

Elegischer Gesang, Op. 118

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

B. December 16, 1770, Bonn, Germany

D. March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria

Premiered on August 5, 1814.

Scored for strings (approx. 4 minutes).

From 1804 to 1815, Beethoven periodically lived in a house owned by the Baron Johann von Pasqualati (1777–1830) on the ramparts of Vienna with a splendid view over the Glacis to the hills north of town. It was one of his favorite lodgings, and every time the perennially restless composer moved out, the Baron reportedly said, “The rooms will not be rented; Beethoven will return.” On August 5, 1811, Pasqualati lost his wife, Eleonore, at the tender age of 24 years. In the summer of 1814, presumably for the third anniversary of her death, Beethoven set a brief poem to music as a memorial “to the transfigured spouse of my esteemed friend Pascolati” as he would later write on the copyist’s score, with his usual uncertain grasp of orthography. The poet has never been identified. The single stanza can be paraphrased, “Gently as you lived, so have you died: too holy for pain! Let no eye weep for the homecoming of this heavenly spirit.” Beethoven cast these lines in a brief ternary form (ABA). The hymn-like outer sections enclose a fugal section in the minor mode (“let no eye weep”) which brightens marvelously on the word for “heavenly.” This luminous detail compensates for the trenchant setting of “for pain” in the first section (“zu heilig für den Schmerz!”)—a line the returning A-section tellingly omits.

In the standard catalogue of Beethoven’s works, one reads that this “elegiac song” was first performed by a vocal quartet with string quartet accompaniment in Pasqualati’s house on August 5, 1814. The first edition of July 1826 also provides for piano accompaniment. While these are viable options, performance with full chorus and string orchestra is undeniably effective. Just months after the *Elegischer Gesang* was published in July 1826, Beethoven would enter the final stages of his own illness. Pasqualati, solicitous to the end, sent gifts of food and wine. It is touchingly human to read Beethoven’s request for “a cherry compote, but without lemons..., a light pudding, almost like gruel,” and “champagne, but please send a champagne glass with it.”

This is Detroit Symphony Orchestra premiere of Beethoven’s *Elegischer Gesang*.

DSO SHOP @ THE MAX RECOMMENDS:

Beethoven, *Elegischer Gesang*, Robert Shaw conducting the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, Telarc 80602.