



**Beethoven 6
Program Notes**

Beethoven 6 – March 21, 2015

Ballet Suite from *Naïs*

Jean-Philippe Rameau
1683-1764

Jean-Philippe Rameau was the leading French composer of keyboard music and opera during the late Baroque period, and a renowned innovator in harmonic theory. In 1702, he began his two decades as organist in numerous churches around France, the last one at Clermont Cathedral where he secured his release from a 29-year contract by deliberately playing all the most unpleasing registrations and adding unresolved dissonances on a feast day.

Rameau moved to Paris in 1722 where he published the first of his many books on music theory, which brought him wide acclaim. His work eventually brought him to the attention of La Riche de la Pouplinière, a wealthy tax collector who devoted a considerable portion of his fortune to supporting musicians and who made Rameau head of his household orchestra. Rameau was known at the time primarily as a composer of keyboard music and cantatas, but when la Pouplinière learned of his protégé's ambition to compose for the stage, he put him in touch with the librettist Simon-Joseph Pellegrin. Together they produced *Hippolyte et Aricie* in 1733, followed by a string of over 30 grand operas and spectacles for the Paris stage.

Rameau was a contentious person. His theory of harmony, which still forms the basis of the modern study of tonal harmony, embroiled him in disputes with the Encyclopedists, Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond D'Alembert, and especially with Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Although widely respected and admired, he was regarded as both unsociable and miserly.

First performed in 1749, the opera *Naïs* was subtitled *Opéra pour La Paix* (Opera for the peace), to commemorate the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, which ended the Austrian war of succession. The story takes place in Corinth, during the Isthmian Games (predecessors of today's Olympic Games), where the sea god Neptune, disguised as a mortal, falls in love and woos the water nymph Naïs. But his love is rivaled by two Corinthian chiefs, who do not heed the warnings of a soothsayer, and a battle ensues.

In contrast to most French opera ballets, the dances in *Naïs* are intimately tied with the stage action, making it a true opera-ballet. In true Baroque fashion, Rameau took some of the orchestral music from his earlier operas and in turn used some of the *Naïs* original music for later works.

Violin Concerto No. 3 in G major, K. 216

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
1756-1791

There is some controversy among scholars whether Mozart himself actually gave the first performance of his five known violin concertos, but there is no question that he was already a master violinist in his childhood. In fact, his father, Leopold – ever the "backstage parent" – was frequently after him to show off his skills by writing a virtuoso concerto for the instrument: "You yourself do not know how well you play the violin," he wrote to his son. When Mozart finally did write concertos for the instrument in 1773-75, he wrote a bunch of them, his five concertos only 12 Koechel numbers apart. At that time, Mozart was in Salzburg, in the employment of Archbishop Hieronymus Colloredo for whom he both composed and served as violinist in the court orchestra. Mozart hated his employer who was a strict taskmaster and had no truck with his young musician, however talented. Although Mozart was more than seven years in the Archbishop's employ, he spent nearly three of them on furlough – stretched to AWOL – performing around Europe and, none too diplomatically, looking for another job. By 1774 he was apparently quite negligent about his violin playing and possibly wrote the concertos for his friend, the court violinist Antonio Brunetti, whose abilities were limited and who had difficulty playing them. After 1775 Mozart occasionally performed them himself.

The violin concertos are relatively modest works by a youthful master, written at a time when the genre was somewhat neglected. After the flourishing of the Baroque violin concerto by such masters as Vivaldi and Tartini, the violin concerto went into partial hibernation until Beethoven awakened it with a new kind of virtuosic writing that was to set the stage for the great romantic concertos of Mendelssohn, Bruch and Tchaikovsky. Mozart left no cadenzas but most players either write their own or borrow one from the pen of any number of great violinists.

The Third Concerto, dated September 12, 1775, shows a marked progression from the first two. It is freer in form and more self-assured, employing the orchestra as a true partner to the soloist, rather than a pale accompaniment. The opening movement uses the ritornello of Aminta's aria "*Aer tranquillo*" from the opera *Il ré pastore* that Mozart had composed earlier that year, one of the composer's few cases of self-borrowing. It is a cheerful, rhythmic theme, and after a transition on the oboes, the soloist enters, elaborating and developing it, eventually leading to a puckish new theme. Subsequently, nearly every time the soloist enters, he introduces new material.

