

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

Nature was Beethoven's muse. A creature of habit, he relished long daily walks in the parks of Vienna and surrounding countryside notating ideas in a small sketchbook that always accompanied him. And, as his hearing worsened, it was to nature that he turned for solace. His doctor suggested that he spend a few restorative months in Heiligenstadt, a small town outside of Vienna known for its bucolic character and therapeutic hot springs. While in Heiligenstadt, he sketched initial ideas for the Sixth Symphony, as well as the beginnings of a work of darker intensity, the Symphony No. 5 in C Minor. A surviving letter from this time—addressed to his brothers but never sent—reveals Beethoven's deepening depression. He voiced intense shame regarding his hearing loss: "...it was impossible for me to say to men speak louder, shout, for I am deaf. Ah how could I possibly admit such an infirmity in the one sense which should have been more perfect in me than in others..." He ruminated on his growing loneliness and isolation: "it is so long since real joy echoed in my heart – O when – O when, O Divine One – shall I find it again in the temple of nature and of men – Never? no – O that would be too hard." The tone of the letter is one of resignation, and, indeed, it seems that Beethoven had lost the will to live. The letter, now known as the Heiligenstadt Testament, included instructions to his brothers on distributing his belongings after his death. Somehow, however, Beethoven persisted. He would live another 25 years, and the triumphant style of music that emerged following his depression—including the *Eroica Symphony*, the famous Fifth Symphony and the *Pastoral Symphony*—is often described as his "heroic" period.

The *Pastoral Symphony* stands as Beethoven's most definitive portrait of nature, although one he described as "more expression of feeling, than painting." A year before Beethoven completed the work, he wrote to his friend and student, Therese von Malfatti, expressing the psychological bliss that nature afforded him:

I am happy as a child at the thought wandering among clusters of bushes, in the woods, among trees, herbs, rocks. No man loves the country more than I; for do not forests, trees, rocks re-echo that for which mankind longs.

In his short titles for each movement, Beethoven hinted at the scenes in nature he loved most and the emotions they evoked:

- I. **Allegro ma non troppo, "Awakening of cheerful feelings on arrival in the countryside"**
The folk-like quality of the main theme makes us feel as if we've been dropped into a rolling, idyllic country scene. It's a beautiful journey as Beethoven coaxes us through an expansive landscape.
- II. **Andante molto mosso, "Scene by the brook"**

Opening with the perpetual motion of a small stream, Beethoven creates ripples and waves in undulating rhythms. Listen for the arrival of a feathered trio near the end, including a nightingale (flute), a quail (oboe), and a cuckoo (clarinet).

III. Allegro, “Merry gathering of country folk”

The third movement drops us straight into an Austrian hoedown, with a catchy folk tune chasing itself forward in dance-like rhythms. Rising to a climax at the very end, we hear a fanfare of hunting horns which is abruptly interrupted. The next movement begins without pause.

IV. Allegro, “Thunder, Storm”

Low tremolos in the strings portend the storm to come. We hear hints of tunes from the previous movement, but they’ve taken on a darker character, now in a minor key. Dynamics rise and fall as the storm surges and grows in intensity. The thunder rages but eventually subsides. By the end of the movement, the sun shines once again with only the softest of rumblings to remind us of the power of the passing storm.

V. Allegretto, “Shepherd’s song. Cheerful and thankful feelings after the storm”

Performed without a break from the previous movement, the finale is signaled by a shepherd’s tune, played first by the clarinet and then echoed nobly by the French horn. This is the joy after the storm. The entire orchestra seems to take flight in growing variations of the simple shepherd’s tune. The music offers an ecstatic, drone’s-eye view of the Austrian countryside, at times close to earth and at others soaring above.