

CHARLOTTESVILLE
SYMPHONY

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

Forces of Nature

February 11 & 12, 2023

Program Notes

Symphony No. 6 in F major, Op. 68, *Pastoral*

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born 16 December 1770 in Bonn, Germany

Died 26 March 1827 in Vienna, Austria

Approximate duration 42 minutes

The Charlottesville Symphony previously performed Beethoven's Symphony No. 6 in October, 1985, March, 1997 and November, 2006.

- F major is a traditional tonality for pastoral music.
- Beethoven loved the outdoors and was fond of walking in the countryside.
- The nature painting makes this symphony an early example of romantic program music.
- Listen for birdcalls and the babbling of a brook and – later – the ferocious thunderstorm of the fourth movement.

All nine Beethoven symphonies had enormous impact on the development of the orchestral literature throughout the nineteenth century. Each one represented some aspect of

experimentation and break with tradition. Beethoven's exploratory gestures were sometimes less adventuresome in the early works, but not always: the Second Symphony, for example, introduced for the first time the concept of a scherzo in lieu of a minuet. Similarly, the later symphonies tend to conform more with our perception of romantic rather than classic. Yet the Eighth, Beethoven's penultimate symphony, is in many ways his most conservative, and a conscious salute to eighteenth-century convention.

Signature Work for the Romantic Era

No symphony caught the public imagination more than the *Pastoral* in Beethoven's day. In the decades that followed his death, when Beethoven worship took on near-reverential proportions throughout Europe, the *Pastoral* remained his most popular symphony. Because it has five movements and uniquely incorporates programmatic titles we know to be the composer's own, it appealed to the poetic nineteenth-century imagination, even spawning a sub-genre of romantic imagery depicting Beethoven composing by a brook. Yet it still retains strong bonds to the Viennese symphonic tradition of Mozart and Haydn. Like the Eighth Symphony, whose tonality of F major the Sixth shares, it is in many ways a reflective rather than innovative work, with stronger roots in the eighteenth century than have been generally acknowledged. It is a curious irony that the *Pastoral* has generally been regarded as the most romantic of Beethoven's orchestral works, and certainly the one that exerted the greatest influence on the next generation of composers.

Fraternal Twins

A major factor in understanding the *Pastoral Symphony* is knowing its companion piece, the Fifth. Beethoven labored on both symphonies, almost simultaneously, in 1807 and 1808.

They were premiered on the same concert in December 1808, published together as Opp. 67 and 68 in 1809, and share the same joint dedicatees: Prince Lobkowitz and Count Razumovsky.

Two pieces further apart in spirit are difficult to imagine. The Sixth Symphony is almost devoid of the intense drama and battling with Fate that so dominate the Fifth. With the exception of the famous thunderstorm (the fourth movement), the *Pastoral* belies the strife-ridden Beethoven with which we are more familiar. Even a high-strung, emotionally charged personality such as his required its balancing moments, it appears.

Nature Lover and Exercise Fanatic

Beethoven was a great nature lover. In his day, the outskirts of Vienna were indeed pastoral. His contemporaries – among them his amanuensis Anton Schindler – reported that he delighted in long walks, even during the occasional inevitable thunderstorm that struck during the summer months. He would return from such an excursion invigorated, oblivious to the temporary discomfort and inconvenience of being thoroughly drenched. The mental image of Beethoven thus soaked is a different counterpoint to what we might generally associate with the thrilling fourth movement, or that which Walt Disney painted for us in *Fantasia*.

Musicians' Corner

The otherwise limpid and unruffled music of the *Pastoral* conforms to normal symphonic structure with the exception that we do not experience the degree of contrast between first and second themes. Schindler confirmed that Beethoven considered F major the only possible key for such a topic as a “nature” symphony. F major was the traditional key for pastoral subjects. Beethoven’s themes in both outer movements are uncharacteristically melodic, showing a more Schubertian side of his personality. Thus, in “Awakening of serene impressions on arriving in

the country” we are left to placid contemplation of nature’s unruffled beauty, without the tension customarily present in Beethoven’s developments.

