

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Symphony No. 6 in F, Opus 68, *Pastoral*

*First performance:* December 22, 1808, Vienna, Beethoven cond. *First BSO performance:* January 1882, Georg Henschel cond. *First Tanglewood performance:* August 5, 1937, Serge Koussevitzky cond. (the BSO's first Tanglewood concert, an all-Beethoven program also including the *Leonore* Overture No. 3 and the Fifth Symphony). *Most recent Tanglewood performance:* July 27, 2001, Hugh Wolff cond.

Beethoven took delight in the world of nature. When in Vienna he never failed to take his daily walk around the ramparts, and during his summers spent outside of town he would be outdoors most of the day. The notion of treating the natural world in music seems to have occurred to him as early as 1803, when he wrote down in one of his sketchbooks a musical fragment in 12/8 time (the same meter used in the *Pastoral*'s "Scene at the brook") with a note: "The more water, the deeper the tone." Other musical ideas later to end up in the Sixth Symphony appear in Beethoven's sketchbooks sporadically in 1804. During the winter of 1806–07, he worked out much of the thematic material for all the movements but the second. In the fall of 1807 and the spring of 1808 he concentrated seriously on the work and apparently finished it by summer 1808, since he reached an agreement that September 14 with the publisher Breitkopf & Härtel for the sale of this symphony with four other major works.

One thing that aroused extended discussion of the new symphony—a discussion that lasted for decades—was the fact that Beethoven provided each movement of the work with a program, or literary guide to its meaning. His titles are little more than brief images, just enough to suggest a specific setting:

- I. Awakening of happy feelings upon reaching the countryside.
- II. Scene at the brook.
- III. Cheerful gathering of the country folk.
- IV. Thunderstorm.
- V. Shepherd's song. Happy, grateful feelings after the storm.

But much more important for an understanding of Beethoven's view is the overall heading that Beethoven had printed in the program for the first performance: "Pastoral Symphony, more an expression of feeling than a painting." Even given the birdcalls of the second movement, the thunderstorm of the fourth, and the *ranz des vaches* (Swiss herdsman's song) borrowed by Beethoven to introduce the final movement's "hymn of thanksgiving," he never intended that this work be considered an attempt to represent events in the real world, an objective narrative in musical guise. Rather, this symphony provided yet again what all of his symphonies had offered: subjective moods and impressions captured in harmony, melody, color, and the structured passage of time. Ultimately, all those elements that might be labeled "programmatic" can be seen to nestle snugly and fittingly into what the eminent critic and annotator Donald Francis Tovey has called "a perfect classical symphony."

Beethoven's sketchbooks also reveal that he was working on his Fifth and Sixth symphonies at the same time. They were finished virtually together, given consecutive opus numbers (67 and 68), and premiered in the same concert (where they were reversed in numbering, with the *Pastoral*, given first on the program, identified as "Symphony No. 5"). Further, only twice in Beethoven's symphonic writing—that is, in these two symphonies—did Beethoven link the movements of a symphony so they would be performed without a break. In the Fifth Symphony, the scherzo is connected to the finale by an extended, harmonically tense passage that demands resolution in the bright C major of the closing movement. Much the same thing happens in the *Pastoral* Symphony, although the level of tension is not nearly so high, and the linking passage has grown to a full movement in and of itself (the thunderstorm), resulting in Beethoven's only five-movement symphony.

Yet no two symphonies are less likely to be confused, even by the most casual listener—the Fifth, with its demonic energy, tense harmonies, and powerful dramatic climaxes on the one hand, and the Sixth, with its smiling and sunny air of relaxation and joy on the other. Nothing shows more clearly the range of Beethoven's work than these two masterpieces, twins in their gestation, but hardly identical. Popular biographies of Beethoven tend to emphasize the heaven-storming, heroic works of the middle period—the *Eroica* and Fifth symphonies, the *Egmont* Overture, the *Emperor* Concerto, the *Razumovsky* string quartets, the *Waldstein* and *Appassionata* sonatas—at the expense of other aspects of his art. On the other hand, some critics of a "neoclassical" orientation claim to find the even-numbered symphonies to be more

successful than the overtly dramatic works. Both views are equally one-sided and give a blinkered representation of Beethoven. His art embraces both elements and much more.