

Joachim Nikolas Eggert (1779–1813)

Biography

The circumstances in which public concerts in Sweden found themselves after the assassination of King Gustav III in 1792 were anything but happy, and a decline over the next decade became evident. In December of that year the Kapellmästare Joseph Martin Kraus, arguably Sweden's greatest composer of the eighteenth-century symphony, died shortly thereafter, and his other colleagues, Johann Friedrich Grenser and Johan David Zander, both of whom were mainstays in the public concerts, were to follow over the next four years, leaving Sweden with a dearth of capable composers. The arrival of the violinist and singer Edouard Du Puy in 1794 augured well for a revival, but in the aftermath of the political situation of 1800, both he and Abbé Vogler were forced to leave Stockholm. Therefore music in both public concerts and opera stagnated until the summer of 1803, when Joachim Nikolas Eggert (1779–1813) arrived in Sweden.

Eggert was born off the Baltic coast of Germany on the island of Rügen in the small village of Gingst on 22 February 1779. He was the son of a cobbler and even though he displayed musical talent during his youth, it was not until the age of eleven that he began to learn music from a local performer, who believed that notes were a waste of time and one should only learn by ear. Fortunately a local organist, Johann Friedrich Dammas, took the child under his wing in 1791 and instructed him for three years in theory, violin, keyboard, and harp. Against his father's wishes, Eggert went to Stralsund in 1794 to continue his training under Friedrich Kuhlow. In 1800 he completed his education in music composition in Braunschweig under Ferdinand Fischer and Friedrich Gottlob Fleischer and two years later was offered the post of Kapellmeister at the court of Mecklenburg-Schwerin. There he found circumstances less than ideal and left after only six months.

Though he contemplated giving up music during a brief sojourn at home in Gingst, he decided to travel to St Petersburg to join the Russian Imperial Chapel. A serious illness caused him to abandon his journey in Stockholm, however, where he was offered a position as a violinist. Over the next several years his reputation as a composer spread and in 1807 he was appointed Kapellmeister and a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Music. When the new monarch, Carl XIII, reorganized the establishment with the intent on returning it to its former glory in 1810, Eggert was designated to go on a grand tour. Unfortunately he fell fatally ill and died on 14 April 1813 at the home of one of his students who lived in the Swedish countryside.

Eggert was well-known for his progressive musical work. As conductor of the public concerts, he introduced Beethoven to Stockholm audiences in 1808, and over the next years performed Haydn's late oratorios and Mozart's *Magic Flute*. He was himself lauded for his music for the plays *The Moors in Spain* and *Svante Sture*, as well as his chamber music; nine of his ten quartets were published and critically acclaimed throughout Europe. His most innovative works, however, were his four symphonies—the fifth was left unfinished at his death—representing the epitome of the Swedish symphony between Kraus and Franz Berwald. He also collaborated with his pupil Erik Drake in gathering one of the first collections of Swedish folk-music.

Symphonies

Symphony No. 1 in C major

1. *Adagio mesto – Allegro con brio*
2. *Andante*
3. *Minuet and Trio: Allegro*
4. *Finale: Allegro vivace*

The main works are, of course the two symphonies. The Symphony in C major is a large-scale conventional piece with hints of both Mozart and Haydn in its lyrical themes and fast-paced tempos. It was perhaps the first work written in Stockholm when Eggert arrived in the city, for it had its première in a private performance in April 1805, conducted by Johann Christian Friedrich Haeffner, Eggert's predecessor and soon to be dismissed conductor. The overwhelming response allowed for a public première two weeks later.

In the long opening Allegro, which follows a slow introduction in C minor filled with powerful chords and dissonance, the main theme is developed in place, almost sounding Schubertian. Eggert uses contrast and a full percussion section to give the work colour, and in the development section he modulates toward some of the more remote keys, much as Beethoven does.

The second movement is his most Haydnesque, a theme and variations that seems as if it belongs to one of the London symphonies. Woodwind countermelodies punctuate the development of the simple main theme, which has a central section with large percussion similar to Haydn's Military Symphony. The woodwind writing is particularly colourful, providing shading to the various strings, including a quirky flute part.

The third movement may be marked Minuet and Trio, but it is fast, in C minor, and with a drive that is decidedly Scherzo-like. The use of wind textures foreshadows Mendelssohn in its rich harmonies and contrasting use that seems right out of his *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The final movement, a variation on a Swedish popular folksong entitled *Gustafs skål*, is a perpetual motion dynamo. Fragmented motives are sequenced and there is a brief display of complex fugal counterpoint before it collapses to a false cadence. The final coda, with scurrying basses, is a magnificent tour de force that brings the entire symphony to a raucous conclusion.

