

## PROGRAM NOTES

October 8 and 9, 2016

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

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born in Bonn, baptized December 17, 1770

Died March 26, 1827 in Vienna

Last performed January 30/31, 1988

Beethoven put aside work on his Second Symphony in 1800 when he received an important and unexpected commission for a ballet designed by the famous ballet master Salvatore Viganò, to be presented at the Burgtheater in Vienna. Beethoven was thrilled to be composing for the court stage and enthusiastically embraced the scenario of the Greek Prometheus myth, reinterpreted in the spirit of the Enlightenment. The Prometheus of myth is severely punished for stealing fire from the gods and giving it to humans. In the ballet he brings two statues to life and enlightens them with knowledge and art. Instead of depicting the prolonged martyrdom of Prometheus, the ballet presents his death, rebirth, and the subsequent celebration of his creatures, who begin to understand his heroism.

*The Creatures of Prometheus* opened on March 28, 1801, for 28 performances, a modest success compared to other ballets, but ironically, as pointed out by David Wyn Jones, the largest number of public performances of *any* of Beethoven's works in his lifetime. The ballet has hardly ever been revived, though Constantin Floros was able to reconstruct most of the choreography in the 1970's. Nor has Beethoven's complete music—an overture and 17 numbers—become a feature of concert programs. Had audiences remained familiar with the entire piece they would have recognized its importance to the *Eroica* Symphony: not only do the variations of the *Eroica* finale share the theme of the ballet's final section, but other movements borrow from the ballet as well. Like the more commonly cited Symphony, the ballet plays an important role in Beethoven's self-proclaimed "new artistic path," in the symbolism of heroism, and in the composer's struggle against his own physical suffering from increasing deafness.

Only the Overture has survived in the concert hall. Setting the scene rather than previewing all the events of the story, the Overture focuses on the ballet's concluding section, from which it draws its effervescent main theme and possibly its contrasting second theme from certain triadic motives. Connections to the First Symphony might also be perceived in the opening chord of the solemn introduction and the configuration of the first and second themes. As with many overtures in sonata form, Beethoven skirts a real development, offering elaborated material to close the exposition and a brilliant coda.

## Concerto for Violin, Cello, and Piano in C Major, Op. 56, “Triple”

Ludwig van Beethoven

Last performed November 6/7, 1993 with the Meadowmount Trio

Beethoven’s Triple Concerto occupies a unique position in the history of music as the first concerto for violin, cello, piano, and orchestra, and as the only one that has entered into the standard repertoire. Previous concertos that had employed more than one solo instrument—Baroque concerti grossi or works in the *sinfonia concertante* genre by Mozart, J. C. Bach and Haydn—typically employed a more homogeneous combination of solo instruments. Beethoven recognized his accomplishment only casually in billing the Concerto as a novelty to publisher Breitkopf & Härtel in 1804. Though Beethoven’s Triple Concerto spawned later examples by Emanuel Moor, Paul Juon, Alexander Tcherepnin and Alfredo Casella, none has surpassed or even equaled Beethoven’s.

According to Beethoven’s first biographer Anton Schindler, who presumably learned the details from Beethoven himself, the piano part of the Triple Concerto was composed for Archduke Rudolph, the violin part for Carl Seidler, and the cello part for Anton Kraft (formerly associated with Haydn at Esterháza). The 16 year-old Archduke became Beethoven’s piano student in the winter of 1803–1804, and Beethoven’s brother Carl offered the barely begun Concerto to Breitkopf & Härtel on October 14, 1803. Though there is little reason to doubt Schindler, questions have arisen concerning when Beethoven became acquainted with the Archduke. In any case, sketches show that Beethoven wrote the first theme while working on the *Eroica* Symphony in 1803 and most of the remainder of the of the Concerto in the spring of 1804 amid work on the *Waldstein* and *Appassionata* Sonatas and the opera *Fidelio*.

