Milwaukee Symphony

Musical Journeys

WEEKLY STREAMING PROGRAMS

Episode 9 Notes

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Baptized 17 December 1770; Bonn, Germany
Died 26 March 1827; Vienna, Austria

Overture to *Coriolan*, Opus 62

Composed: 1807
First performance: March 1807; Vienna, Austria

According to legend, Gaius Marcius Coriolanus gained his surname as an award for the conquest of the Volscian city of Corioli (493 B.C.) on the Italian peninsula. Upon his triumphant return to Rome, Coriolanus was nominated for the position of Consul. Either an ultimate distaste for Roman politics or an unwise political action caused him to abandon the city. Intent on revenge, Coriolanus went to the Volscian enemy to express his change of heart. Recognizing his capacities as a general, the Volscians gave him an army, which he promptly marched to the gates of Rome. There a column of women, led by both the wife and mother of Coriolanus, begged the vengeful general to spare Rome. Moved by their tears, Coriolanus agreed to an honorable truce. Then, as the women joyfully reentered the city, the frustrated Volscians killed Coriolanus.

Fact and legend are indistinguishably entwined in this ancient tale. It is possible that the story of Coriolanus is a composite of various historical figures that changed sides in a conflict. This classic plot identified with the name of Coriolanus lives on through the writings of Plutarch, Livy, and Shakespeare – and through the music of Beethoven.

The story of Coriolanus appealed to Beethoven, particularly in its 1802 dramatization by the Viennese poet Heinrich von Collin. By the time Beethoven wrote his powerful overture on the subject in 1807, the Collin play was already past its peak of popularity.

Noting that this overture was part of the same burst of heroic expression that produced the Fifth Symphony, Maynard Solomon provides some psychological insight, writing:

The closing, disintegrating passage – reminiscent of the end of the *Eroica* Funeral March – symbolizes the death of the hero. Unlike Plutarch's or Shakespeare's hero, Collin's Coriolan chooses death – an action that had more than ordinary resonance to Beethoven in view of his documented suicidal impulses. Like the Sonata, Op. 57 ["Appassionata"], *Coriolan* demonstrates that Beethoven did not always insist on joyful conclusions, but was able to locate transcendence in the acceptance of death itself.

Program notes by Roger Ruggeri.

Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Opus 58

Composed: 1805-06
First performance: 6 March 1807; palace of Prince Lobkowitz, Vienna (private)
22 December 1808; Vienna, Austria (public)

Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 dates from around the same time as the "Waldstein" and "Appassionata" piano sonatas, the Triple Concerto, Op. 56, the Three String Quartets, Op. 59 ("Razumovsky"), and the Violin Concerto, Op. 61. The composer dedicated the work to his friend, patron, and pupil Archduke Rudolph of Austria. Its first public performance took place on a four-hour marathon concert that also included the first performances of Symphonies No. 5 and No. 6, the Choral Fantasy, Op. 80, the soprano concert aria *Ah, perfido!*, and portions of the Mass in C, Op. 86. At the still-young age of 38, it was the last time Beethoven would appear as a concerto soloist, due to his increasing deafness.

In his landmark book *The Classical Style* (1972), Charles Rosen wryly observes that "the most important fact about the concerto form is that the audience waits for the soloist to enter." In the exquisitely lyrical opening phrases of the G major piano concerto, Beethoven offers a gentle rebuff to Rosen's axiom, beginning with the piano alone. The orchestra enters four bars later, quietly echoing the soloist's motif, but in the strikingly distant key of B major. Only after several pages does the texture grow into a full *tutti* and a true conversation between the piano and orchestra begin.

The compelling E minor Andante con moto – a literal dialogue between piano and strings – in the 19th century was said to depict Orpheus (soloist) taming the Furies (strings). Beethoven scholar Lewis Lockwood posits an equally intriguing notion, equating the second movement to an operatic *scena* in which "entreaty is met at first by obdurate refusal… The rhetorical character of the movement, like no other in Beethoven, invites association with tradition, and one of these may well have been that of the expressive aria with string from Mozart's late Italian works."

Any remaining oppositions are reconciled in the sprightly rondo-finale. It begins softly, with a lively motif in the strings. Then, for the first time in the concerto, the trumpets and timpani make their entrance. The fleet, energetic piano is afforded ample opportunity for virtuoso display as Beethoven's soulful and captivating Op. 58 dashes to its conclusion.

