

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
German composer (1770–1827)
Symphony No. 6
Symphony No. 7

These two symphonies showcase sharply contrasted facets of Ludwig van Beethoven's musical imagination. The Sixth, better known by its nickname "Pastoral," has delighted audiences since its 1808 premiere. When the Disney film *Fantasia* premiered in 1940, it featured several of the Pastoral's movements, animated by creatures from Greek mythology. Beethoven intended the Pastoral to be more than mere evocation of images, however. A devoted nature lover, Beethoven strove to capture the emotions he felt when surrounded by the beauty of the natural world.

The Seventh Symphony takes the idea of emotion transformed into music even further. As Thomas May observed, "The Seventh is one of Beethoven's most abstract, 'absolute' compositions – in the sense that it is very much about the power of music itself." Each of the Seventh Symphony's four movements pulses with a range of emotions which listeners are free to interpret for themselves.

Symphony No. 6 in F Major, Op. 68, "Pastoral" (Estimated length: 37 minutes)

"All tone painting in instrumental music loses its value if pushed too far." – Ludwig van Beethoven

The popularity of "program" or "characteristic" music – instrumental compositions based on non-musical subjects with accompanying narratives – reached its zenith in the late 1700s to early 1800s. Many characteristic pieces, which tended toward descriptions of nature, ocean voyages, hunting expeditions, weather (particularly storms), and military battles were of slight musical value, little more than musical bon-bons designed to delight audiences. Some works stretched the bounds of musical taste, like those featuring military scenes complete with flying bullets and the groans of wounded soldiers. As such music became more fashionable, critics extolled what came to be known as "absolute" music, compositions conceived without extra-musical ideas or inspirations.

Beethoven was very familiar with characteristic pieces, particularly Justin Heinrich Knecht's 1785 *Portrait musical de la nature*, which, like Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony, has five movements featuring a country landscape and a storm. Beethoven, however, exercised great caution when composing his own characteristic music. In his Pastoral Symphony, Beethoven combined programmatic elements (e.g., birdcalls) with the feelings nature evoked in him. To clarify his intentions, Beethoven noted in the score, "The whole will be understood even without a description, as it is more feeling than tone-painting."

Beethoven worshipped nature and disliked city life, where his growing deafness made interactions with people difficult. He preferred being outdoors and made a habit of taking a long walk every day, rain or shine. For Beethoven, these walks provided spiritual renewal. Many of Beethoven's diary entries include ecstatic comments praising nature: "Almighty in the forest! I am happy, blissful in the forest: every tree speaks through you ... Does it not seem as though every tree said to me 'Holy, holy! ... In such a wooded scene in the heights there is calm, calm in which to serve Him.'"

Beethoven gave each of the Sixth Symphony's five movements a title. Of particular note is the *Szene am Bach* (Scene by the Brook), in which the strings' rocking triplet rhythm perfectly represents the brook's lazy meanderings. This movement also features specific bird imitations carefully notated by Beethoven in the score of coda: nightingale (flute), quail (oboe), and cuckoo (two clarinets).

In the final three movements, which Beethoven indicated were to be played without pause, peasants dance to a rousing folk tune. The short *Allegro Gweitter, Sturm* (Thunderstorm), the only movement in a minor key, depicts the fury of a summer squall. The closing *Hirtengesang: Frohe und dankbare Gefühle nach dem Sturm* (Shepherd's song. Happy and grateful feelings after the storm) begins with a chorale phrase, an indication of Beethoven's spiritual inclinations. In the score, Beethoven wrote, "Herr, wir danken dir" (Lord, we thank thee).

Despite less-than auspicious circumstances at the Sixth Symphony's premiere (a four-hour program, under-rehearsed orchestra and spottily heated concert hall), both audiences and critics regarded Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* favorably. One review described the storm as "unsurpassedly beautiful," while Beethoven himself noted, in a letter to his publisher, "In spite of the fact that various mistakes were made, which I could not prevent, the public nevertheless applauded the whole performance with enthusiasm."

Symphony No. 7 in A Major, Op. 92 (Estimated length: 36 minutes)

Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, like his *Eroica* (No. 3), is associated with Napoleon. Unlike the *Eroica*, however, which Beethoven originally conceived as a tribute to the French emperor, the Seventh can be heard, among other things, as a celebration of Napoleon's defeat.

Beethoven's hearing had been fading since the early 1800s, and by 1813, he was almost completely deaf. To compensate, he adopted an idiosyncratic conducting style, described by colleague Louis Spohr: "Whenever a sforzando occurred, he tore his arms, previously crossed upon his breast, asunder with great vehemence. At piano he crouched down lower and lower according to the degree of softness he desired. If a crescendo then entered he gradually rose again and at the entrance to the forte he jumped into the air. Sometimes, too, he unconsciously shouted to strengthen the forte ... It was evident that the poor deaf master was no longer able to hear the pianos in his music ..."

Beethoven's deafness apparently had no effect on the audience or critics, who received the Seventh Symphony with great enthusiasm. At its premiere, one newspaper reported, the "applause rose to the point of ecstasy." Writing about a subsequent performance, a Leipzig critic noted, "the new symphony (A major) was received with so much applause, again. The reception was as animated as at the first time; the Andante [sic – the writer is actually referring to the *Allegretto*] (A minor), the crown of modern instrumental music, as at the first performance, had to be repeated."

The introduction to the Seventh Symphony was the longest ever written in the history of the symphony up to that time. At 64 measures, it remains one of the most extensive. The *Poco sostenuto*'s carefully constructed foundation of anticipatory energy leads gently into the joyful *Vivace*, which builds into an ebullient shout.

The *Allegretto* has enjoyed fame separate from the Seventh Symphony as a whole. It quickly became an audience favorite, so much so that 19th century, conductors would often insert it into less popular Beethoven symphonies during concerts.

Beethoven's preference scherzos rather than minuets as symphonic third movements expanded the creative and expressive possibilities of the symphony as a whole. A scherzo ("joke" in Italian) as Beethoven uses it defies expectation, often in a tongue-in-cheek manner. The first section, the scherzo itself, brims with mirthful humor; the joke becomes sharper when paired with the brass-heavy "trio," which Beethoven indicated should be "very much less fast" than the scherzo.

In 1848, Richard Wagner wrote that Beethoven's Seventh Symphony was "the apotheosis of the dance; it is dance in her highest aspect, as it were the loftiest deed of bodily motion incorporated in an ideal mould of tone." The whirling energy of the closing Allegro con brio, for example, suggests a ballet dancer performing a series of dazzling *fouettes*, whipping one leg around and around with effortless skill. Critics and scholars have likened this movement to a Bacchic revel, and Beethoven himself wrote, "Music is the wine which inspires us to new generative processes, and I am the Bacchus who presses out this glorious wine to make mankind spiritually drunken ..."

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