

## MUSIC

# How Beethoven Set Schiller's Poetry

According to Ludwig van Beethoven's biographer Alexander Wheelock Thayer, the composer penned the following reflections during early 1817:

"He who wishes to reap tears should sow love.

"The Compassionate Brothers in *Tell*, form a semi-circle around the dead man, and sing in deep tones:

[Beethoven here inscribes the lines of Schiller's "Monks' Song," and continues:]

"This one thing I feel and clearly comprehend: Possessions are not the highest things in life, but guilt is the greatest evil. . . .

"Sensual enjoyment without a union of souls is bestial and will always remain bestial; after it, one experiences not a trace of noble sentiment but rather regret."

These lines reveal the powerful spiritual bond which united Beethoven with the German poet Friedrich Schiller, and indicate that during these months, Beethoven was intensively studying Schiller's three last plays. With *William Tell*, Beethoven refers to the final scene of Act IV, in which the monks gather around the corpse of the tyrant slain by Tell's arrow. Beethoven's comment on guilt is an almost exact quotation of the final three lines of Schiller's play *The Bride of Messina*. And only a few months before this, Beethoven had composed the canon "Kurz ist der

The study of classical settings of poetry is perhaps the most efficient way to learn the principles of poetic composition. Selections offered here are either previously unpublished, or no longer available in print.

## Gesang der Mönche

Rasch tritt der Tod den menschen an,  
Es ist ihm keine Frist gegeben.  
Es stürzt ihn mitten in der Bahn,  
Es reißt ihn fort vom vollen Leben.  
Bereitet oder nicht zu gehen!  
Er muß vor seinem Richter stehen!

## Monks' Song

Quickly comes Man's death,  
He is given no reprieve.  
It strikes him mid-course,  
It rips him from the prime of life.  
Whether ready to go or not!  
He must stand before his judge!

Schmerz, und ewig ist die Freude" ("The pain is short, but the joy is eternal"), based on the final lines of yet another Schiller play, *The Virgin of Orleans*.

Beethoven's musical setting of the "Monks' Song" typifies what united him with Schiller: the drive to seek universal truth in any material at hand, thus transforming the lowly into the sublime and the beautiful. In *William Tell*, Tell's justified slaying of the tyrant is followed not by jubilation—which would have degraded the audience by celebrating death—but rather by the monks' admonition to the members of the audience to reflect on whether they would be able to bear the awful responsibility to save the nation, borne by the patriot Tell.

Shortly after he wrote the above lines, Beethoven chose to compose a setting of the "Monks' Song" in dedication to his dear friend, the violinist Wenzel Krumpholz, who died suddenly on May 3, 1817. Krumpholz had played an important role in Beethoven's development beginning in 1795, when Beethoven began to take violin lessons with him. Krumpholz soon became one of Beethoven's staunchest defenders, and, as a

frequent visitor to his apartment, was a willing sounding-board for his musical compositions.

Beethoven's student Carl Czerny reports that Krumpholz "was a musical enthusiast whose passion for music was carried to the most extravagant lengths. . . . [a]nd Beethoven, who ordinarily was most reticent with everyone regarding his musical projects, told Krumpholz about all his ideas, played every new composition for him time and again, and improvised for him every day."

After the "Monks' Song," Beethoven's next setting of a Schiller text was his greatest, the "Ode to Joy" in the last movement of the Ninth Symphony. This was the culmination of his thirty-year effort to develop an entirely fitting setting of a Schiller poem—one which would not just fit the words like a well-tailored jacket (as Goethe had mistakenly demanded), but which would reflect Schiller's requirement, expressed in a letter to Gottfried Körner, that "Music must never paint in words and surrender itself to petty game-playing, but rather, it must follow the spirit of the poetry in its entirety!"

—John Sigerson

# Gesang der Mönche

aus Schiller's Wilhelm Tell

in Musik gesetzt von

## Ludwig van Beethoven

Ziemlich langsam

Tenor I

Tenor II

Bass

Rasch tritt der Tod den Men - schen an; es ist ihm kei - ne Frist ge -

Rasch tritt der Tod den Men - schen an; es ist ihm kei - ne Frist ge -

Rasch tritt der Tod den Men - schen an; es ist ihm kei - ne Frist ge -

ge - ben. Es stürzt ihn mit - ten in der Bahn, es reißt ihn fort vom vol - len Le - ben. Be -

ge - ben. Es stürzt ihn mit - ten in der Bahn, es reißt ihn fort vom vol - len Le - ben. Be -

ge - ben. Es stürzt ihn mit - ten in der Bahn, es reißt ihn fort vom vol - len Le - ben. Be -

*cresc.*

*cresc.*

*cresc.*

rei - tet o - der nicht, zu ge - hen, er, er muß vor sei - nem Rich - ter ste - hen!

rei - tet o - der nicht, zu ge - hen, er, er muß vor sei - nem Rich - ter ste - hen!

rei - tet o - der nicht, zu ge - hen, er, er muß vor sei - nem Rich - ter ste - hen!