Symphony No. 2 in g minor

1. *Adagio – Allegro con brio*
2. *Andante*
3. *Menuetto: Allegretto*
4. *Finale: Allegro*

The Symphony in G minor was probably written during 1806 and was intended to be performed in December of that year but Eggert withdrew it for lack of trumpet players; the work calls for a trio instead of the usual pair. It was apparently given its première a few months later. The score bears a dedication to Adolf Fredrik Skjöldebrand, who was governor general of Stockholm, later Intendant of the Royal Spectacles, and an amateur composer himself (a current notion that this work ought to be subtitled "Skjöldebrand" is untenable, given that this is only a dedication and not a characteristic of the work). The four movements call for substantial orchestral forces, and yet Eggert takes great care not to overuse them in waves of sound.

Indeed, the opening introduction is almost simple and hymn-like with a gentle major key bassoon solo that develops over a substantial length of time. G minor arrives with rolling timpani and a powerful Sturm und Drang theme that quickly moves to the relative major and a lively theme that sounds right out of Schubert in that it is tossed back and forth among the various wind instruments and strings. This is reiterated at its return in the last section in a major key, completely diffusing the minor key stormy mood.

The second movement is a theme and variations that begins with a languid horn theme that evokes the deep German forests of Carl Maria von Weber in its folk-song qualities, followed by a repeat in the ethereal flutes. The third variation, however, suddenly turns to the minor with relentless and powerful brass chords (and several contrasting major key interludes that inject a sense of peace into the intense variation). Afterwards, spent and calm, it ends as softly as it began.

The third movement has a flowing theme with the minuet metre not immediately apparent; it is restless and mysterious, rising only to a peak before the return of the theme and it ends with a brief timpani tattoo. The trio has a steady brass gait like an Imperial march.

The finale is a huge sonata-form movement that incorporates Eggert's penchant for long lyrical lines and internal variation. The rhythmic motion is lively and jaunty, with broad orchestral sweeps of sound that eventually wind up in the major key and a brilliant finish that foreshadows Schubert.

Symphony No. 3 in E flat major

1. *Adagio maestoso – Allegro spirito*

2. *Marche: Grave*

3. *Fugue: Adagio maestoso – Allegro*

The Symphony in E flat is an unusual work in which a large-scale sonata form first movement is bookended by a gigantic fugal finale where the main subject is presented in another slow introduction and sped up as the main theme of the Allegro that follows. It was composed probably during 1806–1807 and had its première in May of the latter year in a concert largely featuring Eggert's own compositions. In this work he makes good use of the disciplined Stockholm Hovkapell, which at the time numbered about sixty players. He also writes for three independent trombones; the first performance of this symphony predates Beethoven's Fifth, often cited as the work in which trombones are featured, by eighteen months, though the Hovkapell actually had these instruments on the payroll as early as 1790. Both the finale and the slow march second movement were adapted from his 1805 Funeral Music for Duke Adolph Frederik, and thus the entire symphony seems to have been a bit of a pastiche, rather than a cohesive whole.

In the first movement, the main theme is elaborate and developed in place, with many abrupt rhythmic changes from duple to triple and a wide range of dynamic markings. He uses orchestral colour to create kaleidoscopic moments of light and shade, and even as the movement draws to a close with a huge climax, there is a collapse down to a triple piano, forcing it to become more introspective. The effect would foreshadow the Romantic tone poem, save that it prefaces two extremely severe movements that are terse and unyielding in terms of their mood.

The march is a solemn procession, seemingly fit for a Sarastro and his ethereal realm.

The introduction to the fugue, with its stentorian trombone theme, seems implacable in mood, though the textures are lighter and airier following the initial announcement. The fugue itself with an all-enveloping violin counter-theme is strict and powerful, though it fades away at the end to a quadruple piano, ending on a note of mystery.

Symphony No. 4 in c minor

1. *Adagio – Allegro assai*

2. *Adagio*

3. *Menuetto*

4. *Finale: Allegro con spirito*

The Symphony in C minor was probably composed about 1810 as Eggert settled in to the new regime under Carl XIII after a disastrous war and the abdication of Gustav IV Adolph. It appears to have been given its première either the following year or in 1812, just before Eggert set off on his fatal journey south. It was about this year that Breitkopf published the symphony, possibly in advance of the composer's arrival in Germany and elsewhere.

The opening powerful chords outline a solemn steady march, indeed, almost funereal that dissolves into a mysterious, tension-filled Allegro with a nicely Schubertian second theme, varied at times with transparent orchestration. Cascades of strings and winds lead into an expansive development of new thematic material. This too dissolves into interplay between the winds before the entire movement ends with a powerful coda in C major replete with full percussion.

The second movement features an idyllic pastorale with flutes in their lower register above a flowing clarinet line. The lyrical line evokes a sense of peace and tranquillity, only to be interrupted by booming drums like distant cannon and a unison military theme which becomes harsh and implacable. The peaceful main theme attempts to reestablish itself, but variations on the military tune overwhelm it with trumpet calls and a swirling countermelody on strings. Finally a cavalry charge occurs with clashing cymbals and drums, only to fade away into the languid opening theme that gradually fades into the distance.

