

Program notes: Beethoven Egmont Overture

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN 1770-1827

Egmont Overture, Op. 84

Throughout Beethoven's lifetime Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was the leading literary figure in German-speaking Europe. The relationship between Beethoven and Goethe dates from 1809, when Beethoven was commissioned to write incidental music for a new production of Goethe's play Egmont. At first, the two corresponded through a mutual friend, but they eventually met in person in July of 1812. Although known to be mutual admirers, it is evident from their own descriptions of that meeting that their personalities clashed. In a letter to a friend written a few months later, Goethe stated: "Beethoven's talent amazed me. However, unfortunately, he is an utterly untamed personality; he is not altogether wrong in holding the world detestable, but surely does not make it more enjoyable for himself or others by his attitude."

Beethoven's own impressions were no more complimentary. In a letter to his publisher, he noted that: "Goethe delights far too much in the court atmosphere - far more than is becoming in a poet."

The play is set in Brussels during the sixteenth century, when the Netherlands lay under Spanish occupation. The Duke of Alba, King Philip II of Spain's representative, has the local resistance leader, Count Egmont, imprisoned and condemned to death, after which his grief-stricken wife takes her own life. The night before Egmont's execution, she appears to him in a dream, transformed into the goddess of freedom. She foretells that his death will inspire his countrymen first to rebellion, then to the re-establishment of their liberty. Heartened by this vision, Egmont is able to face his execution with courage and dignity.

The overture is in F minor, a rare key for Beethoven, and to some extent acts as a outline of the drama itself. The somber slow introduction, with block chords and dotted rhythm, leads smoothly into the body of the movement, a triple-meter Allegro, in which the main theme is characterized by an offbeat accent in the upper strings and a descending line. A stormy transition leads to the second theme, a major-key transformation of the overture's opening material, following which the brief development section is entirely concerned with elaborating on the components of the main theme. Rather than a conventional coda, Beethoven ends with entirely new material in F major (4/4, Allegro con brio).

This exhilarating music is used again at the end of the drama, as Egmont climbs the scaffold to his death. In commissioning the music for Egmont, Goethe specified that this moment should not be a lament, but rather a 'Symphony of Victory.'

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