

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator

Overture to *Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus (The Creatures of Prometheus)*, Op. 43

Ludwig van Beethoven

Whether Prometheus was a good guy or a bad guy depends on your point of view, and on who's telling his story. The basic facts — if “facts” apply when discussing Greek mythology — were enunciated by the poet Hesiod: Prometheus was a Titan trickster who stole the gift of fire from Zeus (king of the gods) and delivered it to man. Zeus retaliated by sending Pandora and her notorious box to Earth, unleashing evil, drudgery, and disease among mankind. Or (Hesiod notes, alternatively), Zeus chained Prometheus to a rock and arranged for an eagle to dine eternally on his liver. Either way, Prometheus's prank was punished, and his reputation was sorely stained.

Aeschylus, on the other hand, viewed the event from the side of the mortals. Instead of decrying Prometheus for upsetting the cosmic order, he ennobled the fallen god as the bringer of fire to man — and, with it, the possibility of civilization, with all its incumbent arts and sciences. Aeschylus, one might argue, saw Prometheus as the fulcrum in human cultural history; if he was doomed to suffer, he did so to

benefit the future accomplishments of humans. (His name, after all, means “forethinker.”)

Ludwig van Beethoven would have related to Prometheus's burden. He was not without a substantial ego himself, and while still a fledgling composer he assumed that the musical world would revolve around his achievements — even if Vienna had so far failed to take note of the obvious. His 18th-century output included such substantial pieces as a symphony and two piano concertos, plus a fair amount of chamber music; a work for the stage, however, would probably be needed to propel him to a higher plateau of fame. He turned that corner in 1800, when he was commissioned to compose a score for the new ballet *Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus (The Creatures of Prometheus)*.

Ballet rode the crest of popularity in turn-of-the-century Vienna. One of the city's most applauded dancers was Salvatore Viganò, a Neapolitan by birth and a nephew of the composer Luigi Boccherini. He choreographed the

In Short

Born: December 16, 1770 (probably, since he was baptized on the 17th), in Bonn, Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Work composed: 1800–01; dedicated to Princess Christiane von Lichnowsky (when the work was published in piano reduction)

World premiere: March 28, 1801, at the Burgtheater in Vienna

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 23, 1913, Josef Stransky, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: July 28, 1994, Kurt Masur, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 5 minutes



A depiction of Beethoven conducting, by Michel Katzaroff, ca. 1930

Beethoven on the Stage

Beethoven endured an unsteady relationship with the stage. His career was littered with fervent expressions of desire and even a few fragmentary attempts to compose an opera worthy of his genius, but in the end he managed to complete only one full-fledged opera. As if to underscore his unease with the genre, Beethoven actually “completed” the work twice (under the title *Leonore*) before it reached the final state in which it is usually performed today (under the title *Fidelio*).

But there was more to the stage than opera, and in other theatrical realms Beethoven scored better success. He wrote incidental music – ranging from a single number to complete multi-movement collections – for a half-dozen stage plays: *Egmont*, *Coriolan*, *König Stephan*, *Die Ruinen von Athen* (and its adaptation as *Die Weihe des Hauses*), *Tarpeja*, and *Leonore Prohaska*. In addition, he composed music for two ballets: the *Ritterballet* (WoO 1) in 1790–91 for a production in his hometown of Bonn, and *Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus* (*The Creatures of Prometheus*, Op. 43) a decade later, in 1800–01, for a production in Vienna.

new *Prometheus* ballet to spotlight his wife and himself, with the partners portraying statues brought to life by the fallen god. When the work was premiered, the program described the title character in Aeschylean terms:

a lofty soul, who found the people of his time in ignorance, refined them by means of science and the arts, and gave them manners, customs, and morals.

The action depicts how the two enlivened statues, “through the power of harmony, are made receptive to all the passions of human existence.” Prometheus entrusts their education to the best of teachers – including Orpheus for music, Terpsichore for dance, and Melpomene for tragedy – and each episode is depicted through the course of 16 choreographed numbers. The muse Melpomene slays Prometheus in this version, to punish him for bringing mankind to life; but in the end he is re-deified when Apollo sees that humanity is not such a bad thing after all.

The new ballet scored a hit, running for 14 performances and returning for 13 the next season. Beethoven provided a worthy score for what proved to be a light entertainment, though not without carping that Viganò had failed to depict Prometheus’s suffering adequately. The score offers momentary delights throughout, but one of its apogees is the high-spirited Overture, which was published independently in 1804. Another highlight of Beethoven’s incidental music is the finale, where the composer unveils a theme to which he would return in three later works, most famously in the last movement of his Symphony No. 3, *Eroica*.

The opening sonority of the Overture, an unstable seventh chord in the third inversion, serves as a harmonic red herring. Apart from demonstrating the sort of musical audacity to which Beethoven was disposed, it serves to remind many concertgoers of the very similar feint that opens the composer’s First Symphony, which had been premiered almost precisely a year earlier. These two works

stand at the head of the path along which Beethoven would soon develop his own Promethean tendencies in orchestral music.

Instrumentation: pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, and trumpets, plus timpani and strings.

A Passion for Ballet

Heinrich Joseph von Collin, for whose drama *Coriolan* Beethoven would compose an overture in 1807, wrote in his memoirs about the rage for ballet in turn-of-the-century Vienna:

Popular interest ... was intensified in a great degree when, besides the ballet-master Muzarelli, a second ballet-master, Mr. Salvatore Viganò, whose wife disclosed to the eyes of the spectators a thitherto unsuspected art, also gave entertainments. The most important affairs of state are scarcely able to create a greater war of feeling than was brought about at the time by the rivalry of the two ballet-masters. Theater lovers without exception divided themselves into two parties who looked upon each other with hatred and contempt because of a difference of conviction. ... The new ballet-master [Viganò] owed his extraordinary triumph over his older rival to his restoration of his art back from the exaggerated, inexpressive artificialities of the old Italian ballet to the simple forms of nature. Of course, there was something startling in seeing a form of drama with which thitherto there had been associated only leaps, contortions, constrained positions, and complicated dances which left behind them no feeling of unity, suddenly succeeded by dramatic action, depth of feeling, and plastic beauty of representation as they were so magnificently developed in the earlier ballets of Mr. Salvatore Viganò, opening, as they did, a new realm of beauty.



Ballerina Maria Medina Viganò, wife of Salvatore Viganò; both appeared in the first production of *The Creatures of Prometheus*