

Program Notes for Monday, August 8

Alasdair Neale, Conductor

Mozart	Overture to <i>Don Giovanni</i> , K. 527
Beethoven	Symphony No. 6 in F Major, Opus 68, "Pastoral"
	Awakening of Cheerful Feelings Upon Arrival in the Country (Allegro ma non troppo)
	Scene by the Brook (Andante molto mosso)
	Merry Gathering of Countryfolk (Allegro)
	Thunderstorm (Allegro)
	Shepherds' Song; Glad and Grateful Feelings After the Storm (Allegretto)

Overture to *Don Giovanni*, K. 527 (1787) **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)**

The December 1786 Prague production of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* created such a sensation that people of the city paid to have Mozart simply be present at a performance of the opera in January. Mozart was charmed by the response his work was receiving and ended up staying in Prague for an entire month. This turned out to be a shrewd business decision, as he eventually received a commission for a new opera from Pasquale Bondini, whose National Theater Company was producing *Figaro* in the city. This new opera would become Mozart's masterpiece *Don Giovanni*, premiered in Prague less than ten months later.

When Mozart returned to Prague on October 4, 1787, to prepare for the premiere, there were still gaps in the score, not the least of which was the overture. Mozart kept putting off its composition until the day before the performance, when he essentially pulled an all-nighter to write the famous piece. As Mozart reported, "The copyists were only just ready in time for the performance.... Some of the notes fell under the desks, it is true, but the overture went remarkably well [considering that the orchestra was playing it at sight]."

The ominous introduction to the main body of the overture draws on music from the terrifying end of the opera, when the statue of the Commendatore (whom Don Giovanni killed at the beginning of the opera) comes to life and exacts his revenge by literally dragging him into Hell. The remainder of the overture is a fleet sonata form, paralleling Don Giovanni's fast and easy approach to life, oblivious to those he hurts along the way.

Symphony No. 6 in F Major, Opus 68, "Pastoral" (1808) **Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**

Beethoven's Sixth is his only symphony with descriptive titles attached to the movements. Given the significant role nature took on in his life, it is not surprising that Beethoven chose the countryside on which to base his one programmatic symphony. Nearly every summer, Beethoven would plan an extended stay in rural surroundings, taking long walks by himself in the woods. Alone with his thoughts, these walks invigorated him spiritually and creatively. He incorporated

multiple lengthy strolls into his composing routine every day, bringing small sketchbooks with him, and he would jot down ideas as they came to him. By the time Beethoven was writing the Sixth Symphony, his deafness—which caused him such anguish—was profound, and communing with nature seemed to offer him solace, as he wrote: “My miserable hearing does not trouble me here. In the country it seems as if every tree said to me: 'Holy! holy!' Who can give complete expression to the ecstasy of the woods! O, the sweet stillness of the woods!”

Beethoven was careful to warn his audiences about taking the titles of the movements too literally. As he was composing the piece, he wrote, “Every kind of tone-painting loses its effect by being pushed too far in instrumental music ... anyone who has the faintest idea of rural life will have no need of descriptive titles,” later adding that the titles were meant to be “more an expression of feeling than tone painting.”

Beethoven’s first movements, usually in sonata form, almost invariably can be read as battlegrounds, where ideas are presented, struggled with, built up with tension and anticipation, and eventually resolved in some way, whether in triumph or tragedy. Although in standard sonata form, the opening movement of the Pastoral Symphony paints a picture that couldn’t be farther from this traditional narrative. There is only beauty and peacefulness here; the few hints of darkness are dispelled immediately and leave no lasting impression. And yet, the music is endlessly compelling—a testament to Beethoven’s genius. The pastoral scene emerges immediately, as if it has always been there. Long, sustained notes in the bass (“pedal tones”) throughout the movement create a sense of stillness, magically evoking the calming effects of a solitary walk in the country, of which Beethoven was particularly fond. The retransition to the main theme from the development, usually the height of harmonic tension in a Beethoven movement, is so delicately handled so as to almost pass unnoticed. The music is allowed to breathe here, with pauses and continually-repeated melodic cells that open up into moments of revelation and awe.

The second movement is similarly serene and atmospheric (and also, surprisingly, in sonata form). The babbling brook is represented by continual motion in the muted lower strings under a graceful melody in the first violins. Again, the melodies are given space to linger as the audience is encouraged to listen to everything that is happening around the main tunes. The coda contains three birdsongs, marked specifically in the score: the nightingale (flute), the quail (oboe), and the cuckoo (clarinet).

The third movement gives us three lively dances. The first is a quick but quiet gallop, marked *pianissimo* almost throughout until a buildup leads to an outburst of energy transitioning us to the second dance. Individual wind and brass instruments sing the tune here, evoking the image of a single couple dancing for the group. Echoes of the theme from the first movement link the music to the third dance, a raucous barn-stomper that tires the merry-makers briefly before they do it all over again.

The celebration is rudely interrupted by the quickly approaching thunderstorm. This movement is arguably the most famous and effective depiction of a storm in the classical music literature. Watch the low strings working hard to produce the rumbling in the sky (at one point, the cellos are called on to play 240 notes each in the span of under 20 seconds!). Thunderclaps and whistling chromatic breezes punctuate the texture in a movement that can aptly be described as electrifying.

The glorious finale of thanksgiving after the storm is organized as an unusual rondo, in **ABACABA** form, with the memorable theme from the **A** section never really absent, even within the “contrasting” episodes. Most remarkable here is the expansive coda, merged with the final **A** section, encompassing a full third of the movement. It feels as if Beethoven is reluctant to return from his stroll through the countryside, inviting us to bask in the wondrous surroundings for just a while longer.