Beethoven offered the Concerto to Breitkopf & Härtel again in August and October 1804, but was turned down each time. The Concerto was finally published in 1808 by the Bureau des Arts et d’Industrie. By that time Beethoven must have felt he needed to please Prince Lobkowitz, for the dedication went to him rather than to Archduke Rudolph. Most commentaries give the date of the first performance as May 1808 at one of the Augarten (outdoor) concerts in Vienna, but the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* reviewed a performance that took place in Leipzig before Easter that year by pianist Elisabeth Catharina Müller, violinist Heinrich Mattäi, and cellist J.J.F. Dotzauer. The work was favorably received then in contrast to the May performance, which according to Schindler won no applause.

Beethoven’s work stands out for its solution of seemingly insurmountable problems: that of the balance between the three solo instruments and the orchestra, particularly with regard to the darker hue of the cello, and that of formal proportions—that is, how to proceed without making the work too long when, to be a true triple concerto, each instrument as well as the orchestra should play each theme. The composer met the first of these challenges by having the cello play most of the time in its highest and brightest register and by having it lead off with the majority of the main themes.

Beethoven solved the second problem on the broadest level simply by allowing himself more space. He had entered a new heroic phase—as exemplified by the new broad proportions of the *Eroica*—and let his scale expand to accommodate all the protagonists, particularly in the first movement. Nevertheless, a great deal of ingenuity was required not to expand beyond manageability. He began by crafting relatively brief and simple themes so as to allow more time for elaboration. Furthermore, he offered a condensed second movement, having the cello join the

orchestra in its opening theme and truncating the form to lead directly into the finale. The Rondo alla Polacca also dispenses with a purely orchestral opening.

The quiet, mysterious entrance of the main theme of the first movement suggests great things to come. Its prominent dotted rhythms and subsequent grand crescendo further demonstrate Beethoven's heroic phase. The second theme also depends on dotted rhythms, but with much different effect. In the solo trio's exposition Beethoven gives this theme a special radiance by modulating to A major, the submediant key. With full-scale development, recapitulation and coda, Beethoven felt no need for a cadenza in this movement.

The Largo, in the warm key of A-flat major, sounds like the broad opening of a substantial slow movement—a lovely cello theme, followed by a varied restatement in the winds with piano decoration, and a further statement in which the violin takes the lead. Dramatic chords and portentous solo arpeggios, however, do not lead to a contrasting section. Instead we realize that all the foregoing has served as an introduction to the finale.

The closing movement is a rondo in the style of a polonaise, a characteristic Polish dance in triple meter familiar to the Viennese at the time, but which Beethoven used only rarely. In the central episode the solo violin initiates a particularly energetic display of the polonaise rhythm. The rondo refrain itself is especially charming for its harmonic shift C major to E major and back again. Just before the closing statement of the main theme Beethoven inserts a whirlwind section in duple meter, in which the polonaise rhythm is smoothed out and which culminates in a cadenza-like passage for the soloists. Beethoven brings his polonaise theme back in the original triple meter to close the movement majestically.

## Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Op. 55, “Eroica”

Ludwig van Beethoven

Last performed February 21/22, 2009

In scope and form Beethoven’s Third Symphony was unprecedented. Considerably longer than either of his previous symphonies, it abounds with radical strokes and architectural originalities that influenced the course of music history. Beethoven’s *Eroica* sketchbook shows a certainty of conception; most of his innovative ideas were present at the outset.

The famous—and authenticated—story of Beethoven’s destruction of the dedication to Napoleon Bonaparte, whom he had admired as First Consul, was reported by Ferdinand Ries, Beethoven’s friend, pupil and biographer:

I was the first to bring him the intelligence that Buonaparte had proclaimed himself Emperor, whereupon he flew into a rage and cried out: “Is he then, too, nothing more than an ordinary human being? Now he, too, will trample on the rights of man and indulge only his ambition. He will exalt himself above all others, become a tyrant!” Beethoven went to the table, took hold of the title page by the top, tore it in two, and threw it on the floor. The first page was rewritten and only then did the Symphony receive the title *Sinfonia Eroica*.

