

## PROGRAM NOTES

by Charles P. Conrad, DMA © 2011

### **Egmont Overture, Op. 84 (1810)**

*Ludwig van Beethoven, born December 16, 1770 at Bonn; died March 27, 1827 at Vienna.*

Beethoven's *Egmont Overture* is one of ten pieces of music that were written in 1809 as incidental music to a 1787 play by famed German author Johann Wilhelm von Goethe (1749-1832). The play was a setting of the writings of Friedrich von Schiller, who provided the famous *Ode to Joy* used by Beethoven in his ninth symphony. Lamoral van Egmont was a Dutch count who resisted the Spanish Inquisition, and was sentenced to death by the Spanish governor of the Netherlands. He was beheaded in the marketplace of Brussels on June 5, 1568, and his head was displayed on a pike. Although the Netherlands' independence from Spain was not fully secured until the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, Egmont was hailed as one of the heroes of the struggle against the oppressive Spanish regime.

Vienna was invaded by the French army of Napoleon on four occasions in the first decade of the 19th century, so the local population was enthusiastic about performances of plays that referenced resistance to an aggressor. Joseph Hartl, manager of the Court Theater, scheduled two such works and commissioned local composers to provide new incidental music. Schiller's drama *William Tell* was assigned to Adalbert Gyrowetz (1763-1850), a prolific Bohemian composer who wrote two dozen operas and more than 60 each of symphonies and string quartets. Beethoven was very happy with the assignment of Egmont, as he was an admirer of Goethe and he had lost his respect for Napoleon when the French military leader declared himself Emperor shortly after Beethoven wrote his Symphony No. 3 ("Eroica").

The work is cast in the dark and somber key of F Minor, which is not a key that Beethoven used often. A stark unison opens the overture, and is followed by a series of full chords that introduces the triple meter first theme in the woodwinds. The music builds to a staggering climax with the full orchestra repeating the minor chords, and this buildup is followed by a two-note descending gesture in the violins that ends in silence – surely this is the composer's description of the fatal sword stroke. A soft woodwind chorale ensues, and then begins the heroic finale in F Major and now in 4/4 meter. The overture ends with a huge splash of trumpets and timpani, as well as one of the early highlight moments in the orchestral repertoire for the piccolo. The *Egmont Overture* is scored for two flutes (second also playing piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. Its duration is about eight minutes.

### **Piano Concerto in A Major for Piano and Orchestra, K. 488 (1786)**

*Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, born January 27, 1756 at Salzburg; died December 5, 1791 at Vienna.*

Following his dismissal in Salzburg by Archbishop Colloredo late in 1781, the 25-year-old Mozart moved to Vienna and married Costanze Weber. Needing a stable income, which was not easily earned by a composer not connected with a court or the church, he set about writing piano concertos, which featured himself as soloist. In this way he could increase his earnings and attract piano students, as well as enhance his stature as a composer. He wrote many of his greatest works of this genre during his first few years in Vienna.

Piano Concerto No. 23 in A Major, K. 488, was completed on March 2, 1786, and was intended, along with two other concertos (No. 22 in E-Flat Major and No. 24 in C Minor), for performance during a series of Lenten concerts. The work's first movement is a *sonata allegro* that is typical in its form, but certainly unusual in its use of the accompanying forces. As is to be expected, the orchestra plays its exposition and is followed by the exposition with the soloist. Mozart breaks from the expectation with the extensive use of the wind section during the development – especially noteworthy is the substitution of clarinets for the oboes.

Mozart added clarinets in a second version of his famous Symphony No. 40 in G Minor, and early sketches indicate that he started tonight's work with oboes in mind. The second movement is one of Mozart's most remarkable concerto movements. It is set in the key of F-Sharp Minor, and in the rhythm of a *siciliano*. Here again Mozart features the woodwinds prominently. The flowing rhythms and the dark key give a poignancy that immediately draws the listener into the drama of the moment. The finale is a rousing *rondo* that is a complete departure from the previous mood, and the concerto ends in an enthusiastic and joyous spirit. The work is scored for piano solo, flute, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, and strings. Its duration is about 27 minutes.

### **Prelude à l'après-midi d'un faune (Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun) (1894)**

*Claude-Achille Debussy, born August 22, 1862 at Saint-Germain-en-Laye; died March 25, 1918 at Paris.*

Impressionism in painting preceded the similar movement in music by about 20 years. Both were born in France and had some similarities – the use of subtle colors and harmonies to eliminate distinct outlines and forms, the introduction of elements of the artistic expression of non-European cultures, and the use of smaller forms than those of the dominant artistic atmosphere of the time. Debussy was considered the first and the greatest of the impressionist composers, although it should be mentioned that he did not like that description of his works.

