

Coriolanus Overture

March 7, 2009

Several of Beethoven's most popular masterpieces give musical expression to a tremendous struggle within the human soul. Some, like the Third and Fifth Symphonies, finish in a blaze of heroic glory. The famous "Appassionata" Piano Sonata finishes in a storm of heroic destruction. The "Coriolanus Overture," dating from the same peak of Beethoven's creativity, ends in the hero's undoing.

Beethoven loved reading Plutarch, whose parallel lives of great men of Greece and Rome have been called "a school for heroes." Coriolanus was a conquering but proud General of the early Roman Republic who, considering himself at one point insufficiently appreciated by his fellow-Romans, offered his services to their enemy, the Volsci, and with a Volscian army advanced on Rome to tear it to pieces. Roman leaders, senators, friends and family begged him in turn to spare his own country. In vain. Only the pleading of his own mother at last broke down his anger. Sparing Rome, he doomed himself to exile and death amongst the Volsci.

Beethoven wrote his "Coriolanus Overture" to introduce the theatrical presentation not of the last of Shakespeare's great tragedies, but of a play with the same title by a contemporary dramatist, H.J.v.Collin. The Overture is not programme music insofar as it stands on its own, purely as a drama of the soul in Sonata form, regardless of the story which inspired it. Nevertheless, it is easy to read the music in connection with that episode of Roman history:—

The Exposition's first Subject in two parts would portray the General's anger (bars 1–14) and his agitation (15–27), developed angrily (29–50), but running straight into the smooth and lyrical second Subject (52–77), which it is easy to visualize as the tender pleading of a strong and sure Roman

matron. Anger returns (84–95), to fade into a little falling motif (96–100), which will quietly monopolize the Development (101–152) – mother winning the argument by gently wearing her son down? With the Recapitulation (152–229) the General's anger breaks out again, more violent than ever (167–176), only to run into the pleading, also more insistent than before (178–206) – with Beethoven, a Recapitulation is liable to sharpen rather than soften the conflict which enlivened the Exposition!

The Coda, or tail of the piece (230–314), begins with mother again winning the argument (230–240), stalled by her lyrical pleading (242–254). A final confrontation (255–269) and argument (270–275) conclude in a last outburst of the General's wrath (276–285), only this time it breaks down in a series of falling and quietening chords (286–294) for just the first phrase of the General's agitation to re-appear four times (297, 299, 300, 306), each time slower and more subdued than the last, until the Overture dies away in silence. The General and his wrath are undone. Rome is saved!

Catholics, if you do not wish to tear Rome to pieces, listen to your Mother! Non-Catholics, if you do not wish to help to tear your country to pieces, listen to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of us all, from the foot of the Cross!

Kyrie eleison.