

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Overture from the incidental music to Goethe's "Egmont," Opus 84

*First performance:* June 15, 1810, Hofburgtheater, Vienna. *First BSO performance:* December 1881, Georg Henschel cond. *First Berkshire Festival performance:* August 13, 1936, Serge Koussevitzky cond. *First Tanglewood performance:* August 8, 1940, Koussevitzky cond. *Most recent Tanglewood performance:* July 20, 2001, Andrew Davis cond.

Goethe completed his historical tragedy *Egmont* in 1788 while on a tour of Italy. The historical count Egmont was the most illustrious victim of Spanish tyranny in the 16th-century Netherlands when he was treacherously seized by the Duke of Alba and executed in Brussels on June 4, 1568. In the closing scene of Goethe's drama (which treats the facts of history with great freedom) Egmont is in prison, awaiting execution. He sees a vision of Freedom, in the likeness of his sweetheart Klärchen, and awakens emboldened to address his countrymen with heroic words before being taken to execution, ending, "And to save all that is dearest to you, fall joyously, as I set you an example." The author called for music almost throughout this scene, first during Egmont's vision and then breaking in again immediately after his last words as the curtain falls with what Goethe called a "victory symphony."

Some twenty years after the writing of the play, Beethoven was commissioned by the Vienna Court theater to prepare the incidental music called for by Goethe. The production opened May 24, 1810, but although Beethoven had several months' notice, he had not managed to finish the overture in time; it was added to the performance on June 15. Here the composer found a dramatic subject that he was in tune with as rarely before or after. Perceiving the conflict between Alba and Egmont as the clash between evil and good, he produced music of great force. Most of the overture uses no musical material from the incidental music to the play itself, but for the coda Beethoven suddenly quotes from the victory symphony, the very last music to be heard in the play. Coming at the end of the usually somber thematic material from the main part of the overture, it arouses a terrific sense of victory.

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Steven Ledbetter was program annotator of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1979 to 1998 and now writes program notes for other orchestras and ensembles throughout the country.