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.

Symphony No. 6 in F major, Opus 68, "Pastoral"

Composed: 1808
First performance: 22 December 1808; Vienna, Austria

In his sketchbooks, Beethoven made a number of revealing comments about his Sixth Symphony:

> The hearers should be allowed to discover the situation. – All painting in instrumental music, if pushed too far, is a failure. – *Sinfonia pastorella*. Anyone who has an idea of country life can make out for himself the intentions of the author without many titles. – People will not require titles to recognize the general intention to be more a matter of feeling than of painting in sounds. – Pastoral Symphony: No picture, but something in which the emotions are expressed which are aroused in men by the pleasure of the country [or], in which some feelings of country life are set forth.

Nevertheless, Beethoven did apply titles to the movements of his Sixth Symphony, thereby providing grist for continuing discussions about the composer's intentions. In a broader sense, the Nature-loving Beethoven here expresses himself in a work that forms an artistic respite between the more cosmic utterance of his Fifth and Seventh symphonies.

Less frequently considered is the fact that program music – music dealing with extra-musical subjects – was gaining popularity during those years of the 19th century. J.F. Fetis, a music historian and a contemporary of Beethoven, advanced an interesting theory. He and a few others suggest that Beethoven got the idea for his "Pastoral" Symphony from an advertisement on the back of a publication of three of his piano sonatas. The work advertised as "A Musical Portrait of Nature" by J.H. Knecht; the description of its five movements was very close to those that Beethoven ultimately used. Those who have seen the Knecht work assure us that any similarity ends with this programmatic outlie. Storm scenes were very popular when Beethoven penned his symphony in 1807-08; it is significant that his is the only work of this genre that has truly survived to the present day. As usual, Beethoven outclassed his contemporaries at their own game.

I. *Awakening of cheerful feelings upon arriving in the country: Allegro ma non troppo*; F major, 2/4. A sense of simple tranquility pervades the first movement; violins begin the essential theme. Aside from a smoothly descending idea in C major that serves as a second theme, the movement progresses along on the first theme (or fragments thereof), with only a gentle hint of development.

II. *Scene by the brook: Andante molto mosso*; B-flat major, 12/8. This movement is an expansive pastorale filled with soft murmurings. Strings reveal both themes in this contemplative panorama of nature. In the coda, Beethoven indicates: "the nightingale (flute), quail (oboe), cuckoo (clarinet) are heard."

III. *Merry gathering of country folk: Allegro*; F major, 3/4. A sense of rustic holiday is felt in this scherzo as Beethoven recreates a memory of the music that sounded throughout the Viennese countryside. Although the general mood of this movement is quite apparent, somewhat less apparent is Beethoven's clever parody of village musicians. The oboe tune appears to come in a beat late and then "catches up" with the rest of the ensemble; the bassoon meanwhile plays the only three notes seemingly available to him. This bucolic gaiety is ultimately dispersed by the onset of the next movement.

IV. *Thunderstorm; Tempest: Allegro*; F minor, 4/4. With thunder in the low strings and a sense of wind and lightning in the upper voices of the orchestra, Beethoven creates a free-form storm scene. The activity rises to a climax and then dissipates into the finale.

V. *Shepherd's song; Happy, thankful feelings after the storm: Allegretto*; F major, 6/8. The reappearance of the sun is greeted by a clarinet phrase that is soon echoed by the horn. Their calls, when taken up by the violins, prove to be the first theme of the movement. Aside from the occasional appearance of a second theme, first played by pairs of clarinets and bassoons, the movement is dominated by the lyric unfolding of the opening idea. This finale seems, to Edward Downes,

> "an ecstatic hymn of thanks to some pantheistic god, to Nature with a capital 'N,' to the sun, to whatever beneficent power one can perceive in a universe that seemed as dark and terrifyingly irrational in Beethoven's day as it can in ours. That a man of sorrows and self-erected miseries like Beethoven could glimpse such glory and, by the incomprehensible alchemy of his art, lift us to share his vision – even if only for a few moments – is a miracle that remains as fresh as tomorrow's sunrise."

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.