Milwaukee Symphony

Musical Journeys

WEEKLY STREAMING PROGRAMS

Episode 6 Notes

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Baptized 17 December 1770; Bonn, Germany
Died 26 March 1827; Vienna, Austria

Egmont Overture, Opus 84

Composed: 1809-10
First performance: 15 June 1810; Vienna, Austria

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was Beethoven's favorite contemporary poet, so when he was asked by the Vienna Court Theater to write incidental music for an 1810 production of Goethe's play *Egmont* (1786), he was thrilled to accept the commission. In all, he composed ten pieces: the well-known overture and nine others, including two brief songs for the play's heroine, Claire.

Based on historical events, the drama relates the tale of 16th-century Count Egmont, a general and nobleman who sought to liberate the Netherlands from Spanish rule. Though he foresaw that eventuality, he was beheaded – in Brussels in 1568 – before it came to fruition. Beethoven's response to the story was keenly felt, because at the time of the commission, Vienna was occupied Napoleon's invading troops. (It is said that, during the May 1809 shelling, the composer hid in his brother's basement and covered his head with pillows to dampen the noise.)

The *Egmont* Overture is set in F minor, but with triumphant F-major music at the end. It has been likened to a concise tone poem, and Beethoven scholar Lewis Lockwood has opined that its music reflects specific dramatic images:

> … in the slow introduction, the heavy Spanish oppression and the keening pain of the people; in the Allegro, the rising tumult and revolt; in the coda, Egmont's capture and death (the *fortissimo* return of the opening oppressive figure followed by an abrupt cut-off with a hold), and then the "victory" music, which begins, significantly, *pianissimo* and then rises in eight measure to a climactic *fortissimo* tutti. 𝄐

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Symphony No. 4 in B-flat major, Opus 60

Composed: 1806
First performance: March 1807; Vienna, Austria

Despite his progressing deafness, the 35-year-old Beethoven was on a roll. The list of his works from the year 1806 includes several masterpieces: Piano Concerto No. 4, Op. 58; Three String Quartets, Op. 59 ("Razumovsky"); Symphony No. 4, Op. 60; Violin Concerto, Op. 61; and a revised version of *Leonore*, the opera that would evolve into *Fidelio* (including its famous *Leonore* Overture No. 3.)

Beethoven composed his Opus 60 in the summer and fall, having retreated to the Silesian country estate of one of his most devoted early admirers, Prince Carl von Lichnowsky. Seemingly, the work gave its composer little trouble. Though the master was known to agonize over his scores – experimenting and reworking the music across several drafts – musicologists tell us that few preliminary sketches exist.

The Fourth Symphony's generally affable disposition is at odds with both its symphonic neighbors – the Third ("Eroica") and Fifth. Not long after Beethoven's death, Robert Schumann called it, poetically, "a slender Grecian maiden between two Nordic giants." Writing in the late 19th century Sir George Grove opined that this opus "is a complete contrast to both its predecessor and successor, and is gay and spontaneous as they are serious and lofty."

Beethoven led the premiere of the Symphony No. 4 in March 1807, at a private concert given in the Viennese palace of Prince Franz Joseph von Lobkowitz – the "Eroica" Symphony's dedicatee. The evening also included the first performances of the Piano Concerto No. 4 and the *Coriolan Overture*, Op. 62. The public first heard the B-flat symphony over a year later, on 13 April 1808, in Vienna's Burgtheater.

The symphony opens with a slow, 42-bar introduction – expectant and foreboding – in the parallel minor, not the B-flat major of the key signature. Trumpets and timpani signal the end of the Adagio and the beginning of the Allegro vivace, and an energetic ascending scale figure launches the orchestra on a movement that is sparkling and lighthearted, but also dramatic. The graceful Adagio is a long-breathed song. An insistent accompaniment figure – long-short on the do-sol pitches – pervades the moment. Schumann, the work's great early admirer, thought the effect humorous, "a veritable Falstaff, particularly when occurring in the bass or timpani."

