

PROGRAMME

Gioachino Rossini's William Tell Overture

The *William Tell Overture* resembles nothing less than the work of a genius.¹ (Hector Berlioz)

Times change, as do musical tastes. Over the past few decades, the opera ***William Tell*** by **Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868)** has had to surrender much of the pride of place it once enjoyed. The work used to feature regularly in the programming of the most prestigious opera houses. In Geneva, for instance, “our national opera *par excellence*”, as the *Journal de Genève* called it in 1896, not only inaugurated the new Grand Théâtre in 1879, it was played there over 130 times from 1879 to 1918. Shortly before his death, Rossini, who had written no further stage works since *Tell*'s premiere in 1829, was even able to attend its 500th performance at the Paris Opera.

Ironically, it was the incredible popularity of *William Tell* that no doubt made it a victim of its own success. After all, how many radio and television shows (*The Lone Ranger* being just one example in the United States), cartoons and advertisements have not taken advantage of the jaunty rhythms of its ***Overture***? All this has proven enough to obscure the genuine beauty of the score, not to mention its revolutionary character. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that Rossini's farewell to opera was a turning point in the history of the genre.

The composer's legendary “silence” during the 40 years following *William Tell* was scarcely unproductive: he wrote such important works as the *Stabat mater* in 1833 and the beautiful *Petite Messe solennelle* in 1864. The most recent scholarship supports the view that far from being a rather lazy artist with a light touch who considered that he had already written everything he needed to before the age of 40 – a persona that he himself admittedly cultivated – Rossini was actually a workaholic whom years of unrelenting over-production had brought to the brink of a physical and nervous breakdown.

There are, however, other reasons for Rossini abandoning the opera stage after *William Tell*, “this magnificent product by an artist at the height of his creativity that is more powerful and richer than any work by a younger composer”² – clearly a reference to Donizetti and Bellini by Franz Liszt, who saw in them only the palest of imitators. Liszt correctly imputed Rossini's early retirement to his wounded pride in light of *Tell*'s mixed reception by Parisian music-lovers, swept up in the growing craze for *bel canto*. What is abundantly clear is that audiences had little interest in or understanding of the very skilful blend of the best elements of French and Italian opera that Rossini employed in his score. Then too, the *habitués* of the Paris Opera must have sensed in the story taken from Schiller's play of a successful popular revolt against tyrannical rule a most unwelcome harbinger of the *Trois*

¹ Quoted in the programme for the performances of *William Tell* at the Grand Théâtre of Geneva, June-July 1991, p. 22.

² *Revue musicale de l'année 1836*.

Glorieuses, the three-day uprising in July of the following year that would topple the Bourbon dynasty from the French throne for once and for all. It should be noted that Rossini's own fate was closely tied to that of Charles X, whose fall in 1830 endangered the composer's lucrative financial arrangements with the government. In fact, in a clever ploy worthy of the plot of his own comic operas, to demonstrate his dire financial straits, Rossini felt compelled to move into the squalid attic of the Théâtre-Italien, where he remained for six years until the new regime finally capitulated to his demands – after which, the composer slyly departed for Bologna, where he settled in the splendid palace that he owned there!

Contrary to *The Barber of Seville* (1816), for which Rossini simply borrowed his own overture to an unsuccessful work from the previous year, *Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra*, the composer devoted much time and care to the ***William Tell Overture***, which has remained a fixture in the concert repertory ever since. Rossini's innovative form is that of a symphonic poem in four distinct and autonomous parts, without the slightest thematic relationship to the opera to follow. Even Berlioz, rarely at a loss for words, especially to criticize fellow composers, could not praise enough the opening *Andante*, which showcases the cellos and double basses. Berlioz saw it as a hymn to the beauties of Nature, depicting the calm before the storm. And indeed, the storm is not long in coming in the second-movement *Allegro*, with the winds literally hurling their notes like splattering raindrops, a technique Rossini had already used in the storm scene in *Barber*. For the succeeding pastorale (*Andantino*), the composer draws on the famous *ranz des vaches*, a Swiss folksong of uncertain origin, entrusted here to the English horn, one of Rossini's favorite instruments. The breathless *Allegro vivace* finale, one of the most celebrated pieces in all of classical music, announces the arrival of the Confederate soldiers on horseback, before the curtain rises on the shores of Lake Lucerne.

