

Zhang Conducts Beethoven

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Kernis: *Musica celestis*. Imagine the sound of angels singing in heaven. That was Aaron Jay Kernis' idea for *Musica celestis*. The serene beauty of medieval music also influenced this string orchestra movement.

Tchaikovsky: *Variations on a Rococo Theme*. Tchaikovsky adored Mozart. His virtuosic *Variations on a Rococo Theme* pays tribute to Mozartean grace and elegance while dazzling us with breathtaking writing for the solo cellist.

Beethoven: *Symphony No. 6, "Pastoral."* Nowhere in Beethoven's works does Romanticism express itself more richly than in the "Pastoral" Symphony. Beethoven was a nature lover. Bird calls, babbling brooks and a thunderstorm are highlights of this tuneful symphony.

KERNIS: *Musica celestis*

AARON JAY KERNIS

Born: January 15, 1960, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Composed: String Quartet No. 1 composed in 1990; arranged for string orchestra in 1991.

World Premiere: March 30, 1992, in San Francisco; Ransom Wilson conducted Sinfonia San Francisco.

NJSO Premiere: These are the NJSO premiere performances.

Duration: 11 minutes

Aaron Jay Kernis was an up-and-coming talent even before he snared the 1998 Pulitzer Prize in music for his Second String Quartet. He has fulfilled his promise, becoming one of America's most distinguished composers.

His education and stylistic mentors have been widespread and eclectic, including study with John Adams at the San Francisco Conservatory, Charles Wuorinen and Elias Tanenbaum at Manhattan School of Music, and Morton Subotnick and Jacob Druckman at Yale. His music is equally eclectic, ranging from profound and spiritual works to those with gleeful abandon. Kernis was awarded the prestigious Grawemeyer Award (the largest purse in classical music) in 2002. He was artistic adviser to the Minnesota Orchestra for 10 years. Since 2003, he has served on the faculty of Yale University.

Kernis' First String Quartet, composed when he was 30, is a large-scale, traditional multi-movement work that shows both respect for and command of traditional form. At the same time, its slow movement, which Kernis arranged for string orchestra as *Musica celestis*, brings to mind the music of such modern mystics as the Estonian Arvo Pärt and the Polish Henryk Mikolaj Górecki.

A composer's note in the printed score cites more ancient influences. Kernis writes:

'Musica celestis is inspired by the medieval conception of that phrase, which refers to the singing of the angels in heaven in praise of God without end. ("The office of singing pleases God if it is performed with an attentive mind, when in this way, we imitate the choirs of angels who

are said to sing the Lord's praises without ceasing." — Aurelian of Rome, translated by Barbara Newman.)

'I don't particularly believe in angels, but found this to be a potent image, reinforced by listening to medieval music, especially the soaring work of Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179). *Musica celestis* follows a simple, spacious melody and harmonic pattern through a number of variations and modulations, and is framed by an introduction and coda.'

Whether Kernis drew his inspiration from a medieval abbess or, subliminally, from other music of our own time is not, ultimately, the point. Mood and communication are. *Musica celestis* evokes a sense of timelessness. A central section that grows progressively more agitated reminds us of the frenetic pace so many of us lead, but Kernis' return to celestial serenity for the work's close is a gentle reminder of what really matters in our world.

Instrumentation: strings.

TCHAIKOVSKY: *Variations on a Rococo Theme*, Op. 33

PYOTR ILYCH TCHAIKOVSKY

Born: May 7, 1840, in Votkinsk, Viatka district of Russia

Died: November 6, 1893, in St. Petersburg, Russia

Composed: December 1876

World Premiere: December 30, 1877, in Moscow. Wilhelm Fitzenhagen was the soloist; Nikolai Rubinstein conducted.

NJSO Premiere: 1934–35 season. Alfred Wallenstein was the soloist; Rene Pollain conducted.

Duration: 18 minutes

The Russian composer Tchaikovsky was an emotional man who was subject to extreme mood swings. For several months in 1876, Tchaikovsky sank into a depression. His financial situation was precarious.

