

Discover Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Ludwig van Beethoven: Symphony No. 6 in F Major, Op. 68, "Pastoral"

In the 19th century, none of Beethoven's symphonies captured the public imagination more than the "Pastoral." Beethoven was a great nature lover. In 1808 the outskirts of Vienna were indeed pastoral. He delighted in long walks, even during the occasional thunderstorm that struck during the summer. Because the symphony's five movements bear descriptive titles we know to be the composer's own, it appealed to contemporary listeners.

The limpid and unruffled music of the first movement conforms to normal symphonic structure, with the exception that we do not experience the degree of contrast between first and second themes. F major was the traditional key for pastoral subjects. Beethoven's themes in both outer movements are uncharacteristically melodic. "Awakening of cheerful feelings on arriving in the countryside" leaves us to placid contemplation of nature's unruffled beauty.

"Scene by the brookside" extends the tranquil atmosphere with undulating triplets that suggest the gentle burbling of Beethoven's brook. The bird calls preceding the final three measures are naïve and simple: flute as nightingale, oboe repeating the quail's plaintive cry, and clarinet tooting the unmistakable falling third of the cuckoo.

The "Pastoral's" most original formal innovation is the linking of the final three segments without pause. The connecting thunderstorm provides natural cataclysm, musical drama, and a logical transition to the shepherd's song of thanks with which the symphony closes. Beethoven's orchestration includes some felicitous touches. He withholds trumpet until the scherzo ("Merry assembly of country folk"), because its brassy edge would compromise the uniform serenity of the opening two movements. Full brass underscores the fury of the "Thunderstorm." Punctuation by piccolo and trombones lends 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. England's Donald Francis Tovey famously observed that this symphony 'has the enormous strength of someone who knows how to relax.'

Ludwig van 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

Duration: 39 minutes

Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs, and strings; piccolo and trombones are added for the "Storm" movement only

Beethoven's nine symphonies had enormous impact on the development of orchestral literature in the 19th century. 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 his symphonies captured the public imagination more than the "Pastoral" in Beethoven's day. In the decades that followed 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 programmatic titles we know to be the composer's own, 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 eighteenth 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 Opp. 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.

Nature Lover and exercise fanatic

Beethoven was a great nature lover. In his day, the outskirts of Vienna were indeed pastoral. His contemporaries, among them his amanuensis Anton Schindler, reported that he delighted in long walks, even during the occasional inevitable 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 music of the "Pastoral" conforms to normal symphonic structure with the exception that we do not experience the degree of contrast between first and second themes. Schindler confirmed that Beethoven considered F major the only possibly key for such a topic as 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 provides natural cataclysm, musical drama, and a logical transition to the shepherd's song of thanks with which the symphony closes. Beethoven's orchestration includes some felicitous touches that are subtly rendered by omission rather than commission through much of the symphony. 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.

A MARATHON CONCERT—PREMIERE OF BEETHOVEN'S "PASTORALE"

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, in F major. We know it as the '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 première – 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.

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