

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born December 16, 1770, Bonn, Germany.

Died March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria.

Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage, Op. 112

Beethoven composed *Meersstille und Glückliche Fahrt* (Calm sea and prosperous voyage), a setting of two poems by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, in 1814–15. The first performance was given on December 25, 1815, in Vienna. The work was published in 1822, with a dedication to the poet. The score calls for mixed chorus and an orchestra consisting of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. Performance time is approximately eight minutes.

These are the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first performances of Beethoven's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*.

This tiny masterwork—little-known, scarcely discussed (even in the central Beethoven literature), and rarely programmed (these are the Chicago Symphony's first-ever performances)—is one of the most overlooked works in Beethoven's output. The neglect of this setting of two poems by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe began with the poet himself. Beethoven had known and admired Goethe's poetry since his youth, and he eventually set several of Goethe's poems to music, as well as providing incidental music to *Egmont* in 1810. The two men finally met while on a holiday in Teplitz in 1812, and spent many hours together over the span of several days. Two years later, Beethoven combined two poems by Goethe as this short, dramatic cantata for chorus and orchestra depicting the passage from darkness to light.

When the work was published in 1822, with a dedication to Goethe, Beethoven sent the poet a copy. Although Goethe noted in his diary that he received the score, he never got around to acknowledging it. When nine months passed without word, Beethoven could stand the slight no longer and wrote Goethe a letter, recalling "the happy hours spent in your company" before getting to the point:

I am now faced with the fact that I too must remind you of my existence—I trust that you received the dedication to Your Excellency of *Meersstille und Glückliche Fahrt* which I have set to music. It would afford me much pleasure to know whether I had united my harmony with yours in appropriate fashion How highly would I value a general comment from you on the composing of music or on setting your poems to music!

Still, Beethoven's request went unanswered—possibly out of rudeness or the lack of common decency that is sometimes excused in great artists, possibly because he felt his poetry needed no "accompaniment," but most likely simply because of his total indifference to great music. (Schubert, who once sent Goethe some of his most impressive songs, all of them settings of Goethe's poems, also was given the cold shoulder.) Three years after Beethoven's death, Mendelssohn tried to interest the eighty-year-old poet in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, without apparent success.

Although Beethoven actually never sailed on a voyage, he knew well, through the difficult experience of his own life, the deeper meaning of the two poems by Goethe he chose to set in *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, which is why the beauty of Beethoven's setting is not its ability to paint a seascape—the still wind of the opening, the rippling scales when the sea begins to stir—but in its understanding of the power of transformation. Beethoven's sense of theater was never greater: he begins quietly, almost without any sense of movement, and then at the first mention of "weite," the vast expanse of the distant horizon, the chorus cries out in anticipation. Eventually the wind shifts and the sea begins to swell. The

music builds straight to Goethe's final line: And now I see land! The way the transformative breeze colors the music recalls the passage of the prisoners in *Fidelio*, as they emerge into the courtyard: "Oh what joy to breathe the scent of open air: Only here, here is life." Beethoven knew it well: the sense of rejoining a community after a time of isolation, of recapturing his creative powers after a worrisome period of sterility.

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