He had not yet been contacted by Nadejda von Meck, the wealthy widow whose generosity would later allow him to devote himself to composition free of monetary concerns. His confidence in his own talent had been severely shaken by some career setbacks. Yet, in spite of this psychological state, some of his music reflects high spirits as well as sadness.

During the second half of 1876, Tchaikovsky composed three major orchestral works so vastly different in character that it is astonishing they were written by the same person. First was the *Marche Slave*, Op. 31, a frankly patriotic and popular showpiece. The next was *Francesca da Rimini*, Op. 32, a dark and brooding treatment of the story from Dante's *Inferno* that the NJSO performs in March 2018. With *Variations on a Rococo Theme*, Tchaikovsky did an about-face from the sweeping, Wagnerian gestures of *Francesca*, reaching instead for the pristine clarity and classic elegance of the late 18th century.

The term rococo comes from the French word *rocaille*, meaning decorative shell work. In the visual arts it emphasizes elegant decoration, a light touch and wit. In music, rococo style connotes elegance, simplicity (in comparison to complicated Baroque textures) and graceful, pleasing melodies.

Rococo Variations is one of the most challenging works in the cello literature. Like the composer's later *Mozartiana* Suite, it pays homage to Mozart, who was Tchaikovsky's musical idol, even though he died a half-century before Tchaikovsky was born. Two of Tchaikovsky's biographers, Edward Garden and David Brown, have also suggested a motive of escapism in the frankly reflective variations. Garden sees them "in a world of happy make-believe where the frustrations and terrors of present existence could be forgotten for a time in the contemplation of the past."

Tchaikovsky composed the work for Wilhelm Karl Friedrich Fitzenhagen, a friend who taught at the Moscow Conservatory. Fitzenhagen played the piece on tour, and his championship of the work contributed greatly to Tchaikovsky's growing reputation abroad. After a performance at the prestigious Wiesbaden Festival in 1879, Fitzenhagen reported to Tchaikovsky that the great pianist and composer Franz Liszt had exclaimed, "Here, at last, is music again."

The piece consists of a theme, seven variations and two cadenzas. The four-square theme is preceded by a wistful, “once upon a time” orchestral introduction before the cello plays the melody. Each variation presents formidable challenges to the soloist, in several places exploiting the uppermost range of the instrument.

While the *Rococo Variations* continue to strike awe into the hearts of cellists, their accessibility and transparent grace have made them a great favorite of audiences.

Instrumentation: woodwinds and horns in pairs, strings and solo cello.

BEETHOVEN: Symphony No. 6 in F Major, Op. 68, “Pastoral”

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born: December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: 1808

World Premiere: December 22, 1808, in Vienna.

NJSO Premiere: 1941–42 season; Frieder Weissmann conducted.

Duration: 39 minutes

Beethoven’s nine symphonies had an enormous impact on the development of 19th-century orchestral literature. Each one represented some aspect of experimentation and break with tradition.

Beethoven’s exploratory gestures were sometimes less adventuresome in the early works, but not always: the Second Symphony, for example, introduced for the first time the concept of a scherzo in lieu of a minuet. Similarly, the later symphonies tend to conform more with our perception of romantic rather than classic. Yet the Eighth, Beethoven’s penultimate symphony, is in many ways his most conservative, and a conscious salute to 18th-century convention.

Signature Work for the Romantic Era

None of the nine, however, captured the public imagination more than the “Pastoral.” In the decades following his death, when Beethoven worship took on near-reverential proportions throughout Europe, the “Pastoral” remained his most popular symphony. Because it has five movements and uniquely incorporates Beethoven’s own programmatic titles, it appealed to the poetic 19th-century imagination, even spawning a sub-genre of romantic imagery depicting Beethoven composing by a brook. Yet it still retains strong bonds to the Viennese symphonic tradition of Mozart and Haydn. Like the Eighth Symphony, whose tonality of F major the Sixth shares, it is in many ways a reflective rather than innovative work, with stronger roots in the 18th century than have been generally acknowledged. Nevertheless, the “Pastoral” has generally been regarded as the most Romantic of Beethoven’s orchestral works. It exerted considerable influence on the generation of composers immediately following Beethoven.

