

Beethoven's Egmont Overture was composed in 1809-10 as part of incidental music for a production of Goethe's play, written several decades earlier. The play, set in the Netherlands during the sixteenth century, concerns that country's struggle for independence from Spain. Included in the ten movements are entr'actes, songs to be sung by the lead actress, and a concluding "victory symphony" that uses the same music as the overture's coda. Even though the rest of the music is rarely performed, the overture has become a concert staple. Its careful craftsmanship is typical of Beethoven's best work. He skillfully traces a shape in time by developing simple materials. For example, after the opening held note, the strings sound a series of darkly ominous chords in F minor. These present a rhythmic pattern that may be roughly described as long-long-short-long-long. The pattern returns in the second theme of the allegro section, now in A-flat major and twice as fast. Finally, just before the coda's bright F major, the pattern recurs allegro in the horns and bassoons, transformed into a call to arms.