When the work was published in 1806 the title page read “Sinfonia Eroica, Composed to Celebrate the Memory of a Great Man.”

Beethoven scholar Anthony Hopkins suggests the intriguing possibility that originally the Symphony’s hero was not Napoleon but the legendary Prometheus, bringer of fire from Heaven—a significant part of Beethoven’s ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus* (1800) reappears in the *Eroica* finale. Others have suggested Beethoven himself as the hero, or that Beethoven may have seized an opportunity to honor Napoleon in view of a projected visit to France. Hopkins also proposes that perhaps the Funeral March was for the *Austrian dead* defeated by Napoleon in 1800, then the “great man” would have been “the Unknown Warrior” standing for all heroes killed in battle.

Whether or not the *Eroica* has an identified hero, expressing heroism in music was particularly important to Beethoven at this period: the *Waldstein* Sonata composed just after the major effort on the Symphony in 1803 evokes a similar spirit, as do the *Appassionata* Sonata and the three *Razumovsky* Quartets. Beethoven’s heroic music strives for and achieves something more exalted than perhaps any other composer’s.

In the sketches, the opening chords were not the arresting E-flat ones that launch the epic first movement; the opening subject, however, with its dramatic harmonic turn, was firmly fixed from the start. The vast development section contains much new material including a theme in the remote key of E minor, later to figure prominently in the substantial coda. The end of the development contains the sensational entrance of the horn anticipating the main theme in the tonic while the violins are still outlining the dominant. The effect of this dissonant clash was marred for Beethoven at the first rehearsal when the ever helpful Ries piped up, “Can’t the damn hornist count?—it sounds infamously false!” for which he almost received a box on the ear.

The Funeral March, one of the most famous in all music, is of heroic proportions. Its

large scale is dictated by the prolonged unfolding of the solemn main theme in two sections, each repeated. Beethoven's dramatic plan provides episodes with rays of hope or triumph, only to be banished by returns of the mournful main theme. Beethoven was very conscious of the emotional power of silences—the sobbing fragmentation of the theme at the end is a particularly poignant example.

The Scherzo is truly imaginative with its extended pianissimo staccato opening; salient melodic features of the theme are tossed out in various keys—the home key is saved for the sudden fortissimo 93 bars into the piece. The *Eroica* is one of the few orchestral works in the standard repertoire that is scored for *three* horns instead of two or four. In the trio of the Scherzo Beethoven shows them off to advantage, fully exploiting the capabilities of the natural horn of the period.

The structure of the Finale is unique. It is neither theme and variations, sonata, nor rondo, but a compelling mixture of the three. Beethoven had used the main theme three times before: in his German Country Dances, in the finale of his *Prometheus* ballet, and most extensively in his Piano Variations, Op. 35. The opening shows Beethoven's sense of humor: after a flourish fiery enough to introduce any hero, Beethoven presents just the bass of the theme in soft pizzicato. After variations on the bass, the “tune” finally sails in.

Beethoven eventually dedicated the *Eroica* to his enthusiastic patron Prince Lobkowitz, who called for the entire work to be encored twice at a private concert that Beethoven conducted at the Lobkowitz palace. After the first public performance on April 7, 1805, detractors complained of its length and chaotic form. Czerny reported that “somebody in the gallery cried out: ‘I’ll give another kreutzer if the thing will but stop!’” There were, however, many enthusiastic reviewers including the following who wrote: “There was no doubt in anybody’s mind that we were present at the unveiling of one of the great monuments of our age.” Beethoven was later asked by the poet Christoff Kuffner which of his symphonies was his favorite. Eight had been composed at this point. “Eh, eh!” replied Beethoven, “the *Eroica*.”

“I should have guessed the C minor [Fifth],” said the poet.

“No,” insisted Beethoven, “the *Eroica*.”

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