

## PROGRAM NOTES

Today's symphonic celebration commemorates the 250<sup>th</sup> year of Beethoven's birth with three works: one each from the composer's early and middle style periods, preceded by a short work of fitting pomp to launch the occasion. So-called "incidental music" was frequently inserted within spoken stage plays to enliven the atmosphere or to enhance realism. Beethoven received several such commissions, including this single **Triumphal March from *Tarpeja***, an 1813 tragedy by Christoph Kuffner. The title character Tarpeja was a vestal virgin of ancient Rome who displayed heroism at the military pass of Capdoglio. Beethoven's musical number, however, strives to capture not the strains of Classical Rome, but the characteristic dotted rhythms and fanfare-like melodic contours of the familiar Imperial Austrian military marches that were popular with audiences in his own day. While the play survived only two performances, Beethoven's excerpted march has deservedly enjoyed a more fortunate continuation in the musical repertory.

Beethoven's **Piano Concerto in C Major, Op. 15** was composed in 1795 and later revised for publication in Vienna in 1801 as the First Piano Concerto, even though it was actually completed after the Second, which would receive publication later that year. The work dates from Beethoven's first years of permanent residence in Vienna, where he was establishing his reputation as a pianist, and lies in the heart of the composer's first style period, during which he was imitating his Classical predecessors. The model for this and its companion piano concerto from this period was Mozart, the great master of the genre who in turn had been inspired in his youth by the keyboard concerti of Johann Christian Bach. As with these two earlier generations of concerto composers, this concerto served as a performance vehicle for its virtuoso composer-pianist.

The first movement is cast in *ritornello* form, in which the orchestra first exposes the three main themes before the solo piano joins in their expounded restatement in the Counterexposition. The strings distantly suggest the first of these ideas, a distant march, before *fortissimo* winds powerfully confirm it. Particularly Mozartian is the second theme, with its chromatically expressive lyricism and antigravitational melodic hovering around the fifth. The martial character returns in the closing theme to complete the orchestral Exposition.

In place of the expected restatement of the majestic first theme, the piano instead commences the Counterexposition by introducing itself shyly with a lyrical understatement that appears intent on taming the orchestra. The orchestra's explosive insistence on the theme nonetheless coaxes the piano to cooperate with showy arpeggiated cascades. The remaining two themes from the Exposition are similarly led by the orchestra and graced with brilliant figuration in the solo piano. The series of episodes that constitute the Development eventually simmer into an expectantly hushed *pianissimo* transition that plummets abruptly in a dramatic *fortissimo* octave glissando into the Recapitulation of the three themes.

The deeply expressive Largo is in the distant key of Ab, a third away from the home key, as had become customary for Beethoven by this time. The reduction of the wind section to clarinet, bassoon, and horn allow the piano's lavishly embellished

cantabile lines to shine. The clarinet, an instrument with which Mozart had been closely associated, receives prominent attention, at times engaging in intimate melodic dialogue with the piano.

While the first two movements reflect his preoccupation with Mozart, the highly spirited rondo resounds with the influence of the other great Classical master Haydn, with whom Beethoven had recently studied. The delightfully witty recurrent rondo theme spins out from a single motive that spreads playfully into asymmetrical phrase units. As is customary in rondos of the time, the central episode is in the minor mode. Yet, the combination of the insistent short motive and indecisive melodic direction endows the section with a comic, rather than serious character.

Like the First Piano Concerto, the **“Pastoral” Symphony No. 6 in F Major Op. 68** from 1808 occupies a position in the center of its style period, in this case, Beethoven’s middle style. By now, his works had assumed heroically expanded proportions and a greater depth and range of expression. The extreme contrast between the compacted intensity of the composer’s landmark Fifth Symphony and the idyllic gentility of the Sixth belies the reality that both were completed in the same year. Each represents a distinct element at the core of Beethoven’s being: one wrestles and triumphs over his considerable challenges, the other revels in his profound, almost religious reverence for Nature.

