



SPARK! Musical Insights

A video musical performance with insights from a member of the SPCO intended to spark curiosity and conversation.

Volume 2: Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony with Cassie Pilgrim

Program

Introduction

— Cassie Pilgrim *SPCO Principal Oboe*

Symphony No. 6, Pastoral

Ludwig van Beethoven

— The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra

— Gábor Takács-Nagy *Conductor*

Post-Concert Conversation

— Gábor Takács-Nagy *Conductor*

— James Ferree *SPCO Principal Horn*

Conclusion and Questions for Reflection

— Cassie Pilgrim *SPCO Principal Oboe*

Please note that closed captioning can be enabled for the speaking portions of this video.

PROGRAM NOTE

The Sixth Symphony comes from the heart of Ludwig van Beethoven's "middle" period, a phase when his encroaching deafness changed his relationship to composing and performing, and when the crystalline classicism of his early works gave way to a more focused and concentrated manner of writing. Rather than issuing flowing melodies, Beethoven's quintessential works from this period build highly integrated forms out of compact, elemental materials.

The most iconic symphony from the "middle" period is Beethoven's Fifth, but the same single-minded focus shows up in another work that was on his writing desk at the same time in 1808, the Sixth Symphony. The ingredient that made this work unlike any previous symphonies of Beethoven (or anyone else) was the extent to which storytelling was embedded within the formal structure. For the initial performance in 1808, Beethoven acknowledged the external inspiration in his full title: "*Pastoral Symphony, or Recollections of Country Life: More an Expression of Feeling than Painting.*"

Beethoven's journals and letters reveal his love of nature, as when he wrote in 1810, "How delighted I will be to ramble for a while through the bushes, woods, under trees, through grass, and around rocks. No one can love the country as much as I do. For surely woods, trees, and rocks produce the echo that man desires to hear." Recognizing and appreciating the natural world was a cornerstone of the Romantic ethos, and Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony joined a common thread in music, art and literature of the early nineteenth century that rhapsodized on the beauty and grandeur of the natural world, with a reverence that was in no small part spiritual.

PROGRAM NOTE *(continued)*

Just as the first four notes of the Fifth Symphony influence every measure of the opening movement, the Sixth Symphony builds an expansive essay out of a seemingly naïve theme. The first movement, characterized as the “Awakening of cheerful feelings upon arrival in the country,” enters bashfully, with four quiet measures that trail off. Fragments of this figure build slowly, basking in long stretches of unmoving harmony. The development section, often an opportunity for increased turbulence and activity, instead sinks deeper into a country calm, savoring each radiant chord change.

The second movement, “Scene at the Brook,” establishes a lapping triplet pulse under another mere wisp of melody. The idyllic scene ends with a trio of birdcalls from the woodwinds, representing a nightingale, quail and cuckoo. From here, the symphony diverges from a typical four-movement pattern. There is a Scherzo-like third movement, “Happy gathering of country folk,” but the rollicking dance music halts unresolved and is supplanted by the first staccato raindrops of the “Thunderstorm.” Fearful dissonances and thunderous timpani strikes make for a convincing tempest, until it trails off in one last upward patter from the flute. A clarinet takes over to establish the sing-song contours of the “Shepherds’ song; cheerful and thankful feelings after the storm.” This tune, at once humble and heroic, returns the symphony to its pastoral calm. Near the end, a hymn-like variant lends a deeper resonance to this sunny conclusion.

About The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra

Now in its 65th season, The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra (SPCO) is world-renowned for its artistic excellence, versatility of musical styles, adventurous programming and commitment to community access. As a primarily unconducted, musician-led ensemble, the SPCO performs a broad range of repertoire from Baroque music to new commissions, presenting concerts at multiple venues across the Twin Cities each year. In its mission to make music accessible and affordable for everyone, the SPCO offers free tickets for children and students, as well as an innovative Concert Membership program for just \$9 per month, and the SPCO's online Concert Library shares live and on-demand concert recordings completely free of charge.

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