

*Egmont* Overture, op. 84—Ludwig van Beethoven

Beethoven wrote almost a dozen overtures, the most famous, of course, being the four that are connected with his only opera, *Fidelio*. Some are awful, like *Wellington's Victory*, and others are of the stellar quality that the composer's name evokes. Without doubt, in the forefront of the latter group is the *Egmont* overture from 1809-10. It is a commonplace of the history of the arts that some artists create a deep reflection of their times and circumstances (to the delight of *aficionati* who prize personality), while other artists are able to pursue their art in an Olympian detachment from personal circumstances. Beethoven unquestionably could work in the latter fashion, and the Overture to *Egmont* fits the bill.

Vienna was in turmoil during the summer of 1809, owing to the occupation of Napoleon's army, and the state of the economy and currency values added to everyone's distress. Beethoven—always concerned with money—took it all with difficulty, but was able to put it aside and compose some of his most important works. Completion of the “Lebewohl” piano sonata and the “Harp” string quartet, as well as initial work on the “Emperor” piano concerto date from that summer, and so does the composition of *Egmont*. That being said, it is not difficult to draw the conclusion that much of the storm and triumph of the overture stems from the anxiety over the French invasion.

Beethoven was a great admirer of Goethe, and was commissioned to provide incidental music for a performance of his play about the heroic death of Count Egmont in the fight to liberate the Netherlands from Spanish rule. He finished the commission in June 1810, providing an overture and other appropriate music, lasting in all about forty minutes. The overture, in best Beethovenian fashion commences with somber gravity, a vigorous “working out” of his melodic materials in the middle section, and concludes with triumphant victory—arguably of good over evil, owing to the heroic strife of the individual.

*Songs of a Wayfarer*—Gustav Mahler

Gustav Mahler's excruciating beautiful music is laden with the melancholy and presentiment of hopelessness that often infused late nineteenth-century Romanticism. His large-scale symphonic works often require large numbers of performers (in great variety), and can challenge the endurance of the audience, as well as that of the players. More recognized in his time as conductor than as composer, he assiduously composed in summers, while pursuing a strenuous conducting career that was brought to an early end by heart disease. He was married in 1902 to the famous--some would say infamous--and beautiful Alma Schindler, a woman almost twenty years his junior. They had two winsome daughters, one of whom, Maria (“Putzi”) died tragically at the age of four in 1907. It is said that Alma bitterly blamed him for tempting fate by writing his *Songs on the Deaths of Children*. Constant bickering with singers and the virulently anti-Semitic press in Vienna led Mahler to New York City in the same year, where he became a star conductor with the Metropolitan Opera. His success there led him to an appointment with the New York Philharmonic in 1909 as principal conductor--a rival of Toscanini.

Life was fulfilling, for he enjoyed working with the professionalism of the players there; but that year was marked not only by great success with the première of his Eighth Symphony, but by grief at the discovery of Alma's affair with the famous young architect, Walter Gropius of Bauhaus renown. She married the latter after Mahler's death, and later enjoyed a dalliance with the equally famous painter, Oskar Kokotchka, as well as with other artistic geniuses. Mahler was heartbroken, and even consulted Sigmund Freud. After one more season in New York Mahler's ill health forced his return to Europe, where he died of bacterial endocarditis in May of 1911.

Against this backdrop of personal stress and grief, Mahler seems today to be the perfect creator of intense, existentialist reflections on the banal duality, yet transcendent, nature of human existence. His personal--and to my mind it is uniquely so--rumination on life's meaning can be somewhat prolix and repetitive at the symphonic level, or penetratingly aphoristic in his songs.

While the nine completed symphonies—expansive, not only in length, but in artistic import, as well—naturally tend to loom supreme in Mahler's historical legacy, his songs inform them as with no other symphonist. Moreover, his songs reflect the essence of his whole artistic soul; it is in them that the composer is most directly and authentically understood. Igor Stravinsky once observed that the short, concentrated works of the composer, Anton von Webern, were like “dazzling diamonds.” And so are Mahler's songs. The first four symphonies are specifically related to his *Lieder* in tone and thematic content, and of no other significant composer may one posit this close connection. His mastery of scoring for orchestra is reflected in his preference for writing songs with orchestral accompaniment, as well as including the voice in various symphonies. In addition to various other songs, he composed several significant collections of orchestral *Lieder*: *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, *Rückert-Lieder*, *Kindertotenlieder*, and *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Wayfarer).

