

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
May 6-7-8, 2022
96th Season
Michael Allsen

All through this season, the Madison Symphony Orchestra is celebrating the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth, though a year late, thanks to COVID-19. Our closing concert is devoted to three of his works, all composed during what has been called his "Heroic Decade"—the enormously prolific years between 1802 and 1812, during which he forged a truly individual musical style. We begin with one of many works tied to the ideal of heroism, his dramatic overture to Goethe's *Egmont*. We then welcome back audience favorite Garrick Ohlsson as soloist in Beethoven's powerful fifth piano concerto. Mr. Ohlsson has previously appeared with the orchestra in 1984 (Rachmaninoff, *Concerto No. 3*), 1985 (Mozart, *Concerto No. 25*), 2002 (Brahms, *Concerto No. 2*), 2009 (Rachmaninoff, *Concerto No. 3*), 2012 (Tchaikovsky, *Concerto No. 2*), and 2016 (Brahms, *Concerto No. 1*). The program ends with the most familiar of Beethoven's symphonies, the magnificent fifth.

The title character of Goethe's drama *Egmont*—based upon a real historical figure—personifies heroism and self-sacrifice. These qualities clearly come through in the overture to Beethoven's incidental music to the play, culminating in its victorious ending.

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born: December 17, 1770 (baptism date), Bonn, Germany.

Died: March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria.

Egmont Overture, Op. 85

- **Composed:** Between 1809 and June 1810.
- **Premiere:** The complete incidental music to *Egmont*, including the overture, was first played at the Burgtheater in Vienna on June 15, 1810.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1940, 1949, 1989, 1994, 1999, and 2017.
- **Duration:** 9:00.

Background

Beethoven upheld the ideals of human dignity and freedom in his music and writings, and much the same can be said for the work of contemporary poet and playwright Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832). In his play *Egmont*, first

published in 1786, Goethe freely adapts the story of the 16th-century Flemish nobleman Lamoral van Egmont, who was betrayed by his Spanish overlords. Egmont served the Spanish king well, defeating the French in battle and ruling as a provincial governor. However, his challenge to the Spanish persecution of Protestants in their conquered territories angered the king. Egmont was sentenced to be beheaded, and his stirring speech from the scaffold touched off a rebellion against Spanish tyranny.

The personal relationship between Beethoven and Goethe dates from 1810, when Beethoven was commissioned to write incidental music for a new production of *Egmont*. At first, their correspondence went through a mutual friend, Bettina von Arnim, but they eventually met in person, at Teplitz in July of 1812. Although they had long been mutual admirers, it is evident from their own descriptions of the meeting that their personalities clashed. In a letter to a friend written a few months later, Goethe states: “His talent amazed me. However, unfortunately, he is an utterly untamed personality; he is not altogether wrong in holding the world detestable, but surely does not make it more enjoyable for himself or others by his attitude.” Beethoven’s own impressions were no more complimentary. In a letter to his publisher, he notes that: “Goethe delights far too much in the court atmosphere, far more than is becoming in a poet.”

What You’ll Hear

The *Overture* is set in sonata form. It sets the scene with a solemn introduction, in which strident dotted figures alternate with lighter music in the woodwinds. The end of this introduction leads smoothly into the body of the movement, a triple-meter *Allegro*. A stormy main theme is characterized by an offbeat accent in the upper strings and a descending line. An agitated transition leads to the second theme, a transformation of the introduction’s opening material. The brief development section is entirely concerned with the main theme. In the recapitulation that follows, the Beethoven extends the second theme with a short section of development. Rather than a conventional coda, Beethoven ends a grand dramatic pause, and entirely new material. This exhilarating music is used again at the end of the drama, as Egmont climbs the scaffold to his death. In commissioning the music for *Egmont*, Goethe specified that this moment should not be a lament, but rather, a “Symphony of Victory.”

Beethoven’s fifth and final piano concerto was composed as Napoleon’s armies were besieging Vienna, and it was first performed there while the French still occupied the city. It is a bold, and even defiant work given the times in which it was created.

Ludwig van Beethoven

Concerto No. 5 for Piano and Orchestra in E-flat Major, Op. 73 (“Emperor”)

- **Composed:** 1809.
- **Premiere:** November 28, 1811 with Friedrich Schneider as soloist, in Leipzig, Germany.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1934 (Stanislaw Szpinalski), 1968 (Paul Badura-Skoda), 1979 (Claudio Arrau), 1990 (Andre-Michael Schub), 2000 (Horacio Gutierrez), 2004 (André Watts) and 2011 (Simone Dinnerstein).
- **Duration:** 30:00.