The witty third movement is no Classical-era minuet, but rather a full-blown high-energy scherzo. An unexpected return to the trio for a second go-round expands the customary three-part form into a five-part structure. A busy flurry of 16th notes in the violins introduces the *moto perpetuo* character that pervades the Finale. The second subject, first introduced by the oboe, offers the only respite from this infectiously riotous motion. As is often the case with Beethoven, the development section keeps us wondering where we're heading. We're on our way back to the main theme, of course, but when we arrive there, we're surprised to hear it stated by a solo bassoon. The orchestra sweeps in, though, to pick up the tune, bringing the symphony to a close with high spirits and earthy Haydnesque humor.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Violin Concerto in D major, Opus 61

Composed: 1806
Premiere: 23 December 1806; Vienna

Beethoven spent much of 1804-05 working on *Fidelio*, his only opera. He had also fallen in love with Josephine von Brunsvik, a young widow with four small children. These two distractions – and perhaps his slow adjustment to the fact that he was going deaf – may be the reason for the decline in his compositional output during these years. By the spring of 1806, however, he had hit his stride again. Among the works he completed that year were the three String Quartets, Op. 59 (dedicated to the Russian ambassador Count Razumovsky), the "Appassionata" Sonata, the Fourth Symphony, the Fourth Piano Concerto, and the 32 Variations on an Original Theme. The Violin Concerto, a work completed in short order, was written toward the year's end.

Franz Clement, artistic director of the Theater an der Wien and one of Europe's outstanding violinists, had asked Beethoven to write the concerto for him. It was set to be performed at a concert on 23 December 1806. Due to Beethoven's foot-dragging, the performance turned out to be virtually a read-through at sight. Thayer, in his Life of Beethoven, cites a contemporary account "that Clement played the solo *a vista*, without previous rehearsal." Even if it is a slight exaggeration to say that Clement sight-read his part – we don't know for certain – these are frightening conditions for the first performance of a demanding new work.

The 26-year-old Clement drew rave reviews for his playing, but the piece itself received at best a lukewarm reception. Beethoven did not give up on the Concerto: It was published in 1808 and dedicated to the composer's childhood friend Stephan von Breuning. (Beethoven later reworked the solo part for piano, and this was published as Op. 61a. This arrangement did not prove especially successful and is rarely heard today.)

Although there were occasional performances over the next few decades, the Concerto did not catch on. It had to wait until 1844 to come into its own, when a teenaged Joseph Joachim played the piece in London, with Felix Mendelssohn on the podium. Joachim, later a friend of Brahms and the dedicatee of his violin concerto, came essentially to own the work. It was through his persuasive advocacy that the Concerto took its rightful place in the canon. Today, it is one of the most often performed and recorded of all violin concertos.

The **Allegro non troppo** opens with five soft timpani strokes. On the fifth of those gently resonant beats, woodwinds begin a tranquil melody, marked *dolce* (sweetly) in the score. The violins' immediate imitation of the kettledrum notes on a strange pitch clues us in that the pattern of four knocks – sometimes with, sometimes without a resolving fifth note – is more than a colorful incident. This entire, immensely expansive movement will be saturated with it.

The **Larghetto** movement, set in G major, is a set of variations on a chorale-like theme. The orchestral strings are muted and the motion of the harmonies is minimal. Notice especially the fourth of these variations, a lyrical episode affectively ornamented and accompanied in striking simplicity by clarinets and bassoons. Now the violin seems lost in musing improvisations and sinks almost out of hearing. Finally, a *forte* statement by the orchestral strings says we have had enough introspection. The soloist responds, and we move into the good-natured finale.

The closing **Rondo** is back in the home key of D major, set in a lilting 6/8 meter. At times quiet, at other times boisterous, the movement allows time for relaxation – for us listeners, not for the soloist – and for dialogue between the soloist and full orchestra. There's room, too, for the soloist alone, and the brilliant close seems calculated to earn Clement the bravos history tells us greeted him that late-December evening in 1806.

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.