

## Mozart Symphony No. 40 – March 19, 2016

### Overture to *Egmont*, Op. 84

Ludwig van Beethoven  
1770-1827

The German poet and polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote the historical drama *Egmont* between 1775 and 1787. Based on historical events – although with considerable poetic license – the play conveys Goethe’s idealism and passion for political and individual freedom. Historically, Lamoral, Count of Egmont, was a Dutch patriot and a Catholic who unsuccessfully attempted to attenuate the power of the Inquisition in the Netherlands, which was under Spanish rule during the mid sixteenth century. Caught between the Dutch resistance and his loyalty to King Philip II, Egmont was imprisoned and hanged for treason.

Goethe's *Egmont* bears only scant resemblance to the historical Count. In the play, Egmont organizes a resistance movement against the Spanish forces led by the ruthless Duke of Alva who invade and occupy the Low Countries (Belgium and the Netherlands). Egmont is cast as a martyr for freedom of thought, managing to rouse the populace to revolt as he is about to be executed.

In 1809 the director of the Imperial Theater in Vienna commissioned Beethoven to compose music to accompany Goethe's tragedy. Since he shared the ideals of the Enlightenment with the playwright, Beethoven went to work enthusiastically. In addition to the overture he wrote nine pieces of incidental music, including two soprano arias. He also added a narrator to bridge the gaps in the story and thus, according to Goethe, "...it can be performed as an oratorio." Goethe was pleased with Beethoven's efforts, commenting, "Beethoven has followed my intentions with admirable genius."

The Overture, which quickly acquired a life of its own, captures the essence of the drama. It opens with snarling minor chords symbolizing the Spanish brutality, answered pleadingly by the oboe and upper woodwinds, representing the Dutch suffering. The central Allegro theme in 3/4 has no specific narrative significance but rather, reflects the general dramatic tension, especially the sighing appoggiaturas in the violins. The Overture ends with the “Victory Symphony,” the final section of the incidental music, signifying Egmont's call for the Dutch uprising that eventually drove the Spanish out of the Low Countries.

### Cello Concerto

Philip Sawyers  
b.1951

The life of a freelance musician is hectic and anxiety-producing. While looking for the next gig, waiting tables is not uncommon. Fortunately, Philip Sawyers held down a stable job as a violinist in Royal Opera House Orchestra, Covent Garden. For 20 years he freelanced on the side, dipping into the popular repertory as well as the classical standards.

In 1997, he opted for a quieter life, left the ROH, and undertook a year of postgraduate study at Goldsmith's College, University of London. He still freelances but now has time to compose and teach. Sawyer composed the Cello Concerto in 2011 on a commission from the Sydenham International Music Festival for cellist Maja Bogdanovic.

Sawyer writes: “My approach was not to write a virtuoso showpiece, although there are some technically challenging passages, but to try and reflect what the cello means to me and convey the moods and nuances of expression that I find most appealing in the instrument. My

other aim was, of course, to write an engaging and emotionally and musically satisfying work.”

In the first movement, Sawyers explores a single theme characterized by upward octave and seventh leaps to exploit the expressive possibilities of the solo cello. The theme is made up of several motives, some developed by the soloist, others by orchestral instruments, but there is no clear-cut second theme as in a classical sonata allegro form. The style is chromatic but not spiky nor unsingable. Near the end of the movement is a written out cadenza, later joined by the horns.

The *Adagio* is also based on a single melody, first introduced by the oboe (a tip of the hat to Brahms’ Violin Concerto?) before being taken up by the solo cellist. Concerto composers often choose an orchestral instrument with which the soloist forges a special relationship; here, it is the oboe and the horn. The melody is tonal and more lyrical than the material from either the first or third movements, and the climax is more emotional and intense.

The third movement is based on a 12-tone row – although not hard to follow, especially in the *fugato* section. The movement also contains a cantabile second theme that again features the expressiveness of the cello. At the conclusion, the soloist engages in a more reflective dialogue with the horn and then the oboe. “After this last moment of calm the opening music returns leading to an energetic coda exploiting the full range of the solo cello.”

Born in London, Sawyers studied violin and composition at Dartington College of Arts in Devon, followed by studies at the Guildhall School of Music in London.

### **Symphony No. 40 in G minor, K. 550**

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart  
1756-1791

When listening to any popular and well-known piece of music, it is difficult to keep from being lulled into inattention by its sheer familiarity. And while we can never hear a 200-year-old work from the point of view of its original audience, it is useful to pretend, at least, to be hearing it for the first time.

Despite the fact that most modern listeners tend to regard the key of a work as irrelevant, musicians of the Baroque and Classical periods regarded certain keys as possessing specific emotive qualities, or “affects.” Minor keys in particular were fraught with emotional significance, and few symphonies in this period were written in minor keys. For Mozart, the key of G minor was the key of extreme pathos. He used it sparingly for some of his most heart-wrenching music: the String Quintet K.516; the Piano Quartet K. 478; Pamina’s aria “*Ach, ich fühl’s*” from *The Magic Flute*; and, of course, the stormy so-called “Little G minor” Symphony (No. 25) K. 183 written when he was only 17.

Mozart’s final three symphonies, nos. 39, 40 and 41, were written over a two-month period in 1788, probably as part of a portfolio of new works destined for a series of summer concerts in Vienna. Unfortunately, we lack any information as to whether the concerts actually took place, much less about their reception. At this point his career was already in decline despite the success of his two great operas *Don Giovanni* and *The Marriage of Figaro* written in collaboration with his brilliant librettist Lorenzo da Ponte. That is not to say that Mozart’s music was somehow denigrated or considered no longer pleasing; his published scores were selling briskly and his music was being performed all over Europe. It was almost as if there was a surfeit of Mozart – that he was too well known. And although he

was in desperate need of funds to support his lifestyle, his legendary productivity faltered as well.

The three symphonies reflect very different moods, the darkest being that of No. 40. It is almost as if the tragedy of this symphony saw its resolution only in the triumph of No. 41 (nicknamed “The Jupiter,” but not by Mozart). Ironically, we know less about the circumstances surrounding this most famous of Mozart’s over 600 creations, nor can we extrapolate any specific, solid evidence of how it might have reflected the circumstances of his life or his emotions.

The opening theme of Symphony No. 40, with its hushed, nervous introductory upbeat in the violas, sets the tone of urgency and anxiety that pervades the entire work. The second movement *Andante* is the only movement in a major key. But while it begins serenely enough, it, too, turns dark and intense in the course of its development.

Even the Minuet, usually the most lightweight movement in a Classical symphony, retains the original key and is characterized by a series of phrases ending on successively higher and higher notes, ratcheting up the emotional tension. Restatements of the theme in imitative counterpoint pile on top of each other in their agitation. The Trio, at least, provides an emotional break, however slight.

The theme of the finale is a musical portrayal of hysteria, a shrill arpeggio ending in a sighing appoggiatura, followed by a pounding motive in the orchestra that closes with an echo of the sigh in the lower register. Despite a lyrical second theme, the movement is in constant nervous motion. Finally, Mozart subverts the custom of ending symphonies in minor keys in the major, and stays in G minor to the end. Even Tchaikovsky concluded his morose Fifth Symphony in triumph.

Program notes by:  
Joseph & Elizabeth Kahn  
Wordpros@mindspring.com  
www.wordprosmusic.com