“Scene by the brookside” succeeds in extending the tranquil atmosphere by means of the undulating triplets in the accompaniment, persuasively suggesting the gentle burbling of Beethoven’s brook. The bird calls that precede the final three measures have generated much controversy over the years, but are best heard in their own naïve simplicity, as Beethoven undoubtedly intended them: flute as nightingale, oboe repeating the quail’s plaintive cry and clarinet tooting the unmistakable falling third of the cuckoo.

Music’s Most Dramatic Thunderstorm

The most original formal innovation in the symphony is the linking of the final three segments without pause. The connecting thunderstorm provides natural cataclysm, musical drama and a logical transition to the shepherd’s song of thanks with which the symphony closes. Beethoven’s orchestration includes some felicitous touches that are subtly rendered by omission rather than commission through much of the symphony. For example, he does not use trumpet until the scherzo (“Jolly gathering of country folk”), doubtless because its brassy edge would compromise the uniform serenity of the opening two movements. His introduction of full brass is all the more effective when they burst forth in the fury of the thunderstorm. Punctuation by piccolo at the high end and trombones at the low end lend a cosmic splendor to nature’s wrath. Timpani, too, are reserved for the fourth movement, their only appearance in this otherwise tranquil work, so free of Beethovenian drama.

The *Pastoral Symphony* is scored for woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs, and strings. Piccolo and trombones are added for the “Storm” movement only.

***Metacosmos* (2018)**
Anna Thorvaldsdottir
Born 11 July 1977 in Borgarnes, Iceland
Currently residing in Surrey, United Kingdom

Approximate duration 13 minutes

This is the Charlottesville Symphony's first performance of Metacosmos.

- Now in her mid-40s, Anna Thorvaldsdottir has emerged as Iceland's most prominent composer.
- She is most at home writing for full orchestra.
- Landscapes and nature provide the impetus for much of her music.
- The title *Metacosmos* is meant to evoke a place beyond.
- Her piece is a struggle between chaos and natural beauty.

Iceland has composers? Yeah, and Anna Thorvaldsdottir has rocketed to international acclaim as their beacon. NPR has called her “one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary music.” *The New York Times* praises her “seemingly boundless textural imagination.” The Iceland Symphony Orchestra's recording (yes, there is an Iceland Symphony Orchestra, and yes, they record commercially and internationally) of *Metacosmos*, conducted by Daniel Bjarnason, was named by *The New York Times* as one the 25 best classical music tracks of 2019.

The work has an impressive pedigree: it was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic Society and premiered in Lincoln Center's Geffen Hall in April 2018, with Esa-Pekka Salonen on the podium. Alan Gilbert conducted the European premiere at the Berlin Philharmonic in January 2019. A UK premiere followed at the BBC Proms in July 2019. This woman is getting some high-profile exposure.

So what's all the fuss about? Thorvaldsdottir seems to tame nature in her music, somehow translating it into instrumental sound. "I'm quite obsessed with structure: how it flows, how the [musical] material breathes, how the piece feels in real time," she has said. Her composer's note follows.

Metacosmos is constructed around the natural balance between beauty and chaos – how elements can come together in (seemingly) utter chaos to create a unified, structured whole. The idea and inspiration behind the piece, which is connected as much to the human experience as to the universe, is the speculative metaphor of falling into a black hole – the unknown – with endless constellations and layers of opposing forces connecting and communicating with each other, expanding and contracting, projecting a struggle for power as the different sources pull on you and you realize that you are being drawn into a force that is beyond your control.

As with my music generally, the inspiration behind *Metacosmos* is not something I am trying to describe through the piece – to me, the qualities of the music are first and foremost musical. When I am inspired by a particular element or quality, it is because I perceive it as musically interesting, and the qualities I tend to be inspired by are often structural, like proportion and flow, as well as relationships of balance between details within a larger structure, and how to move in perspective between the two – the details and the unity of the whole.