Background

In 1809, Beethoven was living in a Vienna besieged and eventually occupied by Napoleon’s troops. In a letter to his publisher, the composer complained that: “...I have brought forth little that that is coherent: almost nothing but a fragment here and there. The entire course of events has affected my body and my soul. I am still unable to enjoy the country life, so indispensable to me; Heaven knows how it will go on... What a destructive, coarse life around me: nothing but drums, cannon, and human misery of all sorts.” Despite the chaos of 1809, however, Beethoven was able to finish his last and largest piano concerto during that year. By this point, his deafness had advanced to the point that a performance with him as soloist was impossible, and its first performance was played by Friedrich Schneider in Leipzig. Beethoven’s friend Carl Czerny played the Vienna premiere a year later.

It is ironic that the fifth piano concerto has come to bear the title of the man responsible for the misery in Vienna. Beethoven had expressed great admiration for Napoleon Bonaparte just a few years earlier, but turned against him in 1803 when Napoleon had himself crowned Emperor. (There is the famous story of Beethoven violently crossing out the original dedication of the “Eroica” symphony—changing the dedication to Napoleon to “the memory of a great man.”) If tradition is to be believed, the designation “Emperor” dates from the first Vienna performance in 1812, when one of Napoleon’s occupying soldiers, overcome by the majesty of the concerto, cried out: “*c’est l’empereur!*” The name stuck, though it is certain that Beethoven, whose short-lived admiration for Napoleon had long since passed by that time, would have disapproved of the designation. The fifth concerto was, in fact, dedicated to Beethoven’s most faithful patron, the Archduke Rudolph.

The fifth piano concerto contrasts sharply with the fourth, which Beethoven had completed three years earlier, the two works representing the two sides of what has been called Beethoven's "Heroic" period. The fourth concerto is introspective and brooding, but the fifth is unabashedly dramatic and self-assured. The key of the fifth concerto, E-flat Major, commonly had associations with heroism and grandeur for Beethoven and his contemporaries. Several writers have commented on the "military" nature of the concerto, citing the influence of French music, particularly the so-called "military concerto." Indeed, the first movement can be heard as a kind of "battle" between the soloist and orchestra, although its mood is jubilant throughout. If the drums and cannon that surrounded Beethoven in 1809 affected this concerto, the human misery did not.

What You'll Hear

The first movement (*Allegro*) opens with a dramatic introduction: three orchestral chords which serve as launching pads for short solo cadenzas. The orchestral exposition begins quietly, with a martial theme in the violins. There is a long chromatic scale and trill by the soloist, and the piano begins its exposition with a *dolce* treatment of the opening theme. The development begins in the same manner as the exposition—with a chromatic scale and trill—and is concerned almost entirely with the first theme. This lengthy and intense section closes with a long piano flourish and recapitulation of the opening theme by orchestra and soloist. The recapitulation closes with a relatively brief cadenza written by Beethoven. Cadenzas written by the composer, rather than improvised on the spot were still a new development at this time, and Beethoven was obliged to put a note in the score to the pianist, reminding him to "directly attack what is written here."

The second movement (*Adagio un poco mosso*) begins with a hymnlike melody in the strings. The piano plays a contrasting *cantabile* melody, which closes with a rising series of trills. Together, the soloist and orchestra provide a loosely-structured set of variations on the main theme. As the last variation dies away, Beethoven cunningly works his way back to the concerto's home key, E-flat, and after a brief pause, the soloist launches directly into the final movement (*Rondo: Allegro*). Critic Donald Tovey called this "the most spacious and triumphant of concert rondos." Nothing less would balance the monumental first movement. The noisy and joyous main theme is first presented by solo piano, and then by full orchestra. This alternates with contrasting episodes. The end of the movement contains a final surprise. The orchestra is suddenly quiet, leaving only the piano and timpani to play a long *diminuendo*. When the sound has all but died away, the piano suddenly bursts forth with a final showy display, and the movement closes with an orchestral statement of the main theme.

Certainly the best-known of Beethoven's orchestral works is the stunning fifth symphony. Beginning with the unforgettable four-note motive that dominates the first movement, Beethoven continuously develops his musical ideas through a lyrical slow movement, a fierce scherzo, and a triumphant finale.

Ludwig van Beethoven

Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67

- **Composed:** Between 1804 and 1808.
- **Premiere:** December 22, 1808, at the Theatre an der Wein in Vienna.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1929, 1948, 1952, 1970, 1983, 1997, 2004, and 2011.
- **Duration:** 34:00.

