

Program Notes

by April L. Racana

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Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Symphony No. 6 in F major, Op. 68 “Pastorale”

‘*Sinfonia caratteristica* — or memories of country life.... *Sinfonia pastorella*.... Anyone who has experienced country life can determine the intentions of the composer even without titles.... The listener should be allowed to discover the situation.... All painting in music is a failure if it is pushed too far.... Instead the music is more an expression of feelings rather than a painting in sounds....’

These various comments were written by Beethoven in his sketches for the Sixth Symphony and reveal that although he did in fact give titles, not only to each movement of the work, but also to the work as a whole, that his focus was more on expressing the emotional reactions to nature rather than presenting a programmatic piece.

Beethoven’s love for nature, in fact his need to be in constant connection with nature, is well known. But the fact that, of all of his works, he felt it important to entitle each movement of his *Pastorale Symphony*, emphasizes even more his strong feelings associated with his relationship with nature. The first movement, ‘Awakening of cheerful feelings upon arrival in the country’, may be an expression of his own personal feelings whenever he would leave the city to take time out in the countryside, such as he often did. In fact, when he composed this and his Fifth Symphony, among other

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works, during the summers of 1807 and 1808, he was on retreat in the rural town, Heiligenstadt.

The second movement, 'Scene by the brook', perhaps comes close to painting a picture of nature with the timbres of the orchestra aptly imitating the sound of the babbling brook as well as mimicking particular bird songs. Beethoven even indicated in the score the bird song each instrument was playing in the closing woodwind cadenza, with the flute playing the part of the nightingale, the oboe as a quail, and the clarinet a cuckoo. But again it seems it was Beethoven's intent to create a serene atmosphere with these sounds rather than a sound painting.

The remaining three movements are performed without pause, almost creating the effect of a three-movement work, rather than the five indicated in the score. In fact, many have commented that the fourth movement 'Thunderstorm', in all of its brevity, acts more as an introduction for the final movement, 'Shepherd's song. Happy and thankful feelings after the storm.' The third movement, 'Merry gathering of country folk' is a fairly traditional scherzo/trio form with abrupt interruptions in even rhythms, almost as a foreshadowing of the storm to come. And again, though the fourth movement clearly depicts a scene during a sudden rainstorm, Beethoven's hope was that the audience would experience the emotions at hand, beyond the inevitable sound painting.

Symphony No. 6 was premiered in December of 1808 at the massive concert at the Theatre an der Wien where Beethoven introduced his Fifth Symphony along with his Fourth Piano Concerto, two sections of the Mass in C major, the concert aria *Ah! Perfido*, the Fantasia in G major for piano, as well as the Fantasia in C minor for piano, chorus and orchestra. Needless to say it was somewhat overwhelming for the audience to sit through such a full program. And given that both the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies were composed about the same time, their numbers were mistakenly reversed on the program for this premiere.

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As the final movement expresses pure thanksgiving in an exultant hymn, one can't help but hear Beethoven's own words describe his joy at being surrounded by nature as he wrote in a letter to a friend: "How glad I am to be able to roam in wood and thicket, among the trees and flowers and rocks. No one can love the country as I do.... In the country, every tree seems to speak to me.... In the woods, there is enchantment, which expresses all things.... For surely woods, trees, and rocks produce the echo that man desires to hear."

Work composed: 1808 **World premiere:** December 22, 1808, 1808 at Theater an der Wien, conducted by the composer

Instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, timpani, strings

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Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

Das Lied von der Erde (The Song of the Earth)

Inspired by a collection of poetry that originated in China, and had been translated into German by Hans Bethge, Mahler attempted to soothe the traumatic events in his life by setting some of these poems to music. The summer of 1907 found the composer deeply affected by the loss of his daughter Maria, who died of scarlet fever. Then a short time afterward finding that he himself had been diagnosed with a serious heart defect, which dealt a double blow and kept him from composing much of anything that summer. However, his wife Alma is quoted as saying: "Now, after the death of the child, after the terrible diagnosis of the doctor, in the mood of frightful loneliness, away from our house, away from his place of work (from which we had fled) – now these exceedingly sad poems took hold of him. Already...on long, lonely walks, he sketched the orchestra songs that one year later were to become *Das Lied von der Erde*."

Mahler would eventually select several poems from the collection as the basis for a kind of song-symphony in six movements, scored for two

solo voices, tenor and alto, with orchestra. The composer himself would modify some of the lyrics as well as add his own verses to express his deepest emotions. Bruno Walter, who would conduct the premiere following the composer's death stated: "It is a work more characteristic of his self than any one ever written by him.... While the world seems to vanish beneath him, the ego itself is turned into experience, and a force of emotions which knows no limitations is seen to develop in him who is about to depart. Every note he writes speaks only of himself, every word he sets to music, though it may have been written thousands of years ago, expresses but himself. *Das Lied von der Erde* is the most personal utterance in Mahler's creative work and perhaps in music."

The first movement, "The Drinking Song of Earth's Sorrow" opens with a dramatic fortissimo 'call' in the horns, and features the tenor soloist intoning the lyrics: "The song of sorrow shall ring...through your souls. When sorrow nears, the soul's gardens lie a waste; Joy and song wither and die. Life is dark, as is death." The last line repeats three times at the close of each stanza. The second movement "The Lonely One in Autumn" opens with a meditative oboe solo over muted violins with the female vocal soloist wondering if the 'sun will shine again' and 'dry their bitter tears'.

The next three movements are all relatively brief vignettes, "Of Youth", "Of Beauty", and one more drinking song. One hears instrumental references to the Chinese origins with pentatonic tunes and orchestration reflective of the 'orient'. Also depicted are the contrasts between the beauty of 'young maidens picking flowers' featuring the higher ranges of the orchestral ensemble, and their counterparts 'handsome young men', depicted in galloping rhythms with the full range of the instruments in full play. The female and male soloists continue to alternate, with the tenor closing the last of this triptych questioning 'if existence is but a dream, why then toil and worry?' leaping to his highest register for dramatic effect, with the violins and piccolo depicting the inevitable arrival of spring.

The final movement, “The Farewell,” is presented in three parts with two additional poems set, and a funeral march at the center. This closing section is nearly as long as the preceding movements together, opening with mystical exchanges between the oboe and horns. When the female soloist enters, the low strings intone a constant low C, over fluttering and flowing flute melodies. The closing text, now hopeful, with Mahler’s own version stating: “Everywhere the dear earth blooms in spring and grows anew! Everywhere and forever, blue is the horizon!” The final words “Forever... forever...” fading with both musical and textual repetitions as the celesta enters, suggesting the hope of renewal perhaps in both this earthly life and the next.

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Work composed: 1908 **World premiere:** November 20, 1911 in Munich, conducted by Bruno Walter

Lyrics: Hans Bethge’s *The Chinese Flute*

Instrumentation: piccolo, 3 flutes (3rd doubling on piccolo), 3 oboes (3rd doubling on English horn), Es(E♭)clarinet, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons (3rd doubling on contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (tambourine, bass drum, triangle, cymbals, tam-tam, glockenspiel), mandolin, 2 harps, celesta, strings, solo tenor, solo mezzo soprano

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