

Tafelmusik

BEETHOVEN PASTORAL SYMPHONY

Program Notes
by Allen Whear

VIOLIN CONCERTO

The year 1806 was particularly fruitful for Beethoven, when numerous masterpieces including the Fourth Symphony, Fourth Piano Concerto, “Rasumovsky” Quartets, and two of the Leonore overtures, were completed. Having already transformed and expanded the symphony, piano concerto, and string quartet, Beethoven finally turned his attention to the violin concerto. Although he had himself played violin and viola in Bonn, and written extensively for them in chamber music, so far he had produced only an unfinished sketch for a violin concerto in C major and the two Romances with orchestra. The occasion for the new work was a benefit concert to be given on December 23 at the Theater an der Wien by and for Franz Clement (1780–1842), a Viennese violinist and leader with whom Beethoven had been friendly for a number of years. Beethoven’s new concerto was completed only two days before the premiere, so Clement must have had formidable sight-reading abilities. Works by many other composers also appeared on the program, and between movements of the concerto Clement treated the audience to a work of his own, played on one string with the violin upside down. You will not hear such fare tonight; authenticity has its limits!

New trends in violin technique and execution were sweeping Europe, particularly from France, where Tourte developed a more powerful bow and players such as Viotti and Kreutzer espoused a robust style. Beethoven was aware of these developments, and his “Kreutzer” Sonata three years earlier embraced this dramatic approach, and even carried the subtitle “in uno stile molto concertante come d’un concerto.” But Clement was not of this avant-garde school of playing. He used the older style bow, and was noted above all for his sweet, singing sound and his flawless command of the upper registers. These lyrical qualities are perhaps what most influenced Beethoven’s violin writing in the concerto.

Standard practice in Beethoven’s time was for performers to improvise or write their own cadenzas. He did not leave one for his Violin Concerto—except for an example found in the piano transcription, involving, oddly enough, timpani—and over the years the most commonly performed cadenzas, written by the likes of Kreisler and Joachim, have become so familiar that many do not realize that they are not part of the original work. In keeping with original practice, Elisa Citterio is providing her own cadenzas.

Four simple timpani strokes launch the concerto, in classical sonata form and on a symphonic scale. Typically of Beethoven’s middle period works, a large pattern is needed to honour and elaborate upon formal traditions while featuring a soloist as well as an orchestra. Indeed, the length of the first movement is unprecedented, roughly equivalent to an entire Mozart concerto. When struck on a dissonant D-sharp by the violins, the four-note motive asserts itself not just as an introduction to the principal theme, but as a key structural element and harmonically transforming device throughout the movement. Although the violin part demands great virtuosity, the overall effect is serenity and lyricism, rather than display.

Strings are muted for the Larghetto, which unfolds like a loosely designed set of variations. As the orchestra patiently reiterates the theme in an array of instrumental colours, the violin hovers and weaves an intricate fantasy above. An abrupt orchestral fanfare followed by a brief cadenza ushers in the finale. The Rondo is based on a jaunty hunting theme that may have come from Clement, in the 6/8 meter

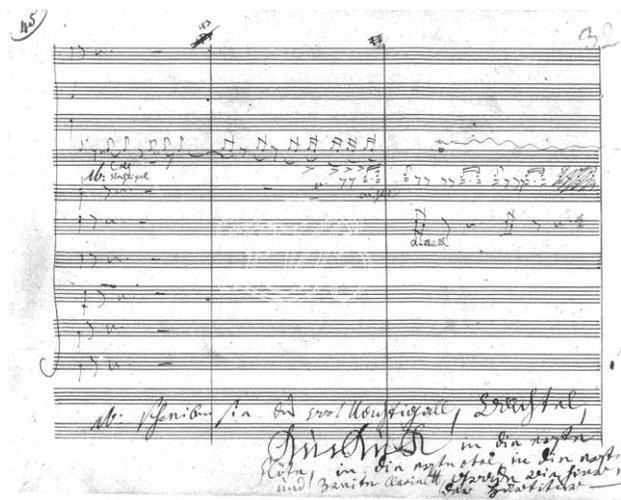
favoured by Mozart. Beethoven avoids the danger of repetitiveness by infusing an element of sonata development and a variety of violinistic effects. At the keystone of the rondo form is an interlude in G minor where the violin and bassoon engage in a singing dialogue. In Beethoven's time, virtuoso violinists most often preferred their own compositions, and his Violin Concerto only received sporadic performances for several decades. It was an acclaimed performance by 13-year old Joseph Joachim with Felix Mendelssohn conducting in London in 1844 that cemented the work's reputation, and it has maintained its iconic place in the repertoire to this day.

