Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Symphony No.6 in F, Op.68 – “Pastoral”
Allegro ma non troppo
Andante molto moto
Allegro -
Allegro -
Allegretto

Beethoven was born just under 250 years ago into a world where his future occupation was pre-ordained by the circumstances of his birth: he was destined to become, like his father and grandfather before him, a musician in the court of the Elector of Bonn. With that life ahead of him he started his musical training at the age of four (and received no other education) and showed such prodigious talent as a child that he gave his first public performance in Cologne at the age of eight. His first compositions were published when he was just 11, and at the age of 13 he was appointed to the important post of harpsichordist with the court orchestra. During Beethoven’s time the Elector of Bonn was Maximilian Franz, brother of Marie Antoinette (the wife of the French king), and youngest son of the Holy Roman Emperor – Bonn was seen as an insignificant outpost of Empire and Maximilian was free to indulge in his passion for the arts largely untroubled by the big concerns of state with which more important rulers of the age were troubled. Maximilian recognised Beethoven’s talent and sent him off to Vienna to study with Mozart. This came to nothing, and Beethoven returned to Bonn for a further few years until a local aristocrat, Count Waldstein, recommended him to Haydn who suggested Beethoven become one of his pupils in Vienna. In 1792, aged 22, Beethoven settled in Vienna, never to return to Bonn. It was in Vienna on 2nd April 1800, that the first of his nine symphonies was premiered.

To quote Christian Wildhagen, “with him, each new symphony seems to redefine the framework of the whole genre”. That was certainly the case with the Sixth Symphony through which Beethoven celebrated the countryside around the delightful rural village of Heiligenstadt where he sought refuge from the stifling heat and suffocating pollution of a Viennese summer. Anton Schindler, who worked as Beethoven’s assistant from 1822 until 1827, described Beethoven as “a man in whom nature was personified. Not the laws of nature, but rather its elemental power captivated him. Thus it came about that the spirit of nature revealed itself to him in all its mighty force and endowed him with the ability to create a work that cannot be compared with anything else in the entire musical repertoire”. That work was his “Pastoral” Symphony, which moved away from convention by having five movements each with highly descriptive titles.

While the idea of such a symphony might have seemed revolutionary at the time, Beethoven in fact modelled it on a symphony by Justin Heinrich Knecht (1752-1817) – The Musical Portrait of Nature – which not only had five movements each with descriptive titles, but also followed a programme very similar to that of Beethoven’s. Indeed the whole idea of using music to describe particular images was just then coming very much into vogue: Beethoven took an instant loathing to a hugely popular piano piece by a composer called Kotzwara, whose The Battle of Prague was
liberally sprinkled with passages depicting “flying bullets”, “the cries of the wounded” and so on. Wary of becoming too wrapped up in such extra-musical story-telling Beethoven wrote in 1807 as he started work on the Symphony; “It is left to the listener to discover the situation. Anyone who has the faintest idea of rural life will have no need of descriptive titles to enable him to imagine what the composer intends”. A year later he had clearly changed his mind and allowed the Symphony to be published with detailed descriptions for each movement. These were presented to the public at the work’s first performance in Vienna on 22nd December 1808.

“Awakening of joyful feelings on arrival in the countryside” – Throughout the first movement a light breeze is blowing, the birds are singing and a shepherd can be heard from time to time playing his pipe to the accompaniment of a drone bass. At one point the music works up into a rustic round-dance, but the overriding impression is of calm, tranquillity and deep contentment.

“Scene at the Brook” – The gentle rippling of water is heard from the very outset of the second movement. Over a decade later, Beethoven was walking with Schindler through the woods near Heiligenstadt when he stopped and said, “Here I composed the scene by the brook, and the yellowhammers up there, the quails, the nightingales and cuckoos roundabout composed with me”. Certainly the sound of birdsong is ever-present in the music, and at the very end of the movement Beethoven includes a kind of “birdsong cadenza”, marking out solos for nightingale (flute), quail (oboe) and cuckoo (clarinet).

“The Peasants’ Merrymaking” – The third movement depicts a country-dance. In Heiligenstadt Beethoven frequently used to visit an inn called The Three Ravens. A village band played there and, as the evening wore on and the drinks flowed, so they became less alert to the job in hand. Beethoven wrote a number of Waltzes for them and noticed that they frequently dozed off in mid-tune. As he told Schindler, in this movement he set out to “copy these poor people”, and he does so with remarkable wit.

“Thunderstorm” – The villagers’ festivities are rudely interrupted by drops of rain which quickly turn into a violent storm complete with claps of thunder and swirling winds. The storm passes directly overhead and then gradually off into the far distance.

“Feelings of happiness and thankfulness after the storm” – With the passing of the storm the villagers sing, tentatively at first but with growing enthusiasm, their hymn of thankfulness that they and their village are safe. The use of trombones here, who have patiently been sitting silently so far, adds a touch of religious depth; the trombone having long been associated with church music. The work ends, as it began, in calm and tranquillity.