The minuet is quite Haydnesque, with a steady theme that is spun out sequentially before moving into a lilting Ländler in the trio.

The finale is based upon a unison brass motive that devolves into a round dance in the major key that seems joyous, with motives bouncing back and forth between the strings and winds. The entire central section is a complex fugue and the ending fades into the background before three final powerful chords. It has been said that Eggert wrote a symphony entitled "War and Peace", and although it is not certain which of the four this was, a strong case can be made for this last completed work, for nowhere else in his oeuvre is there such a harsh depiction of military drama as in the second movement.

Largo (alternative version)

The alternative slow movement to the Fourth Symphony is one of the most powerful and progressive works among Eggert's compositions. In F minor, it begins sparingly with a solo horn, soon joined by a second in an arabesque that wanders about creating dissonances that seem almost Wagnerian. The duet concludes with an unanswered question that fades away before the strings enter with a lyrical line that evokes Kraus, to which the occasional wind solo provides a contrast that seems as if out of Mendelssohn or Brahms. A full orchestra section heightens the intensity before the solo horn returns for a plaintive farewell. While it cannot be determined if this or its F major counterpart came first, the unusual sound and orchestration of this movement points the way to a future that Eggert, unfortunately, did not live to see.

Symphony No. 5 in D minor (fragment)

Indeed, in his last work, the unfinished Symphony No. 5 in D minor, he managed only to write as far as the beginning of the exposition, but the slow introduction, with twenty bars of a low D and rest in the double basses and nothing else, points to a continuation of this progressive and dramatic style evoked in this brief movement.

Stage music

Overture: The Moors in Spain

The Overture to *Mohrerne i Spanien* (The Moors in Spain), was part of a series of pieces composed for insertion into the comedy by Mårten Altén, based upon a French original work, as well as the incidental music to the drama *Svante Sture* by Per Adolf Granberg from 1812.

The overture is a sprightly piece that leaps headfirst into a rollicking main theme with scurrying violins rushing about madly. When the “Moorish” percussion is added, the work bubbles, with moments reminiscent of Carl Maria von Weber (*Abu Hassan*) and Rossini not far behind. It is a compact work that seems to end almost as abruptly as it began.

Incidental Music to ”Svante Sture och Märta Lejonhufvud”

Marche

Entr'acte between Acts I and II

Act II: Postlude

Entr'acte between Acts II and III

Act III: Prelude: Marche

Marche and Chorale

Entr'acte between Acts III and IV

Entr'acte between Acts IV and V

Eggert did not write an overture to Granberg’s nationalist play *Svante Sture*, a play about the madness of King Erik in the sixteenth century. Instead he composed a series of entr’actes, beginning with a simple march for woodwind. The first entr’acte has an extended solo for bassoon, almost a concerto movement, though the march tempo heard in persists. This is followed by a rushing short movement in D major, with tremolo strings, which is almost a throwback to Mozart. The second entr’acte is a regal march with trumpets and drum fanfares. This contrasts with a very Beethovenian march for strings and winds that concludes Act II, and which also serves as a prelude to Act III. The next march is in G minor and more sinister in mood, though it has a central section consisting of a solemn chorale marking the intercession of the nuns of St Clara in the play to save Count Sture from his mercurial sovereign. This makes the return of the march seem even implacable. The penultimate entr’acte between Acts III and IV is a gentle contrast, a bit of pre-Brahmsian sentimentality indicating the love of Sture and Märta Leijonhuvud, his wife. The final entr’acte is a forceful C major march with alternating trumpets and horns giving it a regal air of triumph. All of these movements are short and succinct, indicating their rôle as subsidiary to the drama on stage.

* * * * *

Joachim Nicholas Eggert should be seen today as one of the more progressive symphonic composers of his age. He ought to be considered as one of the more important composers of the Beethoven era, even though he did not compete in Central European musical spheres. His works,

though few in number, demonstrate a forward-thinking compositional skill that, had he lived longer, might have competed with his German and Austrian colleagues in pointing the way to the future of the symphony in the nineteenth century.

A Note on the Numbering of Eggert's Symphonies

Although Eggert wrote only four symphonies, with a fifth incomplete beyond the exposition of the first movement, the numbering of these has varied considerably since work was begun on them by Stig Walin in 1942. Various proposals based upon a fluid composition history have been proposed by a number of scholars, including the present author (in 1983 in the series *The Symphony 1720–1830*).

The current numbering is expected to be the final one, given that documentary research into the dates of composition, particularly by the late Avishai Kallai, has left little doubt as to their order. The only changes that might be forthcoming is if another symphony (or possibly more than one) dating from the period prior to his arrival in Sweden come to light in the future. In any case these would be analogous to Beethoven, whose canon of nine symphonies is vouchsafed, though his official first was written only about the age of thirty.

Bertil van Boer