

## ***Overture to the Creatures of Prometheus, Op. 43* • Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**

Scored for: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons,  
2 horns, 2 trumpets, Timpani and strings

By the year 1800, the thirty-year-old Beethoven had established himself as one of the most prominent musicians in Vienna; a city filled with exceptional artists from across Europe. Commissions for new works, primarily piano sonatas, string quartets, and symphonies, were regularly requested of Beethoven from the cultural elite of the city and his reputation began to spread throughout the continent. Among the newer residents of the city was the Italian-born dancer and choreographer, Salvatore Vigano (1769-1821). Vigano's reputation was based on his simplification of the exaggerated and artificial movements and gestures that had characterized Italian ballet. Empress Maria Theresa had appointed Vigano master of the ballet for the Imperial Court. Each year he produced an original work for the court, often composing the music himself. However, for his 1801 production Vigano wished to tackle the subject of the Prometheus legend and he sought out Beethoven to provide the music.

Beethoven was only too happy to accept. He had been looking for an opportunity to write a work for the stage, since ballet, theatre, and opera were among the most popular musical entertainments in the city. And, unlike symphonic performances, ballets were typically performed multiple times, which would mean increased income for the composer. The nature of telling stories through music also fit well with Beethoven's personality and, as one commentator put it, "doubtless the Prometheus story itself, with its tale of a hero bringing enlightenment to mankind, appealed to the young composer." Prometheus was premiered at the Burgtheater on March 28, 1801, and was reasonably successful: it was performed over twenty times during the next two seasons. However, the style of Vigano soon went out of fashion and the music for Prometheus fell into relative obscurity. Beethoven published the overture in 1804, but the complete score for the ballet, consisting of sixteen separate numbers, was not published until long after his death.

The story of the ballet is a perversion of the Promethean myth. Beethoven thought that many possibilities for dramatic representation of the rebellious and heroic character of Prometheus were unduly ignored—but he had no say in plot development as the story was set up principally as an excuse to create set-pieces for the dancers. In brief: Prometheus creates a man and a woman from clay and water, and brings them to life with fire he has stolen from the gods on Mount Olympus. He intended to combine the best qualities of the animals, but he failed to give them the power of reason. He seeks to destroy his creatures, but Apollo rescues them and takes them to Parnassus, where they learn music. Melpomene, the muse of tragedy, teaches them sorrow, Thalia, the muse of comedy teaches them to laugh, Terpsichore teaches them to dance, and Bacchus, introduces them to the pleasures of revelling. The creatures finally appreciate all the beauties of nature, and with one last solemn dance they embark on the journey of life.

Beethoven conceived the overture as a brief overview of the coming drama, a foretaste of its emotional journey. The Prometheus Overture is extremely concise (clocking in at barely five minutes) and powerful—it is easy to understand why Beethoven frequently used this overture for his own public performances. Massive hammer-strike chords open the slow introduction, which is followed by a sentimental tune presented in the oboes and horns. This proceeds without pause into the Allegro molto con brio. As the marking suggests, this portion of the overture is performed at a blistering pace, introduced quietly by a *moto perpetuo* theme in the first violins. Woodwinds in pairs announce the upwardly rising second theme subject, echoed by the strings. After a brief development section, the opening materials return and a vigorous conclusion anticipates the rising of the curtain as the ballet begins.