

*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 aficionados 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.

*Adagietto* from Symphony No. 5—Gustav Mahler

Gustav Mahler's excruciatingly 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. 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 dual nature of human existence, banal, yet transcendent. 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.

What is perhaps Mahler's most well known music is the famous "*Adagietto*." It is an added (fourth) movement in his expansive, fifth symphony, and gained worldwide fame for its ubiquitous use in the film, *Death in Venice* (1971), and in innumerable other places. Simply put, it's an intense love offering to Alma, written in the summer of 1902, right after their marriage. He worshiped her, and it shows eloquently here, almost painfully so--especially considering the checkered relationship that plagued them almost from beginning to end. He met her while she was having an affair with her music composition teacher, Alexander Zemlinsky, and he died while she was in the notorious, semi-public affair with Gropius. Mahler's letters to her, his anguished notations in his musical scores--they're almost embarrassing-- are a testimony to his long-suffering devotion to her. But, in the moment there was happiness, even if he exaggerated it in his mind. Not only newlywed bliss, but also incredible beauty--all in the music. After his death she blithely went on to collect serially other geniuses as her lovers. If the purity of the love he expressed was only in his mind, well, irony was Mahler's middle name.

Symphony No. 3 in E-flat 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, Mehül, 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.