Emilie Mayer (1812 -1883)

Faust Overture Op.46

Emilie Luise Frederica Mayer was a German Romantic composer who became one of the most

prolific female composers of the 19th century often being called the "Female Beethoven". ln

addition to composing, she was a sculptor, and many of her sculptures are in collections

across Europe to this day. She composed eight symphonies and numerous chamber works,

piano sonatas, and orchestral overtures. Despite the limited opportunities for women in

professional music during her time, she achieved wide recognition and public performance of

her music across Germany. Modern performances of her symphonies and chamber works

reveal a distinctive voice, although clearly influenced by Beethoven and Mendelssohn.

Her harmonies are characterized by sudden shifts in tonality and her rhythms are often very complex, with several layers interacting at once.

Emilie Mayer was born in Friedland, in the North-East of Germany, the third of five children, and

eldest daughter, of a wealthy pharmacist. Her mother died when she was three years otd. She

started piano lessons at age five when she first started composing. ln 1840 at the age of 28, her

circumstances changed when her father committed suicide leaving her with a large

inheritance. A year later she moved to Stettin (now Szczecin), in Northern Poland where she

studied composition with Carl Loewe, a central figure in the musical life of the city. tn 1847,

after the premiere of her first two symphonies she moved to Berlin to continue her

compositional studies with Wilhelm Wieprecht. ln 1850, he led his orchestra in a concert

comprising only Mayer's compositions. lt was attended by the Queen of Prussia who shortty

afterwards awarded her the gold medal of art. With critical and popular acclaim, she

continued composing a wide range of works, travelling for their performances throughout Europe. In 1876 Mayer settled again in Berlin where her music was frequently performed and she re-established herself as a significant figure in the city's cultural circles. She was a honorary member of the Philharmonic Society in Munich and was the co-chair of the Berlin Opera Academy.

The only contemporary hint about Emilie Mayer's personality is a Biographical Sketch written by Elisabeth Sangalli-Marr, a writer who advocated equal education for women. She says that Emilie Mayer "had renounced the binding bondage of marriage for the sake of art. She claimed music as her life's calling, and considered it her life-companion, the ideal of her loving, believing, hoping."

Emilie Mayer died in in 1883 in Berlin and was buried at the Holy Trinity Church not far from Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn. She was, by far, the most famous German woman composer during her lifetime but little of her music has been performed since her death, a situation we are helping to remedy tonight.

The publication of Goethe's Faust inspired Berlioz, Wagner, Gounod and Schumann who saw in

that complex, tragic figure an ideaI subject for musical compositions. The sixty-eight-year-old

Emilie Mayer was not discouraged from competing with such male geniuses; in 1881 she

cmposed her "Faust Overture" which, contrasting with the other pieces in today's concert,

was an instant success.

Although Mayer wrote an abstract concert overture rather than s a tone poem telling " The

story of Faust, Mephistopheles and Marguerite", the slow dark sinuous introduction might be a

portrait of the devilish Mephistopheles. This leads to a vigorous, rather grim, *Allegro*, perphaps

depicting Faust striving for infinite knowledge? The more gentle middle section could be

associated with Marguerite. The only clue that Mayer was thinking in this way comes in the

overture's closing pages: she wrote in the score at the moment the first *Allegro* theme moves

from grim minor key to hopefuI major, "She is saved", a reference to Marguerite's redemption in

Part ll of Goethe's Faust.