Full orchestra is Thorvaldsdottir's passion, and it shows in *Metacosmos*. She wanted more bass and darker colors in this piece. "There are endless possibilities to work with when you have an orchestra: so many colors, so many textures," she has said. *Metacosmos* has impossibly tender moments that emerge from cosmic conflict. It is a soul-touching journey.

A cellist by training, Thorvaldsdottir always thought she'd pursue a career as a professional performer, though she did begin composing in her youth. She studied composition at the Iceland Academy of the Arts. She and her husband pursued their higher education in the USA, where they both earned advanced degrees at University of California, San Diego. Thorvaldsdottir holds both her master's and doctoral degrees in composition. Her works are widely performed by major orchestras in Europe, Asia, and North America. The couple now make their home in Surrey, near London.

The score calls for two flutes plus piccolo and alto flute, two oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, four bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, two trombones, tenor and bass tubas, three large tam tams, three large bass drums, two large gongs knobbed in the center, two cymbals, two tom toms and strings.

Alborada del gracioso

Maurice Ravel

Born 7 March 1875 in Ciboure, France

Died 28 December 1937 in Paris, France

Approximate duration 8 minutes

The Charlottesville Symphony previously performed Ravel's Alborada del gracioso in March, 1993 and November, 1994.

- This piece was originally for solo piano; Ravel subsequently orchestrated it.
- A Spanish jester was the inspiration for this flashy movement.
- Ravel treats the orchestra like a giant guitar.
- Castanets and other percussion enhance the Spanish flavor with flamenco rhythms.

Alborada del gracioso, which has been translated both as “Morning Song of the Jester” and “The Fool’s Aubade”, refers to a facetious stock character in Spanish comedy. Listeners would grasp the unmistakable Spanish character of Ravel’s glorious music even without knowing that background.

Like many of Ravel’s orchestral works, *Alborada del gracioso* originated for solo piano, as the fourth movement of his piano suite *Miroirs* (1904-1905). *Miroirs* launched an intensely

creative period for him that lasted through 1908. Ravel acknowledged the suite's importance in his brief biographical sketch, describing it as:

. . . a collection of piano pieces that mark a change in my harmonic development that is so profound that they have put many musicians out of countenance who up to that point have been the most familiar with my style.

Each of *Miroirs*' five movements was dedicated to a different member of *Les Apaches* -- the name translates roughly to "the hooligans" -- a group of artists and writers with whom Ravel was closely associated from about 1901 until the First World War. The dedicatee of *Alborada del gracioso* was Michel-Dmitri Calvocoressi, a musicologist.

Pianistically, it is the most virtuosic movement in *Miroirs*. Calvocoressi called it "a big, independent scherzo in the manner of Chopin and Balakirev," and the great pianist Walter Gieseking considered it and "Scarbo", from Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit*, to be two of the most difficult piano works in the literature.

Ravel's orchestral version capitalizes on the flashy elements, particularly in his use of percussion. The movement's structure is essentially A-B-A. Its opening measures feature full strings playing pizzicato, making a giant guitar out of the orchestra. The central section is a plaintive love lament, with the bassoon as soloist. Rapid repeated notes enhance the rhythmic impetus and unmistakable Spanish flavor; trombone glissandi add to the atmosphere. Cameo solos for woodwind and brass principal players dish up luscious melodies rich with the flavor of *paella* and *tapas*; castanets evoke the mystery of flamenco. If the original piano writing was symphonically conceived, Ravel's gifts as orchestrator blossom fully in this larger version. *Alborada del gracioso* is a magnificent showpiece for orchestra.

The first performance of the orchestral version took place on 17 May 1919. The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, crotales, triangle, tambourine, castanets, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, xylophone, two harps and strings.

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