

**Symphony No. 6 in F Major, Op. 68 “Pastoral”—Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**

In 1808, Beethoven completed his sixth symphony at a time during which he was enjoying a rising popularity, albeit one without financial security. He had already written some of his most memorable and lasting works, and was a composer fully in possession of technical mastery and supreme musicality—in other words, even if he had composed no more, his place in music history would have been secure. His previous symphony, of course, is now the quintessential model of musical works that exemplify so-called economy of means, integrated technique, unified composition, or any other of a number of terms that simply mean one thing more or less: it’s all about the music—not any experience or object in the physical world. Moreover, that famous composition stems from the skilled manipulation of just a few basic ideas, wonderfully worked out. As we know from the fifth symphony (“ta-ta-ta-taaah”!), this approach to composing became the high altar for the rest of the century for those who reproached music with “stories” or about “real” things.

Then Beethoven did something quite unexpected (being Beethoven): he wrote a symphony about something in our real world of experience! Beethoven openly described his sixth symphony as a reflection of feelings about being in the countryside, replete with birdcalls, a rainstorm, and happy peasants. He nicknamed the work, “Pastoral,” himself, and even precisely noted in the score the names of particular species of birds when he wrote imitations of their calls. However, he was intent that the listener not try to exercise his imagination too specifically, when he cautioned that the symphony was really “. . . more the expression of feelings than painting.” The feelings were good, though, and after the incredible intensity of the fifth symphony, this one is full of serenity, peaceful contentment, and the untroubled enjoyment of nature. Unique in Beethoven’s symphonies, the composer gave each of the five movements (he added an additional one to the more or less standard four) an explanatory title.

But Beethoven being Beethoven, we shouldn’t expect loose formal construction aimed at simply illustrating bucolic scenes with pictorialism driving the cart, like so many composers later in the century—names you know! Rather, in his distinctive and typical fashion he was able to serve both the God of architectural rigor and the Mammon of story telling. That is, we experience the feelings and understand the allusions to birds, storms, and peasants, but all of it is thoroughly shaped by the same principles of tight, logical musical construction that we expect in a more abstract piece like a string quartet, or even a Bach organ fugue. It takes musical skill and inspiration of a high order to pull this off. It is simply a “perfect classic symphony” that also happens to create a magic evocation of the out of doors.

The first movement is notable for its relaxed exploration of clear-cut themes with little of the tension and drive that we have come to associate with the composer. The harmonies stick to relatively close and straightforward relationships, with little exploration of the remote. There are plenty of rustic little tunes to entertain us as Beethoven skillfully explores the description of the feelings that he alluded to in its title.

The second movement is clearly one of his great ones, wherein the composer, as did Schubert, conjures up the brook of the title with a constant murmuring string accompaniment. Listen carefully near the end of the movement for the famous passage of the three birdcalls: one hears successively quite accurate depictions of a nightingale (flute), a thrush (oboe), and a cuckoo (clarinet).

The third movement is the standard scherzo, or dance movement, and here we encounter a country festival with a country band. The middle section of this movement is noteworthy for its duple metre (rather like a march), rather than the usual triple (think of a fast waltz). Listen for a bit of Beethoven's rough sense of humor in the bass notes of the second bassoon—a real country bandsman!

The fourth movement, of course, is the storm, and Beethoven really goes after some degree of realism, here. He adds the piccolo, timpani, and two trombones for the first time in this symphony, and they help to achieve the thunder, rain, lightning, and wind effects. Some listeners claim there is a rainbow at the end as the storm peacefully fades away.

The last movement purports to be a “thanksgiving after the storm,” and is a bright rondo (a repeating theme). One hears a very simple, clear theme—possibly the shepherd's tune—and after a thorough working out of its possibilities, the movement and the symphony ends with the theme played on a muted horn. One of Beethoven's sunniest compositions thus ends peacefully, with a rare look into a part of his personality not often seen.

