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CHANDOS

LUDWIG VAN
BEETHOVEN

OVERTURES:
PROMETHEUS
CORIOLAN
LEONORA NO. 3

PIANO CONCERTO
NO. 5

CITY OF
BIRMINGHAM
SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA

JOHN LILL PIANO
WALTER WELLER

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

1	Overture: 'The Creatures of Prometheus', Op. 43	5:16
	Adagio – Allegro molto con brio	
2	Overture: 'Coriolan', Op. 62	8:33
	Allegro con brio	
3	Overture: 'Leonora No. 3', Op. 72a	13:14
	Adagio – Allegro	
	Piano Concerto No. 5, Op. 73 ('Emperor') in E flat major	39:06
4	I Allegro	20:13
5	II Adagio un poco mosso	8:28
6	III Rondo: Allegro	10:21

TT 66:31

John Lill piano
City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra
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Beethoven: Overtures/Piano Concerto No. 5

Overture: 'The Creatures of Prometheus', Op. 43

Beethoven's ballet *Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus*, literally the creatures or 'creations' of Prometheus, dates from 1801, shortly after the completion of the First Symphony and the Op. 18 Quartets. The choice of subject may have been influenced by the recent success of Haydn's *Creation*, giving rise to one of Beethoven's typical plays upon words. Although patronizing about the ballet-master Salvatore Vigano, he must certainly have been attracted by the legendary figure of Prometheus, the bringer of fire, who was also represented as hero and benefactor, and with whom Beethoven may have identified himself as a musician. In fact, as Marion Scott remarked, the hero on this occasion seemed to have acquired the combined gifts of Orpheus and Pygmalion, bringing statues to life through the power of harmony. With the disappearance of the original ballet most of the music fell into neglect, though the finale acquired fame by bequeathing its theme to the Op. 35 piano variations and the last movement of the *Eroica* Symphony. The overture, however, quickly became a favourite concert piece. Its

dramatic opening chords epitomized the unusual harmonic moves at the start of the First Symphony, and the lively string writing in the *Allegro* looked forward to the finale of the Fourth. But the importance of the wind instruments, already noted in the First Symphony, is another feature, and their antiphony with the strings adds to the excitement.

Overture: 'Coriolan', Op. 62

Beethoven's desire to write operas was continually frustrated and his one great achievement, *Fidelio*, was fraught with problems and twice rewritten. Among his many potential librettists was Heinrich von Collin, whose early death in 1811 prevented their proposed cooperation. Four years earlier, however, he composed the overture for Collin's play *Coriolan* and unleashed his full dramatic powers in his favourite key of storm and stress, C minor. It is worth noting that the Fifth Symphony was nearing completion at the time. The overture was first heard in a concert performance and is a good example of the power of music transcending the spoken word. As with the later *Egmont* overture, though in a somewhat freer manner, it adapts

the principles of sonata form to the expression of human emotions and conflicts. Again we witness, in the aural sense, the tragic destruction of a hero, but with no aftermath of triumph: even the consoling E flat second subject, proud and confident when first heard, turns to the minor key before the final collapse of the C minor *Coriolan* motif. Tovey quoted Shakespeare at this point: 'Most dangerously you have with him prevailed, if not most mortal to him.' Such pathos, with music as the servant of dramatic truth, had been marvellously expressed in the Funeral March of the *Eroica*, also in C minor; but in the overture the compression and economy of material are astounding, giving it a hold over listeners who know little of the background of the drama.

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Overture: 'Leonora No. 3', Op. 72a

The path that led to *Fidelio* was not an easy one. In 1803, when Beethoven took up lodgings at the *Theater an der Wien*, he was working without much enthusiasm on a libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder, the actor, singer, librettist and theatre manager, best remembered for his collaboration in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*. This project, however, was soon abandoned in favour of a more attractive 'rescue opera' based on Bouilly's *Léonore*, or

L'amour conjugal. Bouilly's original text had already been set as a two-act opera by Pierre Gaveaux and performed in Paris in 1798, and subsequent Italian versions were to appear at about the same time as Beethoven's first attempt in 1805. One of these Italian adaptations – by Paër – Beethoven saw in Vienna in 1809, five years before he undertook his final version.

It is well documented that Beethoven composed three versions of *Fidelio*, dating from 1805, 1806 and 1814. To avoid confusion the earlier ones are known as *Leonora*, Beethoven's own preferred title for the opera, whose name is preserved in the three rejected overtures. The 1805 version was a failure not entirely due to the French occupation of Vienna. Joseph Sonnleithner's libretto extended Bouilly's two acts into three by enlarging the subplot of Marzelline's infatuation with *Fidelio* and postponing the main action until Pizarro's entry in the new second act. With Stephan von Breuning's help, Beethoven subjected the opera to a number of cuts and alterations, which reduced the work, now prefaced by a new overture *Leonora No. 3*, to a two-act shape. In spite of these revisions, the 1806 revival of *Leonora* was ill-fated. Beethoven resumed instrumental and symphonic composition and the opera lay untouched until he refashioned it into its final form in 1814.

One of the by-products of the successive reworkings of the opera is the sequence of overtures, of which *Leonora No. 3* is the most substantial. While essentially an astonishingly comprehensive revision of *Leonora No. 2*, the alterations involved greater clarity and conciseness of expression, numerous refinements of scoring and dynamics, the sacrificing of a rich but over-long development in favour of a more conventional-sized one, and the reshaping of the coda to provide a more satisfying climax to the whole. Without excluding the two references to material from the opera already worked out in *Leonora No. 2* – namely, Florestan's aria (in the opening *Adagio*) and the trumpet calls announcing the dénouement of the opera – Beethoven achieves in *Leonora No. 3* a sonata-form shape which, if not an appropriate prelude to the light-hearted banter of the opening scene between Marzelline and Jaquino, provides a remarkable encapsulation of the totality of the drama about to unfold. In this respect Beethoven creates what one commentator has called the 'first, and perhaps the greatest, tone poem'.

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Piano Concerto No. 5, Op. 73 *Emperor*

Deafness brought Beethoven's career as a composer-cum-concerto soloist to a close, but

not before he had written the Concerto-Symphony (Hans Keller's phrase) known in Britain as the *Emperor*: the Piano Concerto No. 5. It is an heroic work conceived in Beethoven's loftiest vein by a man well versed in the heroic ideals of the ancient world. But it draws, too, on contemporary experience. In the spring of 1809 the French bombarded Vienna. Beethoven spent much time in the cellar of his brother's house, a pillow over his ears to check the effect of the vibrations. In July, he wrote to his publisher Breitkopf:

We have passed through a great deal of misery. I tell you: since 4 May I have brought little into the world that is connected – only here and there a fragment. The whole course of events has affected me: body and soul. Nor can I have the enjoyment of country life that is indispensable to me... What a disturbing, wild life there is around me. Nothing but drums, cannons, men, and misery of all sorts.

The Fifth Concerto rises magnificently above the fray, but it does not rewrite history or put a gloss on human affairs. On the last page we have one of Beethoven's most astonishing improvisations, a passage of muffled war music for piano and drum. It is moments like this that astound, even today. But, then, it is Beethoven's capacity to

surprise, disturb, shock, and delight that make his music in general and these concertos in particular so endlessly rewarding.

As the poet Ezra Pound said, great art is 'news that stays news'.

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