

MONTEREY SYMPHONY

75

2022

Program Notes

by Dr. Alicia Mastromonaco

April 16-17, 2022

Ludwig van Beethoven

Egmont Overture, Op. 84

Ludwig van Beethoven's compositional output over the course of his life had an outsize impact on how music historians categorize the transition from the classical to romantic era. Within Beethoven's oeuvre, historians have also categorized several eras. The *Egmont Overture* falls within what historians often refer to as his "heroic" period, during the middle of his life. It was during this time that Beethoven composed his third symphony, "Eroica," and his single opera, *Fidelio*. Like these other two compositions, *Egmont* is heroic both in the story and musical content.

The *Egmont Overture* comes from a set of ten small pieces that served as incidental music for Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's play of the same name. The play is about a sixteenth-century struggle between the Dutch and Spanish. As with the opera *Fidelio*, which Beethoven was revising at the time he wrote the incidental music to *Egmont*, both stories are about women trying to free their unfairly imprisoned male partners. Whereas Leonore (disguised as *Fidelio*) successfully frees Florestan, Klärchen is not able to free Egmont. Nonetheless, both stories exemplify the fight against oppression and dictatorial forces, themes that reflected Beethoven's own political perspectives.

Felix Mendelssohn

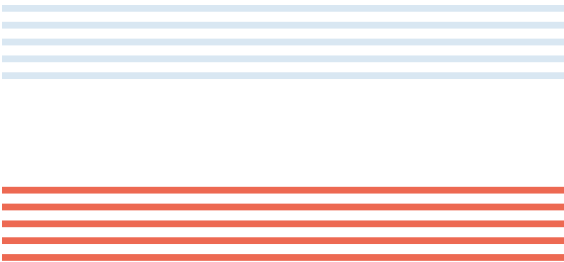
Violin Concerto in E minor, Op. 64



The piece was premiered on June 15, 1810. The first theme is reminiscent of a Spanish Sarabande, rather than being a pleasant courtly dance, it signals the oppression of the Spanish against the Dutch. The coda culminates in a heroic ending, of course, this being the heroic period of Beethoven. Although Klärchen and Egmont both do not survive in the play, their deaths were not wasted. They both became martyrs for the cause of Dutch liberation, each in their own ways. The music, both dark and heroic, signifies the importance of fighting for one's beliefs, whether through political action or musical composition. 

Felix Mendelssohn is often credited with reviving Bach in the musical world of the nineteenth century, after the Baroque composer's music had faded somewhat within musical practice. This is reflected in the music of the Violin Concerto in E minor, which addresses the musical practice and concert culture of its time and attempts to counteract what Mendelssohn thought of as the musical insipidness of the flashy "showpiece concertos" that were common among performer-composers such as Niccoló Paganini. Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto was written for his friend and colleague, Ferdinand David. The two had been friends since 1825, and worked together both at the Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestra, where David was concertmaster and Mendelssohn was Gewandhauskapellmeister (music director and conductor), as well as the Leipzig Conservatory, which Mendelssohn had founded in 1843. David was a musician who adeptly wore many hats, as a soloist, concertmaster, quartet leader, and a teacher.

The three-movement violin concerto is innovative in several ways. First, it is through-composed, meaning that each movement elides into the next. This was likely an attempt by the composer to discourage the audience from applauding or disrupting the flow of the piece. Concert culture at this time was shifting, away from events where a piece might be broken up and performed at various intervals of a concert, interspersed by popular tunes and songs between movements, and toward a culture of rapt listening and attention. Mendelssohn wanted his audience to listen. Mendelssohn also wrote the cadenza into the score. At the time, soloists would improvise their own cadenzas, and while it is likely that Mendelssohn had help from David to write the cadenza, it was not common to commit the music to the score. Finally, rather than a long orchestral introduction in the opening movement that would introduce the first theme and lay a musical groundwork for the soloist, Mendelssohn instead gives the orchestra one and a half bars introduction before the soloist enters with the famous theme of the first movement. 



Johannes Brahms

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 73

The composer Johannes Brahms famously came of age in the symphonic shadow of Beethoven. Brahms did not write his first symphony until he was in his forties, and the similarities between Beethoven's late symphonies and Brahms's first are so readily apparent that the First Symphony was referred to as "Beethoven's Tenth."

Concert culture at the end of the nineteenth century, when Brahms was composing his symphonies, changed dramatically over the course of the century. In the early part of the nineteenth century, most concerts were one-off private events, and the repertoire generally consisted of premieres interspersed with popular tunes and songs. However, by the latter part of the century, civic orchestras



such as the Vienna Philharmonic, were firmly entrenched in concert life, and programming was generally far more conservative. The Vienna Philharmonic, for example, rarely played music by living composers, and Beethoven's music comprised over sixty percent of the repertoire. It was in this context that Brahms tried to break through the symphonic glass ceiling that had been set by his predecessor Beethoven.

Thankfully for Brahms, the Vienna Philharmonic premiered his Second Symphony in 1877 at a subscription concert. Brahms's Second Symphony follows in the footsteps of his first (and, of course, Beethoven's Ninth), by maintaining an appropriate amount of historicism alongside his personal stylistic contributions. The music is lushly romantic, with beautiful, tuneful melodies in each of the movements. Brahms's Second Symphony is known as his happiest symphony, and the beautiful *allegro*

grazioso third movement is the closest the work gets to pure pastoral joy. However, the symphony is not blithely innocent; that would be too much to expect of the hyper self-critical Johannes Brahms. The lullaby theme in the first movement is preceded by the rumble of a solo timpani and low brass chorale that belies the sweetness of the theme, lest it become saccharine. The second movement is pulled like taffy, between lyrical and melancholic passages. After a mysterious *sotto voce* introduction, the finale bursts forth in an exuberant study of both brilliant technical compositional skill and virtuosic playing. Throughout the symphony there is simultaneously lyricism and musical geometry, reminiscent of the formal structures of the symphonies of Mozart and Haydn in the Classical period. The overarching theme of this symphony in some ways is its inherent contrasts: melody and structure, beauty and darkness, optimism and melancholy. 

Dr. Alicia Mastromonaco

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Alicia has played with the Monterey Symphony since 2007. She is also a member of the Carmel Bach Festival and Marin Symphony and plays in orchestras across the Bay Area. A San Francisco native, she began her music studies at age seven on the piano, sang in the San Francisco Girls Chorus, and took up the horn in middle school when she was given her uncle's old single B-flat Conn to try out (and fell in love with the instrument). Alicia earned Bachelor of Music degrees in Horn Performance and Musicology from Boston University, then did graduate work at the Universität der Künste Berlin before returning to California to continue her studies. She earned a Master of Music at University of California, Los Angeles in Horn performance, and a Master of Arts and PhD in Musicology from University of California, Santa Barbara.

Her dissertation, "Breakdown on the Freeway Philharmonic: Understanding the Causes and Effects of Regional Orchestra Bankruptcies in the San Francisco Bay Area," traces the history of the Oakland and San José Symphonies from their inception through their bankruptcies in 1988 and 2002, respectively, and provides socio-cultural analysis of the many factors facing the groups that led to their demise. She lives with her husband and two cats in El Cerrito and enjoys the many beautiful hiking trails just outside their door.