The latter group of four songs was the early work, composed in 1884-1885, when he was in his mid-twenties. At the time he was early in his career as an opera conductor—in Kassel, Germany—and was passionately in love with one of his sopranos, Judith Richter. In the heat of his ardor—doomed, of course--he wrote a group of poems, and subsequently set four of them for voice and orchestra.

Although Mahler wrote the texts, they bear a connection to a large collection of German romantic poetry, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Boy's Magic Horn), a favorite reading for Mahler. He later set some two dozen of the poems, and incorporated some into three of his early symphonies. The conceit of the four Wayfarer poems as a cycle is not unlike that of Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin*—a young journeyman traveling along, musing over the many reflections of his beloved—in this case, a lost one.

The first song, “Wenn mein Schatz Hochzeit macht” (“When My Sweetheart is Married”), is directly “derived” from one of the poems from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. The contemplation of nature as respite from the darkness of human existence is central to Mahler's art. Here, the opening, simple folk-like lament over her marriage to someone else is contrasted in the central section with a turn to nature—replete with birdcalls—as solace. But the bleakness of the beginning returns at the end: songs and thoughts of nature end, and the young man goes to sleep only with the thoughts of his sorrow.

“Ging heut' Morgen über's Feld” (“I Went This Morning over the Field”) is in a much more optimistic mood, lightly scored, and reflects humankind's universal turn to

contemplation of the beauties of nature when faced with the realities of personal despair. A finch chirps for him, the bluebells cheer him, and the sunshine beams. Again, Mahler turns to his characteristic evocation of simple, folk-like textures for this perspective. But, of course, despair returns.

In the third movement, that despair reigns supreme. He thinks of the “knife in his breast” driven by his lost love; he sees her blue eyes in the sky, her hair in the golden fields, and so forth. And his corpse lies on a black bier. It’s not a good picture.

The last song, "Die zwei blauen Augen von meinem Schatz" ("The Two Blue Eyes of my Beloved"), brings acceptance of the finality of the sorrow of his lost love. It begins in abject contemplation of a life of eternal sorrow. But, in typical German romantic fashion, a brief nap under a linden tree, and a snowstorm of its blossoms, brings resolution (death?), or at least acceptance. However, one of the composer’s characteristic funeral marches tells us the truth.

“I am lost to the world” (“Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen”)—Mahler

As we all know, the world changed in permanent and profound ways shortly after Mahler’s death. In most respects the cataclysm of World War I was the turning point of modern history--all that was before passed away, and the horrors of the ensuing times began. Mahler’s introspection seems to understand that the “Guns of August” were near. His life’s epitaph perhaps is best heard in his poignant song, *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen*. It is one of his last works, and part of the group of *Rückert-Lieder*, after the poet, Friedrich Rückert, who not only wrote the poetry for this group of five songs, but also for Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder* (“Songs on the Deaths of Children”). They were given their première in Vienna in January of 1905.

This is a special song, considered by most to be perhaps one of the composer’s most intimate and personal expressions of the intensity of his love affair with life, and the tragedies that it dealt him. He has done his best, and now drifts into eternity. Serenely and acceptingly his soul departs the world and its tragedies . . .

*. . . I am dead to the bustle of the world  
and repose in tranquil realms.  
I live alone in my heaven,  
in my love, in my song.*

Symphony No. 3 in E<sup>b</sup> Major (“Eroica”), op. 55--Beethoven

Beethoven’s first symphony has been called “a fitting farewell to the eighteenth century” and dates to 1800, eight years after his arrival in Vienna as a young composer. His second symphony was completed in 1802, the momentous year of his “Heiligenstadt Testament.” The latter document marked the turning point in Beethoven’s life. It was an anguished letter (never sent, however) to his brothers in which he acknowledged the tragedy and despair of his increasing deafness, but it also revealed his resolution to not

end it all, but to live for his art. Both symphonies contain few, if any hints, of not only this personal crisis, but for that matter, of the enormous musical changes in the nature of musical composition that he was about to impose upon the world.

