PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

Ludwig van Beethoven
Born December 16, 1770, Bonn, Germany.
Died March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria.

Egmont, Op. 84

Beethoven composed incidental music, consisting of an overture and nine musical numbers, for Goethe’s Egmont in 1809-10; the first performance was given on June 15, 1810, in Vienna. The work calls for solo soprano singing the role of Claire, and an orchestra consisting of two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Beethoven’s complete Egmont were given at the Auditorium Theatre on December 16 and 17, 1892, with Minnie Fish as soloist and Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on January 31 and February 1, 1902, with Electa Gifford as soloist, George Riddle as narrator, and Theodore Thomas conducting. The Orchestra first performed Egmont in its entirety at the Ravinia Festival on July 10, 1945, with Dorothy Maynor as soloist and Erich Leinsdorf conducting, and most recently on July 26, 1984, with Isola Jones as soloist, Werner Klemperer as narrator, and Kurt Masur conducting.

Beethoven met Bettina Brentano in May 1810, when he was hard at work on his incidental music for Goethe’s Egmont. He sang and played two of his recent settings of poems by Goethe for her, because he knew that she was a good friend of the great poet. Bettina wrote to Goethe about the composer with such enthusiasm that he answered her at once, suggesting that Beethoven meet him that summer in Karlsbad. In letter after letter that month, Bettina boasted to Goethe about Beethoven’s remarkable talent and, in particular, of the way he had uncovered a “new sensuous basis in the intellectual life.” On May 28 she even quoted Beethoven: “Music, verily, is the mediator between the life of the mind and the senses.”

We don’t know which of Beethoven’s works Bettina knew (aside from the Goethe songs he performed for her), but several of his recent scores revealed a thrilling union of masterly technique and powerful expression—the fifth and sixth symphonies, the Appassionata piano sonata, the violin concerto, the fourth piano concerto, and—perhaps above all, because of its theatrical nature—the opera Leonore (later known as Fidelio). The incidental music for Goethe’s Egmont that he introduced in Vienna that June was Beethoven’s first score for the stage since Leonore, and it shows the composer striving for an ever-greater sense of dramatic intensity.

In the first stern notes of the overture (as well as in the impassioned fast music that immediately follows), Beethoven conveys a seriousness and urgency unexpected in music. The story of Egmont is serious business, to be sure, for it’s not just a tale of freedom and national liberation, but also of a hero who dies for his cause, a theme that prompted Beethoven to write some of his most powerful music throughout his career. Even in Beethoven’s time, the event that inspired Goethe’s drama was ancient history: Count Egmont, who led the Flemish resistance against the Spanish rule of the Netherlands, was beheaded in the Brussels marketplace on June 5, 1568. But to Beethoven it was both personal and timely, recalling his own Flemish ancestry and closely paralleling the current political situation in Vienna, which had been occupied by the French since May 1809. (During the bombardment, Beethoven hid in his brother’s cellar and covered his head with pillows to mute the noise.)

Goethe was just twenty-six in 1775 when he began to write his drama about Egmont, and he shaved twenty years off his hero’s age—the real Egmont died at forty-seven—so complete was his identification with the part. (Time caught up with the poet: by the time the play premiered in Mainz in 1789, Goethe was forty.) Part historical spectacle, part love story, part character study, Goethe’s Egmont has five acts. When Beethoven was commissioned to write incidental music for the first Viennese staging in 1810, he
composed ten musical numbers, including an overture, four entr’actes, and two songs for Claire, the fictional love interest Goethe provided (in lieu of Egmont’s wife and eight children).

The often-performed overture is a compact tone poem, and, like the Leonore overtures Beethoven wrote for Fidelio, it previews not only the central conflicts of the drama but its resolution as well. Here Beethoven depicts the oppression of the Spanish rule (the slow opening is particularly grave), Egmont’s determination and rebellious spirit, the uprising of the Netherlanders, and the hero’s fate. (In an unexpected pause near the end—followed by the emphatic rhythm of the opening—Beethoven even predicts Egmont’s beheading, noting in his sketches that death “could be expressed by a silence.”)

The entr’actes serve not only as orchestral interludes, but also provide important links. The first entr’acte, for example, makes the transition from the solemn end of act 1, when Claire rejects another suitor, to the opening of the second act, set in the noisy streets of Brussels. These entr’actes are not just mood-setters; in Beethoven’s hands, they become part of the drama. The third entr’acte is interrupted by the sounds of Spanish troops approaching; as E.T.A. Hoffmann wrote, the effect “corresponds perfectly to the dramatic action that follows, namely a depiction of the citizens’ alarmed state.”

Claire has two songs—the first an innocent vision of military victory, the second a more complex view of passion—and a purely orchestral death scene. Egmont himself appears in the penultimate melodrama, reciting part of his last speech over music. The final “victory symphony” specified in Goethe’s text revives the brilliant coda of Beethoven’s overture, bringing the drama full circle.

Beethoven sent Goethe a copy of his Egmont music in the spring of 1811, but the two men didn’t meet until the summer of 1812, when they spent time together at the spa town of Teplitz. Goethe was never completely convinced of Beethoven’s genius (he preferred Mozart’s music), but as a companion he dismissed him without hesitation as an “utterly untamed personality.”

In later years, when impresarios wanted to perform Beethoven’s score without staging the entire play—the complete undertaking is Wagnerian in scale—the tradition of narrating the drama was born. Franz Grillparzer, the Austrian poet who would write Beethoven’s funeral oration in 1827, provided one of the most popular of these narrations, using more of his own words than Goethe’s. It was probably his version that Goethe heard in Weimar in 1821, when he wrote: “It was a happy notion to set out the music to Egmont by means of short linking speech in such a way that it can be performed as an oratorio.” After the Victory Symphony, Goethe remarked that “Beethoven has followed my intentions with admirable genius,” perhaps already suspecting that for future generations Egmont would be known for Beethoven’s music as much as for his poetry.

These performances of Egmont are directed by Sheldon Patinkin.

THE DRUM IS RESOUNDING!
Die Trommel gerühret!
Das Pfeifchen gespielt!
Mein Liebster gewaffnet
Dem Haufen befiehlt,
Die Lanze hoch führet,
Die Leute regieret.
Wie klopf mit das Herz!
Wie wallt mir das Blut!
O hätt’ ich ein Wämslein,
Und Hosen und Hut.

Ich folgt’ ihm zum Tor ‘haus
Mit mutigem Schritt,
Ging’ durch die Provinzen,
Ging’ überall mit.
Die Feinde schon weichen,
Wir schiessen da drein—
Welch Glück sondergleichen,
Ein Mannsbild zu sein.

The drum is resounding,
And shrill the fife plays;
My love, for the battle,
His brave troop arrays;
He lifts his lance high,
And the people he sways.
My blood it is boiling!
My heart throbs pit-pat!
Oh, had I a jacket,
With hose and with hat!

How boldly I’d follow,
And march through the gate;
Through all the wide province
I’d follow him straight.
The foe yield, we capture
Or shoot them! Ah me!
What heart-thrilling rapture
A soldier to be!

BLISSFUL AND TEARFUL
Freudvoll und leidvoll,
Gedankenvoll sein;
Langen und bangen
In schwebender Pein;
Himmelhoch jauchzend,
Zum Tode betrübt;
Glücklich allein
Ist die Seele, die liebt.

Blissful and tearful,
With thought-teeming brain;
Hoping and fearing
In passionate pain;
Now shouting in triumph,
Now sunk in despair;
With love’s thrilling rapture
What joy can compare!


Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.
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