Equally remarkable is that Beethoven, the epitome of abstract musical expression, could produce a work of such narrative, almost cinematic vividness. Yet, the composer the idea of descriptive programmaticism that merely depicts images at the expense of pure music – a hollow genre that had been gaining in popularity, most egregiously in works that sought superficially to recreate scenes of military battles. Wrote Beethoven, “One leaves it to the listener to discover the situations . . . Each act of tone painting, as soon as it is pushed too far in instrumental music, loses its force. . . The whole will be understood even without a description, as it is more feeling than tone-painting.” Although Beethoven himself subtitled this symphony “Pastoral” and assigned an accompanying program appropriated from a pre-existing literary work, he elevated the descriptive symphony with a structural and emotional integrity that could conceivably survive alone in the absence of programmatic connotations. In the case of his “Pastoral” Symphony, Beethoven wrote, “Anyone who has an idea of country life can make out for himself the intentions of the author without many titles” and that the symphony was “. . . no picture, but something in which the emotions are expressed, which are aroused in men by the pleasure of the country, in which some feelings of country-life are set forth.”

In contrast with the motivic terseness of the Fifth Symphony, the melodic material of the Sixth is lyrically expansive. Longer harmonic rhythms (the rate of chord changes) of the first movement “Cheerful impressions awakened by arrival in the country” enhance the leisurely, carefree pace and the expansiveness of the landscape. The new rural arrivals are certainly shepherds, as evidenced by the open fifth bagpipe drones that accompany the naively cheerful tune that they play on their pipes. The spirit of simplicity continues into the second theme, which appears in the conventional key area of the dominant (five steps above the opening key). Its arpeggiated figures wander gently from the first to second violins, and then to cello, double basses and woodwinds. An extended crescendo initiates the Development, leading to a fragment of Theme One

that sprawls over a wandering series of sustained chords, as if painting the various qualities of sunlight beneath the passing clouds. The untroubled Recapitulation is a straightforward repeat of the Exposition, closing with a brief coda.

The idyllic character continues into the second movement, “Scene by the brook,” in which an elegantly simple turning figure suggests a persistent birdcall above a placid stream of downward figures. As attention to the stream subsides, an avian trio congregates near the end of the movement in a brief cadenza. Unlike the generalized birdcall throughout the movement these were explicitly identified by Beethoven in the score: a nightengale in the flutes, quail in the oboes, and the familiar cuckoo in the clarinets.

Anyone familiar with Breughel’s famous paintings of earthy peasant life will recognize their musical analogue in the third movement’s “Merry gathering of country folk.” The tempo and  $\frac{3}{4}$  meter are that of the expected symphonic Scherzo, but appropriately burdened with the rustic gait of a Ländler, a characteristic Austro-German country dance. Taking the place of the Trio section is a peasant dance in  $\frac{2}{4}$  meter, seemingly played by a country band. In a touch of Beethovenian humor a bagpipe player, either snoozing or inebriated, musters his limited ability at the cadences to play the only two notes of which he is capable, F and C.

The sound of raindrops puts an end to the merriment as the peasants, we hope, take shelter. The ensuing “Thunderstorm: tempest” is of such overwhelming fury as to render verbal descriptions inadequate. Rumbling whirlwinds in the basses seem to summon their primal energy not from the sky, but from the very bowels of the earth, and lightning strikes in the full orchestra punctuate each new gust. A full unleashing of the storm’s force calls violent sforzando chords in the full orchestra, including a sky-piercing piccolo at its climax.

Shepherds re-emerge into the safety of the gloriously renewed countryside to express their song of “Happy and grateful feelings after the storm.” The contented allegretto begins with Alpine yodeling between the clarinet and horn, which provides the strings with inspiration to take it up as the recurring theme. This is perhaps the most straightforward rondo that Beethoven had ever composed – free of complicated design, devoid of climax, a pure hymn of gratitude for the benevolence of the landscape. Two years after the premiere of the “Pastoral” symphony Beethoven summarized his reverence in a letter, “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, saying, ‘Holy! Holy!’ In the woods there is enchantment which expresses all things!”

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