are yet to be fully considered. Most notably, primary documents show that the bust, its artist, and its commissioners were closely tied to phrenology, the late eighteenth-century scientific movement of cranial and facial observation, and the movement's originator, Franz Josef Gall (Bell Jordan 2024). At its core, Gall's phrenology claimed that innate characteristics and tendencies could be accurately identified by examining human heads and their facsimiles (Wyhe 2002).

In this paper, I explore how Beethoven's bust and other objects relating to his head—including skull fragments, hair, and DNA—are deeply connected to phrenology. I begin by tracing the bust's genesis and the development of early phrenology, arguing that the bust's commissioners, the Streichers, conceived of it as a phrenological object. Next, I consider how phrenology was increasingly connected to racial science and the concept of heredity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, despite phrenologists' original claims being widely criticized (Richards 2013, Cowan 2023). Nevertheless, phrenological ideas were applied to the bust and Beethoven's remains by German racial scientists as evidence of "Aryan" biological and cultural supremacy (see Fine 2020). Thirdly, I consider twenty-first-century scientific studies that have analyzed Beethoven's remains using genetic methods (Meredith 2005 & 2015, Begg 2023). I argue that, by seeking a physiological basis for the composer's "genius," such scholarship ends up echoing phrenology's aims. I conclude by reflecting on how our ongoing fascination with Beethoven's physical appearance, his ethnicity and genetics, and his skeletal remains suggests that popular and scholarly understandings of the composer continue to be haunted by phrenology today.