

"Pastoral"

The Sixth Symphony by Beethoven

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Beethoven Symphony No. 6 in F, Op. 68 ("Pastoral")

PIERRE MONTEUX

Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra

Beethoven's Sixth by Robert Nathan

In the year 1806 Hamburg was in a state of alarm, "surrounded," says the French diplomat Louis Antoine Fauvelet de Bourrienne, "as we were then by Swedish, English, and Russian troops." Europe was in turmoil; the shadow of Napoleon lay like a cloud across half the world. In England, Pitt had died; and Jane Austen had "removed with her family from Bath to Southampton." A year later, Keats was in school at Enfield, and Byron at Trinity College in Cambridge; Longfellow was born in Portland, Maine; and Goethe was putting the finishing touches on the first part of *Faust*. At Tilsit, in a room floating on a raft in the middle of the Niemen River, Napoleon, Alexander of Russia, and the King of Prussia met together, to the distress of the latter. Godoy ruled in Spain as Prince of the Peace; and in Vienna Ludwig van Beethoven addressed a long and flowery petition to the directors of the Court Theater, agreeing to furnish them with one opera a year, along with a small operetta, choruses and occasional pieces, for the price of one annual benefit concert for himself and a salary of 2400 guilders. He didn't get it. "So be it, then," he writes to the Baron von Gleichenstein: "For you, poor Beethoven, there is no happiness to be found outside; you must create everything for yourself, within yourself."

The Great Mogul, as Haydn called him — Haydn who had nearly died of fright two years earlier while the French cannon thundered on Vienna — was nevertheless at the height of his powers, and enjoying a period of relative happiness. Thayer calls the three years, from 1807 to 1809, the three happiest years of his life. His nephew Karl was still too young to trouble him — as he did so bitterly later on; and he was, apparently, in love — if one is to credit the "Letters to the Immortal Beloved"; but no one knows who she was, and they were, in any case, never mailed. He had accepted, and even acknowledged, his growing deafness, but it was not yet, as it would be later, a locked door between the world and him. His first enthusiasm for Napoleon, which had given way to detestation when the Corsican took the crown of Emperor, had turned again to a grudging admiration; as Baron de Tremont wrote in 1809, "The greatness of Napoleon preoccupied him."

This was the period of the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies,

the Violin Concerto, the Rasoumovsky Quartets — a period richly and deeply creative. The "innocence" of the Second Symphony, the early Quartets, was behind him; so, too, the political ardors and grief of the "Eroica"; while the "heavenly airs" of his later works still lay ahead — foreshadowed, perhaps, in the slow movement of the Violin Concerto. It was a period in which he was swept by melody as though by a wind or a daemon. With the French in Vienna, with the guns of Friedland still thundering, Beethoven wrote the "Pastoral" Symphony.

It was, in a sense, the first "programme music" of its kind — with the exception of a work by Knecht, published in the 1780s, and Haydn's *The Seasons*: an evocation of nature, of the fields and the woods of Hetzendorf and Mödling, where he often walked on his small holidays. It is a work, as Beethoven himself said, "in which some emotions of country life are described." Or again: "An expression of feelings rather than a painting in sound." Yet it is a work in the full symphonic form. "It is left," said Beethoven, "to the listener to discover the situation."

The symphony is in five movements, the third and fourth leading without pause into the final movement.

- 1) Awakening of happy feelings on getting into the country (Allegro ma non troppo)
- 2) By the brook-side (Andante molto mosso)
- 3) Merry gathering of the country folk (Allegro), leading to
- 4) Thunderstorm (Allegro), leading to
- 5) Shepherd's Song: Happy and thankful feelings after the storm (Allegretto)

Scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, two trombones, timpani and strings, the symphony also makes use — for the first time in a serious composition — of the piccolo.

It opens in a mood of peaceful — even happy — contemplation. The spirit seems almost to dance a little in the sun; indeed, it dances through most of the score. The first movement is one of rustic simplicity; there are bird songs, a comic dialogue between the bassoons and the violins. It ends softly. The second movement, the Andante, is in full sonata form, overlaying the murmur of the brook, again with bird songs — including that of the giraffe-

throated yellow-hammer, a bird that never was, drawn up out of empty air to confound Beethoven's fatuous friend Schindler. After a moment of silence, a trio of bird calls: the nightingale, the quail, the cuckoo. A short dialogue of wind instruments brings the movement to a close.

A storm — in which it has been said that the thunder precedes the lightning — interrupts a rustic dance; but not too soon. It is a storm which paved the way for all the storms in the Rossini operas which followed; and it is soon over.

In the last movement, which is in rondo form, it is interesting to find a shepherd's song, or "yodel," surprisingly Scottish in character; actually, Beethoven was well acquainted with the old Scottish airs, and did, in fact, promise a number of Scottish songs to his English publishers.

Unlike his other symphonies, the "Pastoral" ends, as it opened, (except for two final chords) in serene quiet.

It was first performed in 1808, shortly after his thirty-eighth birthday. The program was more than ample, including the Fifth as well as the Sixth Symphony, the Fourth Piano Concerto, excerpts from the C Major Mass, a choral fantasia with piano and orchestra, the aria "Ah! Perfido," and some piano improvisations, at which Beethoven excelled. As Mr. Ludwig remarks: "An awesome event!" The weather was bad, the hall was unheated, and the concert was, on the whole, a tribulation.

The author of some thirty-six volumes of poetry and prose, Robert Nathan has acquired a reputation as a master of satiric fantasy unique in American letters. Among his best-known novels are One More Spring, The Enchanted Voyage, Portrait of Jennie, They Went On Together, Sir Henry and So Love Returns.

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