

# ALL BEETHOVEN PROGRAM

## LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827) Overture to *Egmont*, Op. 84

Beethoven's father and grandfather were musicians, and young Ludwig spent almost all his childhood studying and practicing the piano, organ, violin, and viola, whether he wanted to or not! In 1792 he left his native city for Vienna, where he stayed the rest of his life, earning a living as a piano teacher, concert pianist, conductor, and composer.

Throughout his life Beethoven was deeply concerned with the concept of freedom for the individual. As a result, he responded with enthusiasm when asked, in 1808, to write the incidental music for a production of Goethe's tragedy *Egmont*. The hero, Count Egmont (1522-1568), was a Dutch nobleman who attempted to free his countrymen from Spanish domination. For this, he was imprisoned and sentenced to death. Visitors to Brussels can still see, on one of the magnificent old houses that line the town square, a plaque with the following inscription: "Near this spot, on June 4, 1568, Lamoral, Count of Egmont was beheaded, a victim of the implacable hate and tyranny of Philip II, King of Spain."

In the bloody aftermath of the French Revolution, European theatergoers expected (and needed) cheerful conclusions to dramatic productions, no matter how serious the plot. Keenly aware of the almost obligatory "rescue finale," Goethe injected a sense of optimism at the conclusion of his play. He added a final scene in which the Goddess of Liberty appears in a vision to Egmont and foretells the ultimate freedom of the Flemish people. When Beethoven was commissioned to write music for the drama *Egmont*, Vienna was occupied by Napoleon's troops. The parallel between Egmont's struggle for freedom and that of the Viennese is thus unmistakable. Beethoven was undoubtedly inspired by the story of Egmont, especially the Count's final words to his countrymen: "Fight for your hearths and homes and die joyfully—as I do—to save what you hold most dear."

The structure of *Egmont Overture* resembles the opening movement of many Classic symphonies. After a slow introduction, two different themes are presented, developed, and then returned in almost original fashion. The work concludes with a coda that uses previous material. Within this traditional plan, however, Beethoven adds his own touches, unleashing extraordinary powers of dramatic expression and creating a new medium—the dramatic overture.

Although it may not have been the composer's intention, *Egmont Overture* closely parallels the story of Goethe's drama. The work begins with a loud, sustained sound, followed by darkly brooding chords that impart a sense of monumental solemnity. Beethoven was fond of placing extremely different materials side by side. Throughout the Overture, his juxtapositions of contrasting tempos, dynamics, registers, and timbres suggest the turbulence in Egmont's soul: Should he declare his allegiance to the Spanish oppressors or remain loyal to his countrymen?

As the work draws to a close, *fortissimo* chords from the introduction return to form much of the coda. However, the music is suddenly terminated, and there is a suspenseful pause followed by four sustained chords. According to some scholars, this chordal interpolation marks "one of the most moving passages the composer ever penned." At the end of the play, Goethe's stage directions call for a *Siegessymphonie* (Symphony of Victory) to be played, and Beethoven complied by writing a second coda marked *allegro con brio* (fast, with energy). Tonality moves from minor to major, and the atmosphere changes from one of oppression to victory and triumph. There is entirely new thematic material, and stirring trumpet calls help project heroism somewhat akin to the finale of Symphony No. 5.

Today *Egmont Overture* is part of the standard orchestral repertoire and performed as an entity, not simply an

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introduction to Goethe's drama. Nothing is really lost, though, for the overture vividly presents the essence of the dramatic conflict.

## **Piano Concerto No. 1 in C Major, Op. 15**

Beethoven's five piano concertos are landmarks in the concerto repertoire. Although he had already written two in this genre, Op. 15 was the first to be published, hence its designation as No. 1. The composer wrote this work soon after his move to Vienna in 1792. Mozart had already died and Haydn was often away in London, but these two great masters still dominated the city's musical life and influenced Beethoven in his earliest pieces.

Like many 18<sup>th</sup>-century concertos, Op. 15 follows a three-movement, fast-slow-fast scheme, with typical formal structures and qualities. The opening movement is in sonata form; the slow, lyrical middle movement is ternary (ABA); while the finale is a jolly seven-part rondo (ABACABA).