The first performance of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, conducted by Gustave Doret at the Société Nationale de Musique in Paris on December 12, 1894, was an important moment in the history of Western music. Critics, composers, and audience members responded to it immediately, both in glowing praise and derogatory pronouncements. Composer and conductor Pierre Boulez would say of the work, "The flute of the *Faun* has brought new breath to the art of music; what was overthrown was not so much the art of development as the very concept of form itself."

Debussy's work was based on the poem of Edward Mallarmé (1842-1898), one of the leaders in the French poetic equivalent of impressionism known as *symbolism*. The *faune* was a creature of Roman mythology – half man and half goat. The faune was human from the head to the waist, although a set of goat horns was added. The Greek version was a satyr that played a pan-flute known as the *syrix*. About two decades after this work, Debussy would compose what is likely the most famous of all unaccompanied works for flute solo – titled *Syrinx*. Famed choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky created a ballet to the piece that was extremely controversial because of its mimicked sexual activities.

There is speculation that the title of "Prelude" indicated that Debussy intended to write a multi-movement work in the fashion of his *Nocturnes* and *Images*, but this has never been verified. Debussy had this to say about the piece (quoted from Hélène Desgraupe's article *Les Poètes symbolistes et la musique*): "The music of this prelude is a very free illustration of Mallarmé's beautiful poem. By no means does it claim to be a synthesis of it. Rather, there is a succession of scenes through which pass the desires and dreams of the faun in the heat of the afternoon. Then, tired of pursuing the timorous flight of nymphs and naiads, he succumbs to intoxicating sleep, in which he can finally realize his dreams of possession of universal Nature."

The work is scored for three flutes, two oboes, English horn, two bassoons, four horns, harp, two crotales (tuned cymbals), and strings. Its duration is about 10 minutes.

### **Symphony No. 1 in D Major, Op. 25 ("Classical Symphony") (1917)**

*Sergei Sergeyevich Prokofiev, born April 11, 1891 at Sontsovka, Ukraine; died March 5, 1953 at Moscow.*

One would not expect the year 1917 to be a fertile time for musical composition in Europe, with the western portion of the continent embroiled in the "War to end all wars," and the Bolshevik Revolution making historic changes in Russia. It was, however, a busy year in the life of the 26-year-old Prokofiev, who wrote, in addition to tonight's work, the opera *Igor* (The Gambler), his first violin concerto, two piano sonatas, and a set of 20

piano pieces entitled *Mimoletnosti*. Prokofiev described the genesis of his first symphony in his 1948 autobiography: "I spent the summer of 1917 in complete solitude in the environs of Petrograd; I read Kant and worked hard. I had purposely not had any piano moved up to the country because I wanted to try composing without it...the idea occurred to me to compose an entire symphonic work without the piano. Composed in this fashion, the orchestral colors would be of necessity clearer and cleaner. Thus the plan of a symphony in Hay-dnesque style originated...Haydn's technique had somehow become especially clear to me, and with such intimate understanding, it was easier to plunge into the dangerous flood without the piano. It seems to me that if he were alive today, Haydn, while retaining his own style of composition, would have appropriated something from the modern. Such a symphony I now wanted to compose: a symphony in the classical manner. As it began to take on actual form, I named it *Classical Symphony*; first, because it was the simplest thing to call it; second, out of bravado, to stir up a hornet's nest; and finally, in the hope that should the symphony prove itself in time to be truly 'classic,' it would benefit me considerably."

It would be tempting to call Prokofiev's effort a beginning to the neoclassical movement in modern music, but that would probably be incorrect. His countryman Igor Stravinsky was the most significant devotee of this movement in the early 1920s, and Prokofiev's description of Stravinsky's neoclassic works (*Pulcinella*, Concerto for Piano and Winds, Octet, etc.) was "Bach with wrong notes." Haydn was the king of musical jokesters in the late classical era, and Prokofiev plays one of his own – the first movement is the expected *sonata-allegro* form, but the recapitulation (the return of the first theme following the development) is in the wrong key – C Major instead of D Major. This works itself out, and the music ends in D Major. Haydn surely would have approved!

Symphony No. 1 in D Major is scored for the expected classical period orchestra consisting of pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinet, bassoons, horns, trumpet, timpani, and strings. It is about half the length of a late Haydn symphony, at 15 minutes.