Ludwig van Beethoven
Selections from the ballet score “The Creatures of Prometheus,” Opus 43

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN was baptized in Bonn, Germany, on December 17, 1770, and died in Vienna on March 26, 1827. At the request of the Milanese dancer and ballet designer Salvatore Viganò, he composed his music for the ballet “Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus” (“The Creatures of Prometheus”) in 1800 and early 1801. Planned as a tribute to Maria Theresa, second wife of the Emperor Franz of Austria, the ballet had its first performance on March 28, 1801, at the Burgtheater in Vienna, to such success that it was performed sixteen times in 1801 and thirteen times the following season.

THE SCORE OF THE “PROMETHEUS” MUSIC calls for two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, harp (in just one movement), and strings.

From his own time to the present, most people have thought of Beethoven as a revolutionary composer. In fact, while he pursued originality in his work, he never called himself a revolutionary. But there is no question that he brought a distinctive new voice to music, one so powerful as, by the end of his lifetime, to have moved the entire art in his direction. That is, certainly, revolutionary enough in practice.

Still, especially in his early career, Beethoven was careful in his choice of projects and his style in realizing them, cautious when dealing with genres in which his predecessors Haydn and Mozart were supreme (string quartet, symphony, opera, concerto), bolder when he felt he could own a genre (piano sonata, cello sonata, piano trio). Meanwhile, all his life he based what he did on precedents and authorities—always interpreting them in his own terms.

Part of Beethoven’s relation to the past was his understanding of genres. His early to middle-period theater music is distinct in sound and effect from his other work, with audible echoes of his main model for theater music, Luigi Cherubini. So when Beethoven was commissioned to write a score for an 1801 ballet called The Creatures of Prometheus, and put away other current projects to write nearly an hour of music in a few weeks, he adopted a style that to modern ears sounds light, lyrical, barely Beethovenian.

The project was not a surprising choice for Beethoven, who was at that point in the middle of establishing himself as a composer beyond his already established position as a piano virtuoso. In most of his career he was ready to turn his hand to light music if the pay was good and the project could bring him further opportunities. In other words, the practicalities of his taking on a ballet score are not hard to discern. Beethoven gave the choreographer, to the best of his abilities, what was expected: music to support the dance. What could not have been predicted is how important the results of this ballet would come to be for Beethoven and for his art.

The dancer/choreographer who commissioned the Creatures of Prometheus music was Salvatore Viganò, recently appointed ballet master to the Viennese Court. At that point Viganò’s fame across Europe equaled and probably outstripped Beethoven’s. His approach to ballet was reformist and controversial, much involved with tableaux, storytelling, and pantomime. His plot for the Prometheus ballet ran as follows. Rather than the figure from Greek myth who brought fire to humanity, this Prometheus is a demigod who carves images of a man and woman in clay and magically brings them to life. But Prometheus makes a shocking discovery: though his creatures can walk and talk, they have no souls, no reason, no humanity. In order to teach them feelings, wisdom, and moral awareness, Prometheus takes them to Parnassus and presents them to Apollo. Apollo in turn introduces the creatures to his subjects, who teach them music, tragic and comic drama, and dance.

After lots of dancing by all concerned, to everyone’s horror Prometheus is killed by a wrathful Melpomene, Muse of Tragedy. But luckily Thalia, Muse of Comedy, is on hand to cheer everybody up and bring the demigod back to life.

This story verges on absurd, but it seized Beethoven powerfully. The idea of proto-human creatures being made fully human by means of the arts was a high-Enlightenment conceit that resonated with his upbringing in liberal Bonn. These were the kind of ideas that formed him as a man and artist who set out to serve that great abstraction, Humanity.

More directly, the story was in the spirit of a hero of Beethoven’s—the poet, playwright, and philosopher Friedrich Schiller. He was author of one of the central texts of the revolutionary 1780s, An die Freude, “To Joy,” which Beethoven aspired to set to music as a teenager, and finally did in his Ninth Symphony. In his influential book On the Aesthetic Education of Man, Schiller set forth that
the ideal society can arise only from education in aesthetics, which is to say an appreciation of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, and their embodiment in Art. “It is only through Beauty,” Schiller wrote, “that man makes his way to Freedom.”

The depth and breadth of these ideas, however, are not particularly audible in Beethoven’s music, which is a series of numbers graceful, tuneful, appealing, entirely distinct from his music for concert hall and opera. The performances this week include a selection of numbers from the ballet, the most significant of which are the overture and finale.

