

LaGrange Symphony Program Notes – “A Bright Future” November 2, 2010

Beethoven: *Egmont* Overture, op. 84

In 1788, one year prior to the French revolution, the esteemed German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe produced a new play telling of the historical Count Egmont, a Flemish patriot of the mid-sixteenth century, a time when the Low Countries lay under the rule of Spain's King Philip II. Egmont's instigation of Flemish rebellion drew the anger of the king, who ordered the count's imprisonment and execution. Yet even in death, Egmont inspired the Flemings to continue their fight for independence. Goethe's dramatic telling of the tale was such a success that two decades later, in 1809, it was revived for a new production, and at this time, the play's producer invited Beethoven to provide accompanying music. Beethoven set to work at once, and eventually produced ten musical numbers to accompany the play. In addition to the well-known overture, there were also four entr'actes (music between scenes), two songs for the leading lady, and three other numbers. With its new musical score, the play was staged in Vienna late in the spring of 1810.

That the composer thought highly of his work is proven by two of his own letters. When he submitted the score to his publisher Breitkopf and Härtel, he demanded a high fee of 1400 gulden, specifying that the payment should be "in silver money," adding "I cannot accept anything else without being a loser." Additional proof of his confidence is found in the fact that he bothered to send the music to Goethe himself. "You will shortly receive," he wrote, "the music for *Egmont*; that glorious *Egmont* which through you I have considered, felt and set to music with the same warm emotions as I experienced when I read it." It would have been Goethe's first glimpse of the score, and his first hearing, as he had not attended the Viennese production. Yet he was content with the composer's effort, remarking, "Beethoven has followed my intentions with admirable genius."

Mozart: Bassoon Concerto in B-flat, K. 191

All too frequently, the bassoon is the Rodney Dangerfield of the orchestra: the instrument that gets no respect. Even in its best-known appearance, the bassoon is presented in a less than complimentary fashion, for in *Peter and the Wolf*, violins are cast as the hero, whereas the bassoon is relegated to the role of grumpy grandfather. This lowly public image seems to be of recent occurrence, for in earlier eras, the bassoon stood in rather higher regard. Hundreds of bassoon concertos date from the Baroque Era; Vivaldi alone wrote nearly forty. Handel requested a full dozen bassoons for his *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, and throughout the era, the bassoon was valued for the role it played in the continuo parts that served as the foundation for virtually every composition. Classical Era composers, too, found a place for bassoons, though usually as part of the orchestra, not as soloists. Of the master composers of the last half of the eighteenth century, only Mozart composed a showpiece for the instrument.

His Bassoon Concerto, written in Salzburg, was completed June 4, 1774, making it not only Mozart's first concerto for a wind instrument, but also his first concerto for any instrument other than the piano. Piano concertos came first because Mozart played the piano and needed compositions to showcase his skill. His only reason for writing a bassoon concerto was that he had a commission from an amateur bassoonist, the Baron Thaddeus von Dürnitz. For this same patron, Mozart also completed a bassoon and cello sonata, and a piano sonata; evidence suggests that, in fact, there may have been a total of three bassoon concerti for Dürnitz, two of which have now vanished. Yet whatever the true total number of Dürnitz commissions completed by Mozart, the fact remains that none of them earned him a single gulden. Dürnitz never paid for any of the works he received, a fact belied by the jolly character of this effusive composition.

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| I. | Allegro | [Fast] |
| II. | Andante ma adagio | [Moderate but slow] |

III. Rondo: Tempo di menuetto [Rondo: Tempo of a minuet]
Tchaikovsky: Violin Concerto in D, op. 35

In the spring of 1878, Tchaikovsky was in Clarens, Switzerland on the shores of Lake Geneva in the midst of a working vacation. Soon after his arrival, he received a visitor from home, the violinist Yosif Kotek, a former student of Tchaikovsky's at the Moscow Conservatory. Being very fond of the young man, Tchaikovsky immediately set aside the piano sonata with which he was engaged to begin a violin concerto that could serve the dual purpose of celebrating Kotek's skill while also giving Tchaikovsky an outlet for his feelings.

Within eleven days, the sketches were complete. Then, Tchaikovsky decided to redo the slow movement and produced a replacement in a single day. The process of orchestration followed with equal dispatch; from beginning to end, the Violin Concerto had required less than a month of effort. So far, the path had been smooth, but it was with the work's completion that trouble arose, for a new work requires a premiere, and Kotek was too little known to do the honors himself. Thus, Tchaikovsky chose to dedicate the work to the renowned soloist Leopold Auer, only to find to his horror that Auer refused to perform it, rejecting it as "unviolinistic." A premiere scheduled for March 1879 had to be cancelled for lack of a soloist. Other violinists also turned Tchaikovsky down before he finally persuaded Adolph Brodsky to premiere the work in Vienna in December 4, 1881.

By most accounts, Brodsky performed well, but the composition itself was less fortunate, attracting the disdain of Eduard Hanslick, the most influential of Viennese critics, whose infamous review reads, in part, as follows: "The Russian composer Tchaikovsky is surely not an ordinary talent, but rather an inflated one, with a genius-obsession without discrimination or taste. Such is also his latest, long and pretentious Violin Concerto. For a while it moves soberly, musically, and not without spirit. But soon vulgarity gains the upper hand, and asserts itself to the end.... The violin is no longer played; it is beaten black and blue.... Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto gives us for the first time the hideous notion that there can be music that stinks to the ear."

In Hanslick's defense, he would later have far kinder things to say about Tchaikovsky's Pathétique Symphony, but that concession would be after the composer's death. For now, a deeply wounded Tchaikovsky had to face the failure of a major composition. Refusing to blame Brodsky for the debacle, he thanked his colleague for championing the piece, changed the Concerto's dedication from Auer to Brodsky, and chalked it all up to experience. He went on to score great triumphs in the realm of symphony, opera and ballet. Before long, many of his former enemies were repenting their earlier attacks. Even Leopold Auer came to praise Tchaikovsky, confessing in the final year of the composer's life that he had misjudged the Concerto and belatedly adding it to his repertoire. A late victory is better than no victory at all.

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| I. | Allegro moderato – Moderato assai | [Moderately fast – Very moderate] |
| II. | Canzonetta: Andante – attacca | [Moderate – straight to next movement] |
| III. | Finale: Allegro vivacissimo | [Finale: Fast and very lively] |

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