

BEETHOVEN

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Overture in F minor from the Stage Music to Goethe's *Egmont*, op. 84

The works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe have inspired whole generations of composers. What Beethoven found so fascinating about him he explained to his friend Bettina von Brentano during a walk in the grounds of Schönbrunn Palace on 27 May 1810. She reported Beethoven's words in a letter to Goethe written the following day: "Beethoven remained standing in the oppressively hot sun and said: 'Goethe's poems exert a great power over me not only by virtue of their content but also their rhythm; I am put in the right mood and stimulated to compose by this language, which builds itself into a higher order as if through spiritual agencies, and bears within itself the secret of harmony. Then burning enthusiasm drives me to cast forth melody in all directions. I pursue it, passionately recapture it, I see it fly away, disappear into a mass of differing impulses, then I grasp it again with renewed passion. I cannot separate myself from it, with hasty delight I must reproduce it through all modulations and at the last moment I triumph above the original musical idea, and behold: there is a symphony. Yes, music is truly the intermediary between the spiritual realm and the sensual. I would like to speak about this with Goethe, would he understand me?—Melody is the sensual life of poetry. Does not the spiritual content of a poem become sensual feeling through melody?'" Frau von Brentano, later von Arnim, must have possessed an excellent memory, but it is quite possible that she was intentionally playing the role of messenger and conveying to Goethe a text already formulated by Beethoven. The composer expressed himself here with an unusual and all-too-extreme candidness concerning his own experience of the creative process—an intimate, friendly gesture, perhaps, by the master tone poet towards the master poet. Goethe—who knew perfectly well how to say no when just anybody approached him with special requests—in fact allowed himself to be moved by the recommendation of their mutual lady friend, acknowledging to Beethoven in 1811: "The dear Bettina Brentano surely deserves the sympathy you have shown towards her. She speaks of you with delight and the liveliest affection, and reckons the hours which she spent with you among the happiest of her life." In summer 1812 the two great men met one another personally for the first time in Töplitz, where Beethoven was taking a cure, and from then on more frequently in Karlsbad. By then, the stage music to *Egmont* had already been music history for two years.

In the summer of 1810 Goethe's drama, concluded in 1788, was finally to be performed for the first time in Vienna. A year before, Beethoven had received a commission from the Imperial Court Theatre to write extensive stage music for the work, the ten numbers of which were then written between October 1809 and June 1810. However, as the composer was not quite finished the stage music was first played at the fourth Vienna performance of the drama, on 15 June 1810 (not, as it is sometimes incorrectly noted, 24 June). Its success at the time was considerable. In April 1811 Beethoven finally took the courage to send a piano

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score to Goethe, writing "this magnificent Egmont, which because of you I brought to mind and experienced once again as I wrote the music, just as I did when I first read it – I greatly desire to know your opinion of it." After hearing it several times on the piano Goethe was so enthused that he finally organised a further performance in Weimar (January 1814).

The overture, in the dark 'mourning' tonality of F minor, retells the story of Count Egmont, the leader of the Dutch uprising against the occupying Spanish in Brussels in the 16th century. It begins with the emotionally charged funeral march of the oppressed; the principal theme of the Allegro surges forward passionately and restlessly while the lyrical second subject depicts Egmont's heroic transfigured love (dotted rhythm in the strings) for Klärchen (high woodwind), which in the recapitulation is abruptly broken off. The conclusion of the overture anticipates the shattering 'symphony of victory' which accompanies Egmont to the scaffold (offstage) at the end of the drama—20 years later Hector Berlioz alluded to the general idea of this music in his 'March to the Scaffold' from the *Symphonie Fantastique*. The overture has gained an almost folk-music like popularity; in contrast, the wonderful complete stage music has been almost entirely forgotten—despite the fact that in 1821, with the express blessing of Goethe, an arrangement for the concert hall was made with linking texts by Friedrich Mosengeil. Apart from that it is most regrettable that the orchestrally accompanied stage play has almost completely disappeared from theatre performance schedules in favour of opera, and probably eclipsed also by the sound film, despite the fact that there is a wealth of first-class stage music by famous composers for virtually all the great theatrical works—a genre which still awaits rebirth.

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