

# program notes

BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN ■ 1770-1827

## ***Coriolan Overture, Op. 62* (1807)**

This Overture was inspired by, rather than composed for, the tragedy *Coriolan* (1802) by Heinrich Joseph von Collin (1771-1811), a jurist, poet and, from 1809, court councilor who enjoyed much theatrical success in Vienna with this play. The drama's plot, which may be either fact or fable, tells of Gaius Marcius, a patrician Roman general of extraordinary bravery who led the Roman armies to a great triumph over the Volscians, the people of the hill country south of Rome. For capturing their city of Corioli, he received the honorary name of Coriolan. His return to Rome found him embroiled in the conflict between patricians and plebeians, the latter claiming insufferable oppression. The aristocratic Coriolan so vilified the populace that the senate, yielding to plebeian pressure, voted his permanent exile. So bitter and vengeful did he become that he went to the conquered Volscians, swore allegiance to them, and offered to lead them against Rome. He besieged the city, rejecting all ambassadors until his mother and his wife came to entreat him to abandon his wrathful revenge. They subdued his bitter arrogance and pride, and he withdrew the Volscians, who turned against him. In Shakespeare's version, he is slain by them; in Collin's adaptation, he commits suicide.

The Overture opens with a stern unison in the strings punctuated by slashing

chords from the full orchestra. A restless, foreboding figure of unsettled rhythmic character constitutes the main theme. The second theme is a lyrical melody, greatly contrasting with the preceding measures, but not immune from their agitated expectancy. The tempestuous development derives its mood and its material from the main theme. The recapitulation recalls the opening gestures. A lengthy coda, almost a second development, pits the lyrical melody against the imperious statement. The final outburst of the unison gesture spread across the full orchestra represents the dramatic denouement and the extinction of Coriolanus' awful pride. The Overture dies away amid sighs and silence.

## **Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58 (1804-1806)**

The Napoleonic juggernaut twice overran the city of Vienna. The first occupation began on November 13, 1805, less than a month after the Austrian armies had been soundly trounced by the French legions at the Battle of Ulm on October 20th. Though the entry into Vienna was peaceful, the Viennese had to pay dearly for the earlier defeat in punishing taxes, restricted freedoms and inadequate food supplies. On December 28th, following Napoleon's fearsome victory at Austerlitz that forced the Austrian government into capitulation, the Little General left Vienna. He returned in May 1809, this time with cannon and cavalry sufficient to subdue the city

by force, creating conditions that were worse than those during the previous occupation. It was to be five years — 1814 — before the Corsican was finally defeated and Emperor Franz returned to Vienna, riding triumphantly through the streets of the city on a huge, white Lipizzaner.

Such soul-troubling times would seem to be antithetical to the production of great art, yet for Beethoven, that ferocious libertarian, those years were the most productive of his life. Between *Fidelio*, which was in its last week of rehearsal when Napoleon entered Vienna in 1805, and the music for *Egmont*, finished shortly after the second invasion, Beethoven composed three concertos, three symphonies, two overtures and many songs, chamber works and piano compositions. It is a stunning record of accomplishment virtually unmatched in the history of music.

The poetic mood of the Fourth Concerto is established at the outset by a hushed, prefatory phrase for the soloist. The form of the movement, vast yet intimate, begins to unfold with the ensuing orchestral introduction, which presents the rich thematic material: pregnant main theme, with its small intervals and repeated notes; secondary themes — a melancholy strain with an arch shape and a grand melody with wide leaps; and closing theme of descending scales. The soloist re-enters to enrich the themes with elaborate figurations. The central development section is haunted by the rhythmic figuration of the main theme (three short notes and an accented note). The recapitulation returns the themes and allows an opportunity for a cadenza before a glistening coda closes the movement. The second movement starkly opposes two musical forces — the stern, unison summons of the strings and the

gentle, touching replies of the piano, which eventually subdue the orchestra. A high-spirited rondo-finale is launched by the strings to bring the Concerto to a stirring close.

## **Symphony No. 7 in A major, Op. 92 (1811-1812)**

The Seventh Symphony is a magnificent creation in which Beethoven displayed several technical innovations that were to have a profound influence on the music of the 19th century: he expanded the scope of symphonic structure through the use of more distant tonal areas; he brought an unprecedented richness and range to the orchestral palette; and he gave a new awareness of rhythm as the vitalizing force in music. It is particularly the last of these characteristics that most immediately affects the listener, and to which commentators have consistently turned to explain the vibrant power of the work. Perhaps the most famous such observation about the Seventh Symphony is that of Richard Wagner, who called the work “the apotheosis of the Dance in its highest aspect ... the loftiest deed of bodily motion incorporated in an ideal world of tone.” “Beethoven,” John N. Burk explained, “seems to have built up this impression by willfully driving a single rhythmic figure through each movement, until the music attains (particularly in the body of the first movement and in the Finale) a swift propulsion, an effect of cumulative growth which is akin to extraordinary size.”

A slow introduction, almost a movement in itself, opens the Symphony. This initial section employs two themes: the first, majestic and unadorned, is passed down through the winds while being

punctuated by long, rising scales in the strings; the second is a graceful melody for oboe. The transition to the main part of the first movement is accomplished by the superbly controlled reiteration of a single pitch. This device both connects the introduction with the exposition and also establishes the dactylic rhythm that dominates the movement. The *Allegretto* scored such a success at its premiere that it was immediately encored, a phenomenon virtually unprecedented for a slow movement. In form, the movement is a series of variations on the heartbeat rhythm of its opening measures. In spirit, however, it is more closely allied to the austere chaconne of the Baroque era than to the light, figural variations of Classicism.

The third movement, a study in contrasts of sonority and dynamics, is built on the formal model of the scherzo, but expanded to include a repetition of the horn-dominated Trio (Scherzo – Trio – Scherzo – Trio – Scherzo). In the sonata-form finale, Beethoven not only produced music of virtually unmatched rhythmic energy (“a triumph of Bacchic fury,” in the words of Sir Donald Tovey), but did it in such a manner as to exceed the climaxes of the earlier movements and make it the goal toward which they had all been aimed. So intoxicating is this music that some of Beethoven’s contemporaries were sure he had composed it in a drunken frenzy. An encounter with the Seventh Symphony is a heady experience. Klaus G. Roy, former program annotator for The Cleveland Orchestra, wrote, “Many a listener has come away from a hearing of this Symphony in a state of being punch-drunk. Yet it is an intoxication without a hangover, a dope-like exhilaration without decadence.”

# ALLENTOWN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

NOVEMBER 13-14, 2021

P R O G R A M

**DIANE M. WITTRY** MUSIC DIRECTOR/CONDUCTOR

*Coriolan Overture*, Op. 62 LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58 LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN  
Allegro moderato  
Andante con moto —  
Rondo: Vivace  
Piano Soloist: Stefano Grecco

Symphony No. 7 in A major, Op. 92 LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN  
Poco sostenuto — Vivace  
Allegretto  
Presto  
Allegro con brio

¿ ¿ INTERMISSION ??