SYMPHONY NO. 6

In the same venue almost exactly two years later, Beethoven presented his own benefit concert, or *Akademie*, on December 22, 1808, unveiling the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, as well as other works. These sibling symphonies, although written concurrently, show two distinct sides of Beethoven's character. Before hearing the opening of the Sixth Symphony, remember the dramatic and arresting start to the Fifth: its terse, four-note motto developed throughout the movement, and the work's symbolic struggle with destiny culminating in glorious victory. Consider the "Pastoral" Symphony the antidote to the drama of the Fifth, and savour the symphony's opening, the composer's expression of his love of nature: "Awakening of cheerful feelings upon arrival in the countryside." With soft dynamics, droning fifths in the bass, and simple harmonies, Beethoven invites us to relax from the outset, as if taking us by the hand and sharing his delight. The bucolic atmosphere is further enhanced by the use of constantly repeating melodic and rhythmic patterns instead of motivic development—without ever feeling monotonous—while fulfilling the architectural requirements of sonata form. Beethoven's avowed intention was "more an expression of feeling than painting," to distinguish this from program music conjuring specific images and events.

Beethoven's earliest sketches for the Sixth Symphony included a fragment entitled "Murmuring of the brooks," depicting flowing water. The muted strings, in lazy triplets, create a foundation of flowing, meandering water while broad melodies unfold in an unhurried manner. Although birdcalls have been

implied throughout the movement, there is, near the end, a kind of cadenza where Beethoven specifically imitates the nightingale (flute), the quail (oboe), and the cuckoo (clarinet), all perfectly integrated into the structure. It's as if Beethoven, despite claiming not to be interested in "painting," wants to show—perhaps with tongue in cheek—how perfectly he could do it on a whim.



The end of the second movement in Beethoven's manuscript score of Symphony no. 6, in which he labelled the flute as "Nachtigall" (nightingale), the oboe as "Wachtel" (quail), and the clarinet as "Kuckuck" (cuckoo). The score is in the Beethoven-Haus Bonn (BH64), and can be viewed on their website.

The *Scherzo* ("Merry gathering of country folk") is a rustic dance complete with a village band in the trio section. Beethoven seems to poke fun at amateur country musicians: the merry oboe is elbowed out by the clarinet, while the bassoon struggles to play its three bass notes in the right place. Once the horn joins in, all tumble into a heavy contradance, growing ever louder until a trumpet restores order. The whole sequence is repeated until the coda, when ominous rumblings in the bass interrupt the revelry. A storm approaches ...

“Storm. Tempest” introduces a raindrop motive in the violins, as the trembling below grows louder and rises chromatically towards F minor. Then full orchestral violence breaks out, augmented by piccolo, trombones, and timpani. Beethoven builds on a longstanding tradition of storm music; he surely found a model in Haydn’s *Seasons*. The reliable patterns of nature in previous movements are disrupted here with sudden dynamics and the most dissonant harmonies of the symphony. Gradually the storm subsides, as a miraculous musical rainbow emerges from the oboe, a broad tune derived from the initial raindrop motive. The bagpipe drones return, and Alpine yodelling paves the way for “Shepherds’ song: Happy and grateful feelings after the storm.” The leisurely pace of the earlier movements is restored in this serene rondo, until the coda, where the principal theme builds to what the Beethoven scholar Donald Francis Tovey describes as “a grand solemn tutti, glorious as the fields refreshed by the rain.” A muted horn recalls the alpine melody as the movement comes to a gentle close, and we reluctantly return to our urban reality.

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Beethoven writing to his friend Therese Malfatti in 1810 about his forthcoming holiday in the country:

“I look forward to it with childish excitement. How delighted I shall be to ramble for a while through bushes, woods, under trees, through grass, and around rocks. For surely woods, trees, and rocks produce the echo which man desires to hear.”