DWIGHT’S “DIARIST,” ALEXANDER WHEELOCK THAYER:
SEARCHING FOR BEETHOVEN IN PARIS AND LONDON

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“The Diarist has gone up the Rhine and on to Paris, on the scent of certain Beethoven treasures to be found there, and we shall soon hear from him in the gay capital of France.”
—Dwight’s Journal of Music (November 17, 1860)

On October 18, 1860, the distinguished American Beethoven biographer Alexander Wheelock Thayer (1817-97) departed Mainz on the 6:30 a.m. train bound for Strasbourg, France. After a brief layover in Neustadt a. d. Haardt, he continued on to the French frontier town of Wissembourg, where he was abruptly informed that his passport was not in order! After a brief yet annoying delay, Thayer was permitted to continue on with his journey, eventually arriving in Paris on October 20, just two days shy of his forty-third birthday. While in the “gay capital of France,” Thayer visited the American poet and artist Christopher Pearse Cranch (1813-92); the Swiss-born, German composer and pianist Sigismond Thalberg (1812-71); and the French ventriloquist and philanthropist Nicolas Marie Alexandre Vattemare (1796-1864), who created the first international system for the exchange of items among libraries and museums.

At the end of January 1861, Thayer departed France for England, where he interviewed Charles Neate (1784-1877), Sir George Smart (1776-1867), Cipriani Potter (1792-1871) and Joseph Röckel (1783-1870), all of whom were intimately acquainted with Beethoven in Vienna. He also received assistance from the distinguished music critics George Hogarth (1783-1870) and James William Davison (1813-85); the English composer Sir George Alexander Macfarren (1813-87); and Musical Union founder and director John Ella (1802-88). Finally, Thayer met the distinguished English music historian Sir George Grove (1825-1900), with whom he developed a close and enduring friendship.

While anchored in Paris and London Thayer also attended numerous performances by some of the greatest artists and musical institutions of the day.

In this study I will chronicle Thayer’s Paris and London residences, about which little has been known. From Thayer’s numerous articles in Dwight’s Journal of Music, specifically those published under the “Diarist” pseudonym, it is possible to place his whereabouts—at times even daily—during this nine-month period. Beyond this, Thayer’s contributions to Dwight’s Journal constitute a brilliant synthesis of travel writing, general history, and music criticism, and provide hitherto unknown biographical information concerning the writer himself. Finally, I will present valuable Thayeriana mined from contemporary periodicals, census records, and from the personal letters and journals of Thayer’s intimates. Collectively, this new documentary evidence casts light on a heretofore starless chapter in the “Life of Thayer.”