

27, 28 March 2015

Ludwig van Beethoven

German composer and pianist

born: December 17, 1770, Bonn; died: March 26, 1827, Vienna

Piano Concerto No.5 in E-flat major, Op.73 "Emperor"

Allegro

Adagio un poco mosso

Rondo: Allegro

First Classics performance: March 11, 1937, conducted by Lajos Shuk, with pianist Harold Bauer; most recent performance: February 21, 2009, conducted by JoAnn Falletta, with pianist André Watts; duration 37 minutes

For all his celebrated irascibility, the real Beethoven possessed a tenderness which found its intimate voice through his beloved piano, the instrument on which he was the foremost virtuoso of his time. In addition to a triple-concerto and various chamber works, Beethoven scored five concertos and thirty-two sonatas for his own use as a performer. In the case of the "Emperor" of 1809, because of his progressive deafness, the premiere was not given until 1811 in Leipzig by the pianist Friedrich Schneider. This was followed by a performance in Vienna during the tumultuous year of 1812 by Carl Czerny, a Beethoven protege. (Czerny was the pedagogue/composer who wrote the well-known etudes which remain in use today.)

As an aside: Beethoven was fortunate to be on the scene at exactly the right moment to take full advantage of important technical developments in piano manufacture. Those improvements allowed the instrument to be played with a range of dynamic contrasts similar in scope to what we experience from today's modern concert grands. Beethoven himself did all he could to act as a catalyst to the manufacturers. In the middle of his performing career he wrote to one of the leading piano builders:

"The current ways of playing the pianoforte are still the most uncultivated of all the instruments. I am glad, my dear fellow, that you are one who comprehends and feels that one may sing on the pianoforte, if one is capable of feeling."

Concerto No.5 conjures a mix of worldly meaning and musical means. But this is not in reference to the "Emperor" moniker which was tagged onto the work some years later (an invention of publishers, who may have taken liberty with the title dedication to Archduke Rudolf of Austria.) In fact, Beethoven scored most of the work during the bombardment and occupation of Vienna in 1809 by Napoleon's forces. The composer was angered by the encroaching explosions, and his sketchbooks for the concerto contain musical snippets interspersed in the margins with exclamations: *Auf die Schlacht Jubelgesang! - Angriff! - Sieg!* (To the Battle in a Song of Triumph! Attack! Victory!). We may be certain which side Beethoven supported - he had previously canceled the dedication of his third symphony to Napoleon when the vainglorious general proclaimed himself as Emperor of France. But we may otherwise be sure of an extra-musical rationale in ***Concerto No.5*** if only because Herr Beethoven rarely scored a note that was not steeped in high purpose:

"When I open my eyes I must sigh, for what I see is contrary to my religion, and I must despise the world which does not know that music achieves a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy...In truth, music is the mediator between intellectual and sensuous life."

Beethoven is quoted here from a letter to Goethe from the German writer Bettina Brentano von Arnim, who determined that both men should meet (they did, at Teplice in 1812). Historians

often note the words were from von Arnim, and therefore subject to interpretation. However, various examples of such sentiments are also revealed in the composer's personal letters.

As for *Concerto No.5*, the score offers soaring exclamations, searching melodies, and virtuosic writing for both piano and orchestra, including Beethoven's own cadenza near the close of the first movement (with specific admonitions for the soloist to avoid any improvisation or substitution).

Beginning with an impromptu introduction, the first movement *Allegro* establishes the soloist at once as the chief interlocutor, after which the grandeur of the orchestral statement assures that a tour of exalted symphonic phrases and solo pyrotechnics is at hand. The soul-touching lyricism of the second movement *Adagio* in the remote key of B major achieves one of the most magical and serene moments for piano and orchestra in the entire concerto repertoire. Czerny described this movement as reminiscent of a solemn song of pilgrimage. Then - from quiescent repose - suddenly springs the joyous, free-styled pace of the third movement, back in euphonious E-flat major with the happy fury of an exuberant, dance-like celebration.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Egmont: Incidental Music, Op.84