Within these traditional boundaries, however, are many features of originality and individuality. One immediate example concerns the length of the composer's first piano concerto. When compared to earlier works, Op. 15 is rather extensive. In fact, it is Beethoven's longest orchestral composition before his first symphony. Another instance occurs in the opening movement. Instead of presenting the themes first in the orchestra, with the solo instrument repeating, Beethoven surprised his audience by assigning a new melody to the solo instrument. Keenly aware that a soft beginning easily attracts the audience's attention, Beethoven opens Op. 15 with a march-like theme, initially timid and *pianissimo*, but soon reiterated loudly with vigor and confidence. The composer relished placing extremely contrasting dynamics next to each other, and he uses this technique again in the final movement, where the soft theme in the

piano is immediately repeated *fortissimo* by the orchestra. As a keyboard virtuoso, it was only natural for the composer to exploit the expanded range of the newly improved piano. In the finale, one of the themes is divided between the bass and treble registers. This movement is full of energy and boisterous humor, thanks to its *scherzando* tempo and *sforzando* accents, which produce a brilliant, exuberant quality that could have been provided only by Beethoven.

Beethoven's harmonic treatment also sets the work apart from earlier compositions. The overall plan moves from C major to A-flat major and then back to the home key. There are numerous chromatic runs, ascending and descending, and a dreamy chromatic passage in the development section of movement one. The opening of the first movement also contains an unusual harmonic shift between themes—C major for the first melody and E-flat major for the second. Other notable examples of harmonic boldness are found in the various sections of the last movement. The orchestra appears in unison and moves chromatically upward, thus preparing for the eventual return to the A section in the home key.

In Piano Concerto No. 1, Beethoven was attempting to impress the Viennese public with his prowess as both a pianist and a composer. He wrote the piece for himself and premiered it, possibly as early as 1795. It was customary for performers to improvise in concerts, and Beethoven dazzled everyone with three impromptu passages in the opening movement. However, years later he realized his increasing deafness would prevent him from performing this work again. As a result, he wrote out three contrasting cadenzas for this concerto, presumably for different occasions and audiences.

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## Symphony No. 1

Beethoven's nine symphonies form the core of modern symphonic repertoire and have influenced practically all major composers since they have been written.

Symphony No. 1 is clearly modeled after Haydn and Mozart. Like the older masters, Beethoven follows the sonata principle and writes for four separate movements, with the third labeled "minuetto." The instrumentation and slow introductions of Beethoven's work particularly recall the works of Haydn, and there are thematic relationships between Symphony No. 1 and Mozart's Jupiter Symphony.

Despite these similarities, Beethoven's individuality is apparent. Most earlier works in this genre use sonata form, along with ABA and rondo structures, but Beethoven employs only sonata or quasi-sonata form for all the movements, even the slow second one. He also uses fugal writing in the second movement, and the codas are much more elaborate than those of his predecessors.

It is in the area of harmony, though, where Beethoven departs most strikingly. The *adagio* chords at the opening of movement one are marked by harmonic ambiguity, with tonality firmly established only with the last chord of the introduction. The overall harmonic scheme is also somewhat unusual, with tonality moving from C major to F major and then back to the home key. In Beethoven's 31 published works that precede this symphony, only seven use the subdominant for a slow movement within a major key context. In addition, there are remarkable passages of chromaticism, especially in the development section of the second movement and in the third movement.

Although the Minuetto is in three-part form and triple meter, it resembles a Beethovenian scherzo rather than an 18<sup>th</sup>-century minuet. It's very fast; in fact, the composer inscribed it *allegro molto e vivace*.

This movement is also large and powerful, full of incessant rhythms, *sforzando* accents, with quasi-developments and repetitions of short figures. Beethoven abandons all pretense of Classic symmetry. The first section divides into two parts—seven measures in the first and 71 measures in the second.

The opening of the finale is a masterpiece of comedy. Following a loud chord that is held, violins try to play an ascending scale. At first they play only three notes and then stop. After several attempts, each time progressing one note further, they finally succeed in presenting the complete scale, and this leads directly into the main theme. Daniel Türk, a prominent conductor and contemporary of Beethoven, always omitted these introductory measures because he was afraid the audience would laugh. Unfortunately, he missed the whole point. Beethoven intended to be humorous. So relax and enjoy this movement because it's just plain fun. It sparkles and is full of wit and vitality.

Symphony No. 1 was an immediate hit with the audience, with one critic describing it as "the most interesting public concert for a long time."

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