

One of the enduring features of Beethoven scholarship is the division of his life and works into three style periods, a methodology proposed shortly after the composer's death and popularized by Wilhelm von Lenz in 1852 in a book titled *Beethoven et ses trois styles*. The first period (“classical”) is said to have extended to around 1802, the second (“heroic”) to around 1814, and the third (“introspective”) to 1827, the year of Beethoven's death. Though musicologists have disagreed on many details of the traditional three-part schema, it has stuck because it provides a useful framework for assessing the development of Beethoven's art over time. Each period is characterized by aspects of his musical style, responses to his circumstances and relationships, changes in his emotional development, and milestones in the progress of his career as a composer.

The point is worth stressing here because, in his music for the ballet *Creatures of Prometheus*, composed in 1801, we find a young, late-first-period Beethoven willing to labor over a musical genre that imposed strict limitations on his imagination. Until much later in the nineteenth century, music for ballet normally consisted of pastiches of preexisting works adapted to the physical motions of dance. Apart from overtures and other incidental items, it allowed virtually no room for musical creativity. (This is why full-length ballets by major composers are relatively rare. The next after Beethoven was Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, which dated from 1875.) Beethoven's reasons for undertaking the project are clear from his circumstances. In 1792, at age 22, he had moved from his native Bonn to Vienna, where he soon made a name for himself as a pianist and composer of works in which the piano featured prominently. But as the decade drew to a close, he had yet to prove himself in composing works for the stage, an important rite of passage in the Vienna of his day. Thus, when the opportunity arose in 1800 to impress the imperial court with music for a full-length stage work—even a ballet—he took it, partly because his collaborator was to be Salvatore Viganò, considered the greatest choreographer of his time. The resulting work was completed in 1801 and first performed in March of that year at the Vienna Hofburgtheater. During 1801 and 1802 it was performed twenty-nine times, an excellent run. It also accomplished Beethoven's purpose by leading directly to a commission for his opera *Fidelio*.

Viganò's immediate source for the Prometheus legend was a novella by Anne-Gabriel Meusnier de Querlon titled *Les hommes de Prométhée* (London 1748). In Querlon's version, Prometheus brings to life stone figures of a man and woman; they marvel at the beauties of nature and fall in love. The following synopsis, provided in the 1802 playbill, shows how Viganò adapted Querlon's story:

*The basis of this allegorical ballet is the fable of Prometheus. The Greek philosophers, by whom he was known, explain the essence of the fable in this way: they describe him as a sublime spirit, who came upon the men of his time in a state of ignorance, who refined them through science and art, and imparted to them morals. Proceeding from this basis, in the present ballet two statues appear coming to life, and they are made responsive to all the passions of human life through the power of harmony. Prometheus leads them to Parnassus so that they may be taught by Apollo, the god of the fine arts. Apollo commands that Amphion, Arion, and Orpheus make music known to them, that Melpomene and Thalia make tragedy and comedy known, that Terpsichore and Pan make shepherd dances (invented by Pan) known, and that Bacchus make the heroic dance that he invented known.*

Viennese audiences of the period would have immediately picked up on the Enlightenment theme that runs through Viganò's version of the story. His is not the Prometheus of antiquity – the defiant titan, punished by Zeus for giving fire to mankind – but a philosopher and teacher who imparts knowledge and reason.

Beethoven's music comprises an overture, and introduction, and sixteen “scenes.” He seems not to have been especially proud of the final work, at least as a stage production. In a letter to the publisher Hofmeister, he blamed Viganò for its weaknesses: “I have made a ballet, but the master of the ballet has not exactly executed it for the best.” Beethoven did, however, like the music well enough to use the overture as a concert opener and to reuse certain themes in later works. Two themes from the finale formed the basis of numbers 7 and 11 of his 12 *German*

*Dances* (1802). One also formed the basis of a set of piano variations (Op. 35) and the finale of the *Eroica* Symphony. Echoes of the *Prometheus* music can be heard in the slow movement of the Second Symphony and in the storm and pastoral scenes of the Sixth Symphony (“Pastorale”). The overture, the only item in the work to remain in the concert repertory, is Mozartian, with rapid figurations in the strings and light scoring for the winds.

*Program notes by Mark Whitney*