Richard Cole

Ludwig van Beethoven's *Symphony No. 3 "Eroica"*

*Now Napoleon will obey only the call of his own ambition! He will put himself over everyone else and become a tyrant!*³

Did **Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)** really speak the above words upon learning of Napoleon's self-proclamation as Emperor of the French in 1804? No one can say, but what seems certain is that the composer, who had placed the First Consul (almost his exact contemporary) on the pedestal of a revolutionary hero, did indeed tear up the title page of the ***Symphony No. 3 in E flat, op. 55***, originally dedicated to him with the subtitle of "*Bonaparte*".

It was another French general, Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte, who suggested the idea of an "heroic" symphony celebrating the egalitarian ideals of his country's Revolution. Upon being appointed ambassador in Vienna of the short-lived Directory of the French Republic

³ Quote attributed to Napoleon, in François-René Tranchefort, "Ludwig van Beethoven », *Guide de la musique symphonique*, Paris, Fayard, 1986, p. 54.

in 1798, Bernadotte, an inveterate music-lover, became fast friends with the young composer. He introduced him to a member of his retinue, the violinist Rodolphe Kreutzer, a professor at the recently established Paris Conservatory, to whom Beethoven subsequently dedicated the *Violin Sonata* that bears his name. For his part, Beethoven was keenly interested not only in the experiment of the young French Republic and the overthrow of a despotic regime, but also in the musical repertory associated with the Revolution, particularly the monumental vocal-symphonic works of Gossec, Méhul and Cherubini, all intended to glorify the valiant combat of the new regime and to form the tastes of a free people.

Written for the most part during the summer of 1803, the *Third Symphony* was neither Beethoven's first nor last work meant to translate into music the triple motto "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity". In 1800, he had been commissioned by Salvatore Viganò (1769-1821), recently appointed ballet director at the Court Theatre in Vienna, who wished to stage a new "heroic and allegorical" ballet. It remains a mystery why the Habsburg monarchy accepted the subject submitted by Viganò under the contemporary political circumstances. With his bold choice of the myth of Prometheus, the choreographer was well aware that in his native Italy, Napoleon was known as "the modern Prometheus" after driving the Austrians out of the peninsula in 1797 and imposing a humiliating peace treaty on them. Bonaparte was likened to the figure from Greek mythology as the one who had restored human dignity to Italians and given them the fire of liberty by freeing them from the yoke of oppressive Austrian rule.

Both by temperament and his modest origins, Beethoven was favorably predisposed to adhere to these new ideas. During his early years in Bonn, the city was far from just another provincial town. Already as the 13-year-old assistant and student of the Court organist Christian Gottlob Neefe, the adolescent Ludwig was following in the footsteps of his teacher's own master, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. The latter hypothesized that music did not need to be descriptive to contribute to the moral edification of men and women⁴. In the wake of the storming of the Bastille in 1789, the Prince-Elector in Bonn had resolved to reign as an enlightened despot over his modest principality. The resulting intellectual and political awakening no doubt explains Beethoven's decision to enter his native city's university, known for its free-thinking ambiance.

Once settled in Vienna, although Beethoven had no choice but to cultivate the patronage of the imperial Court and the aristocracy if he wished to succeed, he never sought any official posts. At the time that he accepted Viganò's commission, he was yearning to be called to Paris, the city of liberty, and to compose music for the First Consul. Although its two dozen performances prove that *The Creatures of Prometheus* was well received at its premiere in 1801, the critics in Vienna, known for their rigidly traditional outlook, were less enthusiastic, having grasped all too well the work's political undercurrent.

While Beethoven had not yet finished his *Second Symphony* at the time, he decided to write two more in order to draw the attention of music-lovers in the French capital, where the genre of the symphony had remained in great demand since the time of Mozart and Haydn.

