PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Ludwig van Beethoven

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

Overture to *The Creatures of Prometheus,* Op. 43

Beethoven composed music for his ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus* in 1801; it was first performed on March 28, 1801, in Vienna. The overture calls for an orchestra consisting of pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, and trumpets, with timpani and strings. Performance time is approximately five minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first performances of Beethoven's Overture to *The Creatures of Prometheus* were given on subscription concerts at the Auditorium Theatre on March 9 and 10, 1900, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on March 12, 13, and 14, 1992, with Erich Leinsdorf conducting. The Orchestra first performed this overture at the Ravinia on July 10, 1936, with Hans Lange conducting, and most recently on July 31, 1998, with Lawrence Foster conducting.

The Creatures of Prometheus marked Beethoven's introduction to the Viennese stage. Its swift, easy composition and immediate popular success in no way predicted that his major theatrical undertaking, the opera *Fidelio,* would take ten years to perfect, and even then it attracted considerable criticism. But ballet is not opera, and in 1801, Beethoven's decision to write music for Prometheus to dance to was not charged with the same deeply personal issues raised by the story of Leonore and Florestan.

The idea for *The Creatures of Prometheus* came from the celebrated Neapolitan choreographer Salvatore Viganò, who normally wrote his own music. For this work, however, which was to be presented for the empress Maria Theresia at the Vienna Court Theater, Viganò picked an unusually serious, "heroic-allegorical" subject, and then turned to Beethoven for music of corresponding importance. Although Viganò assumed Beethoven had never written for the dance before—his slight, earlier *Ritterballett* had intentionally been passed off as the work of Count Waldstein—Beethoven had already proved, in his first two piano concertos, first symphony, and *Pathétique* Sonata, that he recognized that music was a dramatic language.

We know very little about Viganò's production of *The Creatures of Prometheus*—or even about ballet in general at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Ballet as an art form independent of opera was relatively new, and Viganò was one of the first to give it depth and character. The playbill for the first performance provides this synopsis:

> This allegorical ballet is based on the myth of Prometheus. The Greek philosophers, who knew of him, elucidate the story in the following manner—they depict Prometheus as a lofty spirit who, finding the human beings of his time in a state of ignorance, refined them through art and knowledge and gave them laws of right conduct.
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> In accordance with this source, the ballet presents two animated statues who, by the power of harmony, are made susceptible to all the passions of human existence.

Prometheus takes them to Parnassus, to receive instruction from Apollo, god of the arts, who commands Amphion, Arion, and Orpheus to teach them music; Melpomene and Thalia, tragedy and comedy. Terpsichore aids Pan, who introduces them to the Pastoral Dance, which he has invented, and from Bacchus they learn his invention—the Heroic Dance.

Beethoven wrote an overture, an introduction, fifteen numbers, and a finale for this two-act ballet. The overture begins with a dissonance even more arresting than the one that opens his First Symphony. The brilliant allegro section, bristling with energy, often is said to represent Prometheus fleeing from heaven after stealing fire from the gods.

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