**Beethoven: Symphony no 6 in F major, Op. 68, ‘Pastoral’**

On a cold December night in 1808 an all-Beethoven concert was held in the Theater an der Wien in Vienna. The programme included, among other things, the first performances of his fourth piano concerto and both the fifth and the sixth symphonies. It lasted four gruelling long hours. Before the end, the poor exhausted frostbitten audience were desperate to leave but afraid to sneak out for fear of being glowered at by the notoriously mercurial Beethoven. To make things worse, the orchestra made a bit of a mash of this difficult modern music, and I imagine few of those present realised that they had witnessed the beginning of a new age.

The fifth symphony is a colossus. Imagining a world without it is like picturing a world with no Mount Everest, or no moon; or a world where no one had ever yet said ‘to be or not to be’ or even ‘let there be light’. From its opening motif, arguably the best-known man-made sound on the planet, through the valley of the shadow of death and out into the glorious bright blaze of the finale, it takes us on musical journeys that even today can astonish, surprise and uplift us, and leave us feeling emptied yet full, wrung out and, to be honest, not really ready for another whole symphony.

But if you *had* to follow the fifth with another one – if you really *had* to – wouldn’t it be great if it could be one that was just utterly, miraculously delightful from start to finish? That is exactly what Beethoven gave us in his sixth symphony.

The ‘Pastoral’ is a series of pictures telling the story of a day in the open air. Each of the five movements has a descriptive title explaining the simple narrative. We arrive in the country and feel happy about it; we sit by a brook, watch the water flowing past and hear birdsong; we see some rustic folk performing a boisterous dance; this is interrupted by a terrible thunderstorm; the sun comes out and we are happy again.

That’s all there is to the story. It is not possible to deduce many more details of actual events in this day of pastoral recreation, and Beethoven stressed that he was more interested in the feelings evoked by the countryside than any specific narrative. It is not a tone-poem.

There are, of course, passages in which the orchestra imitates nature directly. The coda to the second movement introduces the song or call of three birds, which are labelled in the score as *Nachtigall* (nightingale), *Wachtel* (quail) and *Kukuk* (cuckoo). Of all the noises of nature the cry of the cuckoo is the easiest to reproduce with a musical instrument, since it consists of two clear notes a third apart. Anyone could put that into a symphony. But what about the quail and the nightingale? The quail does not make a recognisable note, but the staccato rhythm of its call is exactly as Beethoven portrayed it. And the nightingale’s legendary song, though infinitely complex, does include a mixture of repeated notes and two-note trills, which Beethoven’s flute calls to mind without being a direct imitation. But he does all of this without descending into mere sound-effects; he gives us a portrait of nature which is nevertheless still music.

The same applies to the thunderstorm in the fourth movement. You can chart its progress like a real storm. It begins with distant rumblings, just loud enough to interrupt the dancing of the countryfolk. Almost at once it begins to rain: a gentle pitter-patter to begin with, accompanied by a chilly wind. Then the sky suddenly darkens, the squall hits and we are drenched. Before we can recover from this, a mighty thunderclap and dazzling lightning-bolt explode overhead. More thunder follows, and stronger winds. But it does not last long. The storm passes overhead, and as its last grumblings recede into the distance the sun breaks out once again. Yet, as with the birdsong, Beethoven makes us live through this vivid scene using only a symphony orchestra playing melodic themes: music, not just noise.

The rest of the symphony for the most part eschews such explicit portrayal of actual things or events. Its pastoral nature comes from the emotional tone of the music, but also from the organic way in which Beethoven develops his material. The essence of symphonic music is repetition and variation. A symphony will take a theme, or a number of contrasting themes, repeat them just enough to make them familiar, then change them into something new before bringing them back to the original form. What Beethoven did in works such as the *Eroica* and the fifth was to begin this process with short, simple motifs, but allow them to develop on a massive scale, taking us on a musical journey that encompassed the whole world. In the ‘Pastoral’ symphony he does something different. The themes grow in the way that a tree grows: each branch is a version of the trunk; each twig is like the branch. New shapes emerge and grow from what comes before them: there are none of the sudden lurches of mood, no unexpected gear-changes, no sharp corners. In the first two movements, and in the finale, there is barely a feeling of time passing at all: the music flows like that brook, always similar but never the same, and you have the impression that he could have gone on and on with the same material without the delight waning (though the audience at that marathon première probably wished it had ended sooner). There is ebb and flow but no drama except in the third and fourth movements.

It is more like a landscape than a story.

© Mark Browse 2014