⁴ See Elisabeth Brisson, *Guide de la musique de Beethoven*, Paris, Fayard, 2005, p. 217.

The initial dedication of the *Symphony No. 3* to Napoleon must therefore be viewed in a context that was as commercial as it was political. A letter by the composer to his publisher, Breitkopf & Härtel, in August 1804 attests to the *Third's* original title of "*Ponaparte*" (*sic*). A copy of the no longer extant autograph, found in Beethoven's papers upon his death and still preserved at the Society of the Friends of Music in Vienna, includes a title page that is partially torn owing to the crossing out of the original mention: "*Sinfonia grande intitulata Bonaparte*".

It is not known when the composer's furious gesture might have taken place. The Emperor's coronation occurred in December 1804, but already in late May the Viennese press was reporting on the French Senate's vote to raise Napoleon to imperial rank – precisely the same period when the *Third Symphony* was premiered in a private performance at the palace of Prince Lobkowitz. By the autumn, the work had already been rededicated to the latter, a leading patron of Beethoven.

The *Third* was published in 1806 under the title of "*Sinfonia eroica - composée à la mémoire d'un grand homme*" – perhaps a reference to Prince Ludwig Ferdinand of Prussia, a close friend of Lobkowitz who had been killed that year in a battle against Napoleon. Whatever the case, Bernadotte certainly held no grudge against Beethoven. In one of those ironies of history, the composer made his last concert appearance as a pianist in January 1815 at the Congress of Vienna. There, he reported subsequently with some pride, he had been treated royally by the crowned heads assembled there to decide the deposed Emperor's fate. One of those present was none other than Bernadotte, who had since become Crown Prince of Sweden and one of those responsible for Napoleon's defeat.

As if the orchestra cannot wait to launch into the opening ***Allegro con brio***, their introduction is limited to two brusque chords before the cellos present the opening theme. Two overlapping rhythm patterns, one binary and the other ternary, compete for attention prior to emergence of the oboe's three-note motif, whose continuous transformations are impressive. In the unusually rich and lengthy development section, a new subject is entrusted to the oboes and violins, albeit not devoid of brassy interruptions by the horns – a passage which Wagner always insisted on "correcting" when he conducted the *Third*, considering it too "dissonant"! Also exceptionally long, the coda is dominated by the powerful return of the opening motif.

Replacing the initially planned triumphal march, the second-movement ***Adagio assai*** symbolizes Beethoven's farewell not only to his "hero" but also to his own dreams as once personified by Napoleon. In the 19th century, Hans von Bülow was not the only conductor to slip on a pair of black gloves when conducting this three-part ***Marcia funebre***, largely based on the *Piano Sonata, op. 26* (1800-1801). Once the theme's exposition is complete, the oboe, soon echoed by the flute and the bassoon, weaves a plaintive song that recalls the first subject of the preceding *Allegro*. After the *fugato* development, the orchestra returns to part A, this time with references to the second theme.

Some musicologists insist that Beethoven originally sketched out the third movement as a *menuetto*. Yet apart from the welcome change in atmosphere after the gloomy funeral march, it is hard to envision this lively ***Scherzo (Allegro vivace)*** played at half speed. The

implacable beat here was proof, according to Pierre Lalo, not only of the composer's youthful vigor, but also that the real hero being celebrated in this symphony is none other than Beethoven himself.

The strings unleash a wave of sixteenth notes to usher in the passacaglia (variations on a ground bass) at the core of the **Finale (*Allegro molto*)**. The *pizzicato* theme heard here had already been used several times by Beethoven, most notably in *The Creatures of Prometheus* and his *Variations for Piano, op. 35* (1802). Among the dozen transformations of the bass motif, the *fugato* episodes and a variation in the style of a *verbunkos* (a Hungarian dance) stand out in particular. Even the "new" motif heard in the woodwinds is actually a disguised variation on the same bass. The final variation, a clarion call *presto* and *fortissimo*, closes out this symphony in true Beethoven fashion.

Richard Cole