Overture: Sostenuto ma non troppo

Lied: Die Trommel gerühret! (The Drum Resounds!): Vivace

Entr'acte I: Andante; Allegro con brio

Entr'acte II: Larghetto

Lied: Freudvoll und Liedvoll (Joyful and Woeful): Andante; vivace

Entr'acte III: Allegro; Marcia vivace

Entr'acte IV: Poco sostenuto e risoluto

Cärichen's Death: Larghetto

Melodrama: Süßer Schlaf (Sweet Sleep): Poco sostenuto

Victory Symphony: Allegro con brio

The <i>Overture to Egmont</i> was the first work ever performed by the BPO at the Orchestra's debut concert on November 7, 1935; most recent performance of the complete <i>Incidental Music</i> : October 2 and 3, 1987, conducted by Julius Rudel; duration 37 minutes
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Perhaps no figure in 19th century music was more influential than Ludwig van Beethoven. Beyond his celebrity as a pianist and composer, his Romantic pen was widely revered, fired by the spiritual nobility of the individual.

However, the composer's personal life was complicated. For example, he had repeatedly suffered the rebuke of unrequited love from women who could not or would not accept the complexities of his personality. Added to this was the reality of his progressive hearing loss, an affliction he resented bitterly but one which did not deter the passion of his altruistic philosophy.

While Beethoven's full catalog is a trove of variety in all major genres, his most endearing musical statements reveal the heart of an idealist. Among them are his opera *Fidelio* (in praise of a heroic woman), the *Eroica* symphony (dedicated to any great individual), the ninth symphony (*Ode to Joy* by Schiller), and the *Prometheus* ballet (hero of Greek legend), among others.

Likewise, Beethoven's *Egmont* glorifies the intrepid hero portrayed in Goethe's verse-drama of 1777. The play calls for incidental music at various points along the way, including a "Symphonic Victory" in the last scene. For a revival of the drama at Vienna's Burgtheater in 1810, Beethoven completed nine selections plus an overture. He wrote to the poet's friend Bettina von Bretano: "I have written the music out of love for Herr Goethe's poems, which bring me much happiness. Who can be thankful enough for a great poet, a nation's richest jewel?"

For his part, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was a German writer who is today regarded as one of the Titans of world literature. One might say he was his very own "Age of Enlightenment" - a product of the earlier Renaissance who signed in as an author, philosopher, journalist, painter, statesman, educator and even a theater manager. Moreover, he is credited with having established the Sturm und Drang (Storm and Stress) period in Romantic literature.

Goethe's most celebrated masterpiece is **Faust**, which concludes with a paean to the feminine ideal (it is fair to say Goethe was a passionate fellow - he kept falling in love 'for the first time' throughout his life). But in his time, exceeding even the popularity of Faust, Goethe's brief novel **Sorrows of Young Werther** (*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*) of 1774 came to exert a greater influence on the European psyche than any other novel in history.

Goethe's Egmont saga is set in the Netherlands in 1568, based in part on fact: The storyline the hero's death sentence for leading a rebellion against Spanish occupation. On the eve of his execution the ghost of Clärchen (who was Egmont's earthly love and the Goddess of Freedom) appears to him in a dream. To the populace a defiant Egmont proclaims:

"The deepest joys of my heart were one; divine freedom inhabited the figure of my dearest love. Strive forth, brave people! Friends, take heart! Your parents, your wives, your children are behind you. Guard your sacred heritage. And defend all you hold most dear, as I do before you now!"

Opening in solemn F minor, the **Overture** sets the stage to open the drama. An ominous mood is initially tone-painted via plaintive lyrics in the woodwinds over dark commands in the strings. But in turns, as the tempo brightens, the music becomes ever more resolute, spinning into a fully symphonic treatment. Beethoven, ever the optimist, captures the spirit of Egmont by transposing doubtful hope into defiant joy, closing with imperious, heralding brass. The incidental pieces which follow are in complement to the narrative storyline. The Finale presents a stellar, **Symphonic Victory** in brazen F major. Wunderbar..!

program notes by Edward Yadzinski