His third symphony was simply unprecedented; it was a watershed composition whose import to those who followed was similar to that of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. It changed forever what one expected of a symphony—in length, in complexity, in dramatic expression, in creativity, and in thematic treatment. It marks the beginning of the symphony's place as the highest aspiration of serious instrumental music throughout the nineteenth century and for much of the twentieth. Written during the years 1803-04, it was given its première (private) in 1804 at the palace of his patron, Prince Lobkowitz. Initial critical reaction was favorable, but did acknowledge that the work challenged listeners to abandon simple expectations of entertainment, and to enter the world of critical appreciation. The "Eroica," following its name, is truly heroic in many dimensions. In terms of the music, itself, it simply essayed more, achieved more, and marked out a bold new path for symphonic composition. It is also a work—although elements of a personal heroic intensity had appeared earlier in his piano sonatas—that became the norm for the spiritual tone of the composer's mature works--the Beethoven that we know so well. Finally, the "Eroica" is completely the child of its times. The French Revolution only a decade before had changed European history in a cataclysmic upheaval that was both political and philosophic. Change and the expectancy of change had been wrought by heroic action and thought, and Beethoven was keenly reactive to it. In a well-known anecdote, he furiously ripped Napoleon's name from the dedication page after the latter betrayed his republican ideals and named himself emperor.

The first movement begins simply with two hammer strokes in the tonic key, and the familiar—and simple--main theme ensues in the 'cellos, pausing famously and enigmatically on the strange C# in the fifth measure. This note is a harbinger of marvelous things to come, as the composer sets up an adroit manipulation of themes, fragments of themes, and motives. There are not just two main themes in the conventional fashion, but a literal embarrassment of riches. Beethoven cunningly hints at their significance and works them in and out of each other in a fashion that is redolent of a murder mystery in which only at the end are the logical relationships really clear. Powerful climaxes are contrasted with lyrical moments; driving rhythms are punctuated with displaced accents; and the whole is carried by a tight structure that evokes a sense of inevitability to everything that happens. It's a long movement—longer than most complete, four-movement symphonies up until that time.

The second movement is unique—it's not the usual slow movement that often is a placid retreat from the storm of the faster movements. Rather, Beethoven borrows a bit of the heroic spirit of the French composers of the time, and casts this movement as a funeral march. French composers such as Gossec, Mehúl, and Cherubini had often served up these dark marches as requisite patriotic music for the large civic ceremonies of the time, and these works of apotheosis served admirably as models for Beethoven's creation of tragedy in this movement. The main theme is long, and its generally despairing mood is broken by moments of optimism and hope. Beethoven, being Beethoven, cannot resist a later fugal development of the theme. But the despair is clear at the end, as the movement literally concludes with a halting, fragmentary disintegration

of the theme into nothingness. This movement publicly has marked the demise of notables from Toscanini and FDR to that of Adolf Hitler.

The scherzo of the third movement is a rollicking, good-natured affair. Especially ingratiating are the little overlapping fanfare-like figures played by the horns in the middle section. Most composers before Beethoven had contented themselves with only two French horns, but Beethoven's ideas needed three of them, so the symphony orchestra's growth in instrumental forces begins.

The last movement, as you may imagine, brings on more innovations. For most of symphonies up until that time, final movements had served as a merry cap to the proceedings, with little of the import of the earlier movements. Beethoven writes as a *finale* for this powerful symphony a series of variations on a simple little tune and its bass line that is a *tour de force* of creativity. We hear the bass line first, probably thinking: "That's the theme!" The composer gives us a couple of variations on it, and then over the third variation, the "real" theme appears as a melody over the bass line that appeared to be the first theme. More variations ensue, each with its own character, followed by a marvelous fugal development of the bass theme in the eighth variation—Beethoven pulls out every trick as the little bass line is almost "developed out of existence." Next comes a gentle statement of the melody by the winds in a beautiful, slow iteration that is incomparable. The full orchestra then triumphantly takes the last variation, uniting bass and melody. Beethoven, of course, is not finished, and a coda with more development—it's Beethoven, remember—takes us to the smashing climax.

--Wm. E. Runyan

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