### **Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18—Sergei Rachmaninoff**

Those who create art, whether in the performing arts or in the visual arts, inevitably find their personal “niche” in matters of style. It is of little consequence whether or not their artistic orientation is a conscious personal choice, or one seemingly imposed by their audiences and by professional critics. Simply put, there are artists whose voice naturally is to work within tradition and commonly understood artistic language; they strive to develop that tradition to new levels of meaning through their own talent and personal vision. Others make a total commitment to artistic truth arrived at through new voices, new styles, new languages. Every museum and gallery of art, and every concert hall is testimony to this essential dichotomy. It must be admitted that there is a universal prejudice among intellectuals—especially those who subconsciously view the arts as they do technology—that the new is necessary the good. The latest styles are more sophisticated, hence more relevant, and old styles should be left with the dead artists that created them. This popular view was dominant among the cognoscenti during most of the twentieth century, but it is beginning to moderate, as a more liberal acceptance of diverse artistic styles now is more common than previously in all the arts.

Like J. S. Bach, who upon his death was looked upon as a more or less old fuddy-duddy (now we know better, of course), Rachmaninoff has borne his share of criticism for having composed in a hopelessly old-fashioned style long after its relevance. His compositions are the last major representatives of vivid Russian Romanticism—long after that style was presumed dead and buried. Yet, like Bach, his musical genius, his talent, and his strong belief in the validity of his art all led him to create a legacy that took “old-fashioned-style” to a natural and valid high point of achievement. While a child of the nineteenth century, he died almost at the midpoint of the twentieth, secure in his success, and secure in the world's enduring appreciation of his “dated” style.

Rachmaninoff wrote four piano concertos, the first was a student composition (later revised) from 1896 and he composed the last in 1926 (revised in 1941). The second is by far the most popular, and was finished in 1901 when the composer was twenty-eight years old. He had just undergone a devastating series of professional setbacks that cast him into deep depression. This concerto contains all of the essential characteristics of Rachmaninoff's style that have established his lasting place in audiences' esteem everywhere. An unparalleled melodic sweep,

the lyricism which seems to unfold in growing cascades of sound, coupled with masterful orchestration of rich, lush textures. The composer was a virtuoso pianist and his writing for the solo piano emanates from a mastery of the almost limitless figurations possible for the instrument. Although Rachmaninoff left Russia after the Revolution, never to return, and lived in a variety of places (at his death in 1943, he was living in Beverly Hills), he lived as a Russian all of his life. That is, he and his wife maintained a home with Russian servants, spoke Russian there, and lived with Russian customs.

That ethnicity speaks eloquently in almost every bar of his music, and anyone can sense that from the first ominous chords that build the tension before the entrance of the main theme in the second concerto. The darkness of the mood is enhanced by the simple choice of register for that theme, for it is scored for unison low strings and clarinet, right at the bottom of the violins' range. The winsome second theme, in a happier mode, is pure Rachmaninoff. The middle of the movement is suitably restless, in a varied tapestry of themes, keys, and textures, leading to a climax, where we expect the usual review of the opening. However, the composer, ever creative, turns things upside down, and we hear quite a different closing section than is usual. New ideas and relationships add considerably to the charm of the movement, as it builds to the inevitable climax at the end.

The slow movement finds the piano ruminating with figurations that leads one to ask, "Where is the theme?" The flute provides the answer in a delicate solo that leads to a series of exchanges between the solo piano and other instruments in a languorous atmosphere, now considered a trademark of the composer. Even if you do not have perfect pitch, there is an indefinable satisfaction gotten from the unexpected choice of key for this movement, a rather unusual relationship between E major and C minor.

The last movement is the one with the melody made so famous during the 1940's in a maudlin pop arrangement. For all of that, this concerto to the present continues to be the source of musical elements ripped from it and used in unexpected contexts. In any case, after a few gestures in the lower instruments, the soloist kicks the movement off with a grand cadenza, which teases us as to where the movement could possibly go. The answer is a dynamic march of a theme, snapping along. The "big, lyrical theme" is the contrast, introduced by the warm, rich viola section. Exciting give and take between the two ideas propels the movement along, until the "big, lyrical theme" wins the day, and soars rhapsodically to the majestic ending that only a grouch would denigrate. The years in Rachmaninoff's life immediately before the composition of this work may have been low ones for the young man, but this concerto is apt testimony to the palliative effects of a good therapist and marrying your sweetheart.

--Wm. E. Runyan

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