“It is merely astonishing and grandiose.”
- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Background

Although preliminary sketches of Beethoven's *Symphony No.5* date from as early as 1804, the bulk of the work was written in 1807-08, at roughly the same time as the *Symphony No.6*. Both symphonies were performed for the first time at a benefit concert in Vienna on December 22, 1808. The program for this landmark (and marathon) event also included excerpts from his *Mass in C* and the concert aria *Ah, perfido*, together with premieres of two works with Beethoven himself at the piano, the *Piano Concerto No.4* and the hastily-composed *Choral Fantasy*. After a bit of initial resistance from audiences and his fellow musicians—this was, after all, a truly *avant garde* work—the *Symphony No.5* was recognized as a masterpiece, and has remained the single most familiar of Beethoven's works since then.

This was a remarkable work for its time...or any time. Though not as long as his groundbreaking “Eroica” symphony of 1803, this work is played by an expanded orchestra that includes instruments seldom heard in earlier symphonies: piccolo, contrabassoon, and trombones. Beethoven was obviously proud of this innovation, and wrote to Count Franz von Oppersdorf that “...this combination of instruments will make more noise, and what is more, a more pleasing noise than six kettledrums!” Also new is the degree to which all of the four movements are linked thematically. The famous four-note motive of the opening movement reappears in

all three successive movements, and nearly all of the main musical ideas are linked in some way.

What You'll Hear

There is no more recognizable motive in Western music than the opening four notes of the first movement. Whether or not Beethoven attached a specific meaning to this motto is unclear. His first biographer, Anton Schindler reported that Beethoven referred to this motive as "Fate knocking at the door," but this may be apocryphal. Later times have attached *all* sorts of meanings to it. For example, during World War II, because of its identity with the Morse Code "V," it became the musical emblem of Allied victory. At the same time, it was viewed as one of the most purely "German" nationalistic works by the Nazis. In purely musical terms, however, Beethoven's use of this rhythm in the opening movement is a work of genius. With two statements of this four-note motto, Beethoven brusquely tosses aside the stately Classical tradition of long, slow introductions, and jumps directly into the body of the movement (*Allegro con brio*). The opening theme is almost entirely spun out from the motto, and even the second theme, stated sweetly by the strings, is brazenly announced by the motto from the horns. The motto is also the focus of the development section, which includes some stunning antiphonal effects. The headlong rush of the recapitulation is abruptly broken by a brief oboe cadenza, seemingly at odds with the nature of this movement, but actually a logical continuation of the main theme. Beethoven reserves his most savage fury for the coda, the longest single section of this movement, and another section of intense development.

The second movement (*Andante con moto*) is a very freely-constructed theme and variations. The theme is laid out first by violas and cellos and then more robustly by full orchestra. After three imaginative variations, Beethoven launches into a section of very free development, beginning with a lovely pastoral passage from the woodwinds. The scherzo (*Allegro*) begins mysteriously in the low strings, but soon picks up as much power as the opening movement, with a statement of the motto by the horns. The central trio moves from minor to major, and has a blustering theme in the lower strings developed in fugal style. When the main idea returns, it is strangely muted, and it quickly becomes apparent that this movement is not going to end in any conventional way. In place of a coda, there is a long and mysterious interlude, building gradually towards the most glorious moment in this work: the triumphant C Major chords that begin the finale.

The fourth movement (*Allegro*) is where Beethoven suddenly augments the orchestra with trombones and contrabassoon. This orchestral effect, probably

inspired by contemporary opera, is stunning. The opening group of themes, stated by full orchestra, is noble and forceful and the second group, played by strings and woodwinds is more lyrical, but no less powerful. The development focuses on the second group of themes, expanding this material enormously. Just as the development section seems to be finished, there is a reminiscence of the scherzo—bewildering at first, but then perfectly logical as it repeats the movement’s transitional passage and leads to the return of the main theme. While the recapitulation is rather conventionally laid out, the vast coda continues to break new ground. As in the development section, things seem to be winding to close when Beethoven takes an unexpected turn: in this case a quickening of tempo to end the symphony in a mood of grand jubilation.

The Last Word Goes to Berlioz

According to an account by Hector Berlioz, he brought his former teacher Jean-François Le Secur to an early performance of the *Symphony No.5* in Paris. After the final bars, the old man was so excited by the piece that his head was reeling, and he wryly complained that: “One should not be permitted to write such music.” Berlioz replied: “Calm yourself—it will not be done often.”