The overture is the most serious music, elevated and Mozartian in tone, beginning dramatically with dissonant chords punctuating silence. No. 1 (Poco adagio), starting slow and pensive and turning into an Allegro, portrays Prometheus’s first encounter with his statues, whom he brings to life. No. 3 (Allegro vivace) is a minuet in which he shows tenderness to his disappointing creations and takes them to Parnassus. No. 5 (Adagio—Andante quasi Allegretto), in which Euterpe, Muse of Music, plays for the creatures and begins to enlighten them, starts with that un-Beeethovenian instrument, the harp; its second half has a poignant cello cadenza and solo, with flute. To the stern music of No. 9 (Adagio), Melpomene acts out a tragic scene, ending with her stabbing Prometheus, accusing him of fashioning creatures who will only come to grief. In this performance there follow Nos. 14 (Andante: Solo della Cassentini), 15 (Andante: Solo di Viganò), and 16 (Finale: Allegretto), in which Thalia brings the demigod back to life; in tune the music is respectively solemn and grand, joyous, and, in the finale, dancing.

In musical and philosophical terms, it is the finale that is historic. To anyone who knows Beethoven’s Symphony No. 3, the raging and radical Eroica, it will be a shock: this is the bass line and theme of the symphony’s finale, and also of the Variations for Piano, Opus 35, known as the Prometheus or Eroica Variations. In The Creatures of Prometheus, the finale takes the form of a familiar dance of the time called an englishe or Anglais. Of that dance, Schiller wrote in a letter, “I can think of no more fitting image for the ideal of social conduct than an English dance....It is all so skillfully, and yet so artlessly integrated into a form, that each seems only be following his own inclination....It is the most perfectly appropriate symbol of the assertion of one’s own freedom and regard for the freedom of others.”

Why so much attention to a dance? This was, uniquely for the time, a contredanse in which over the course of it everyone danced with everyone else. This meant, in the dance halls of the day where classes mingled, that this was the only time in which the classes danced with one another. For that reason, in the public mind the englishe had a connection to the breaking down of class, to the democratic spirit, to revolution—ideals that were shared by the progressive aristocracy of 1801, and by Beethoven.

For Beethoven the musical essence of the ballet finale, the Prometheus Variations, and the Eroica finale was in the bass line: a simple sequence of notes implying the simplest harmonies. In the ballet it perhaps symbolized the creatures in their raw form, before being enlightened by art, which is represented by the variations laid over the bass line—one of which, in both the piano and symphonic versions, involves the lifting englishe tune from the ballet.

All this is to say that in the next two years this unpretentious finale from the Prometheus ballet attached itself to Beethoven’s highest ideals, inspired a major set of piano variations, and sparked a symphony that attached itself to the Promethean spirit of the age, Napoleon (the original title of the Third Symphony was Bonaparte). In turn, the symphony marked the start of Beethoven’s full maturity, effectively revolutionized the genre of the symphony, and, in large degree likewise the art of music. Quite a resumé for a little dance number.

Jan Swafford

THE FIRST AMERICAN PERFORMANCE of Beethoven’s Overture to The Creatures of Prometheus was given by Charles Hupfeld with the Musical Fund Society in Philadelphia on March 19, 1822. William Taylor led what was billed as the first New York performance of the overture in a concert at the City Hotel on March 20, 1823. The first Boston performance of the overture was given by George J. Webb in an Academy of Music concert at the Odeon on December 28, 1844, when it was played as a piano duet by Webb and a Mr. Greatorex. Theodore Thomas led four of the score’s sixteen movements (with the billing “first time”) at a “Grand Sunday Night Concert” on December 14, 1867, at Lyric Hall in New York.

THE FIRST MUSIC FROM “THE CREATURES OF PROMETHEUS” to be played by the BSO was
the finale, as part of a program on November 18, 1882, led by Georg Henschel, who subsequently led the overture in a program of January 19, 1884. The first extended sequence of music from the score was given by Wilhelm Gericke in December 1888, since which time—aside from a few occasions on which Pierre Monteux (in 1919, 1921, and 1923), Richard Burgin (in February 1952), and Erich Leinsdorf (in October 1967) led additional selections—only the overture has been heard in BSO concerts, under the direction of Emil Paur, Max Fiedler, Serge Koussevitzky, Bruno Walter, Charles Munch, Seiji Ozawa (first in October 1976; later in April 2001, the most recent subscription performances of the overture), Joseph Silverstein, Klaus Tennstedt, Kurt Masur, Adám Fischer, Semyon Bychkov, Leon Fleisher, and Christoph Eschenbach (the BSO’s most recent Tanglewood performance of the overture, on August 16, 1996, though Eschenbach led the Philadelphia Orchestra in a more recent Tanglewood performance, in August 2006). A complete performance of Beethoven’s “Creatures of Prometheus” music under BSO auspices was given by Roger Norrington with the Camerata Salzburg (and speaker Hannes Eichmann) at Tanglewood on August 6, 2003, in Ozawa Hall, on a program with Beethoven’s “Eroica” Symphony.