Fraternal twins

A major factor in understanding the “Pastoral” Symphony is acquaintance with its companion piece, the Fifth. Beethoven labored on both symphonies in 1807 and 1808. They were premiered on the same concert in December 1808, published together as Op. 67 and 68 in 1809, and share the same joint dedicatees: Prince Lobkowitz and Count Rasumovsky. Yet two pieces further apart in spirit are difficult to imagine. The Sixth Symphony is almost devoid of the intense drama and battling with Fate that so dominate the Fifth. With the exception of the famous thunderstorm (the fourth movement), the “Pastoral” belies the strife-ridden Beethoven with which we are more familiar. Even a high-strung, emotionally charged personality such as his required its balancing moments, it appears.

In Beethoven’s day, the outskirts of Vienna were still countryside. His contemporaries, among them his scribe Anton Schindler, reported that he delighted in long walks, even during the occasional thunderstorm that struck during the summer months. He would return from such an excursion invigorated, oblivious to the temporary discomfort and inconvenience of being thoroughly drenched. The mental image of Beethoven thus soaked is a far cry from the scenario that Walt Disney painted for us in *Fantasia* (1940) during the thrilling fourth movement.

Musicians' Corner

The otherwise limpid and unruffled “Pastoral” conforms to normal symphonic structure, except that there is little contrast between first and second themes. Schindler confirmed that Beethoven considered F major the only possible key for a “nature” symphony. F major was the traditional key for pastoral subjects. Beethoven’s themes in both outer movements are uncharacteristically melodic, showing a more Schubertian side of his personality. Thus, in “Awakening of serene impressions on arriving in the country,” we are left to placid contemplation of nature’s unruffled beauty, without the tension customarily present in Beethoven’s developments.

“Scene by the brookside” succeeds in extending the tranquil atmosphere by means of the undulating triplets in the accompaniment, persuasively suggesting the gentle burbling of Beethoven’s brook. The bird calls that precede the final three measures have generated much controversy over the years but are best heard in their own naïve simplicity, as Beethoven undoubtedly intended them: flute as nightingale, oboe repeating the quail’s plaintive cry and clarinet tooting the unmistakable falling third of the cuckoo.

The most original formal innovation in the symphony is the linking of the final three segments without pause. The connecting thunderstorm (immortalized in popular culture through Disney’s original *Fantasia*) provides natural cataclysm, musical drama and a logical transition to the shepherd’s song of thanks that concludes the symphony.

Beethoven’s orchestration includes some felicitous touches that are subtly rendered by omission rather than commission. For example, he does not use trumpet until the scherzo (“Jolly gathering of country folk”), doubtless because its brassy edge would compromise the uniform serenity of the opening two movements. His introduction of full brass is all the more effective when they burst forth in the fury of the thunderstorm. Punctuation by piccolo at the high end and trombones at the low end lends a cosmic splendor to nature’s wrath. Timpani, too, are reserved for the fourth movement, their only appearance in this otherwise tranquil work, so free of Beethovenian drama.

Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs, and strings. Piccolo and trombones are added for the “Storm” movement only.

A MARATHON CONCERT— PREMIERE OF BEETHOVEN’S “PASTORAL”

On the evening of December 22, 1808, Beethoven gave a much-anticipated benefit concert at Vienna’s Theater an der Wien. The music-making lasted a staggering four hours and included choral and solo vocal music, as well as orchestral compositions. Its first part opened with the premiere of Beethoven’s newest symphony, his Sixth, “Pastoral.”

Next on the program came an aria, ‘Ah perfido!’ (later published as Op. 65); the Gloria from Beethoven’s Mass in C Major and the Fourth Piano Concerto. Following an interval, the marathon music-making continued with the Fifth Symphony—also a premiere—the Sanctus from the C major Mass and a Piano Fantasia with the composer improvising, probably using material that he subsequently incorporated into the “Choral Fantasia.” It must have been a very long night—but what a benchmark night for great music!

The combination of secular and sacred vocal music with solo improvisation and orchestral pieces was not unusual in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. An evening of live music customarily included a wide variety of performing forces. This 1808 program has historical significance not only because of Beethoven’s titanic stature, but also because it included the premieres of two great symphonies.