The slow movement is one of those ravishingly sensuous adagios that are a Mozart hallmark. It is the only movement in which the flutes participate. The finale begins as a rollicking rondo with a very simple theme. Although it is customary for the repetitions of the rondo theme to alternate with episodes of new material, Mozart takes the convention to some unusual places. He continually vacillates between G major and G minor, including a passage in which the tempo slows in combination with the shift to g minor, Mozart's key of extreme pathos and despair. But the dark mood does not persist and the high spirits return with a theme resembling a German folk tune – which Mozart called a "Strassburger" in his correspondence, giving the Concerto its nickname – and finally to the original rondo theme. The movement ends quietly and somewhat unexpectedly with a simple repetition of the rondo theme.

Symphony No. 6 in F major, Op. 68 **"Pastorale"**

Ludwig van Beethoven
1770-1827

While many of Beethoven's symphonies broke new ground, the Sixth is both innovative – as it prefigures the Romantic tone poems – and traditional. Beethoven and his audience were readily able to attach literary, emotional or extra-musical concepts to music. His *Wellington's Victory* was the latest in a long tradition of musical battles dating back to the Renaissance. And of course, there were musical models for many of the images in the Sixth Symphony – Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* and bucolic Christmas pastorals with bagpipe drones, as in Handel's *Messiah* or Corelli's *Christmas Concerto* – not to mention an extensive vocabulary of rhetorical musical figures from the Baroque, bird calls and other perennial tone painting devices.

But Beethoven seemed to be searching for something different, an ideal way to portray and “express” nature. “Any painting, if it is carried too far in instrumental music, loses expressive quality...The overall content, consisting of more feelings than of tone paintings, will be recognized even without further description,” he wrote in his sketchbook while working on the Sixth Symphony. This and other notes to himself as he worked reveal the Symphony as more than a sentimental outpouring. Here was another of the composer's creative challenges to be met in the context of his trajectory of self-fulfillment as an artist. As Beethoven's biographer, Barry Cooper, puts it: “He was faced with two main problems in writing a symphony in the pastoral style: the first was to prevent the music from degenerating into scene-painting or story-telling; the second was to combine the pastoral style, leisurely and undramatic, with the thrust and dynamism of the symphonic style.”

Beethoven wrote more words about the Sixth Symphony than about any of his other compositions. He provided descriptive titles to each of the five movements, while at the same time commenting that the music was self-explanatory and needed no titles. The first movement, “Cheerful feelings awakened on arriving in the country,” builds up none of the intense tension so common in Beethoven's first movements, being instead an unhurried study in tranquility. The murmuring accompaniment in the second movement, “Scene by the brook,” captures the sound of a flowing brook interspersed with the birdcalls and chirping insects – all within a tradition in tone painting common since the Renaissance.

In a break with the classical symphonic structure, the last three movements run together as a continuous quasi-narrative entity. The third movement, “Merry gathering of country folk,” suggests a village band with the lower strings imitating the drone of a bagpipe. The dance is interrupted by the “Thunderstorm,” a superb impressionistic evocation of lightning, thunder and howling winds. As the storm approaches, the thunderclaps come faster and faster, then slow down as the storm passes. After the final rumbles, a solo clarinet, followed by a solo horn, lead into the “Shepherd's song: Happy and thankful feelings after the storm.” Instead of a traditional rousing Finale, the bucolic scene ends with the shepherd's pipe figure fading away into the distance.

Beethoven started to work on the Symphony in the summer of 1807 and finished it in June 1808. It was premiered at a concert (*Musikalische Akademie*) of his recent compositions in the Imperial Theater in Vienna on December 22, 1808. The program, which was over four hours long, also included the premiere of the Fifth Symphony, the Fourth Piano Concerto, the concert aria “*Ah Perfido*,” some piano improvisations by the composer, three movements from the Mass in C major and, to top it all off, the *Choral Fantasia*, which Beethoven composed as a grand finale to the occasion. Such monster concerts were the norm in the early nineteenth century, with people coming and going in the middle as they pleased. Not surprisingly, few stayed for the duration.

The gentle atmosphere of the Sixth Symphony is in sharp contrast to the high-voltage intensity of the Fifth, completed only a few weeks earlier. Although Beethoven fought, quarreled and argued with everyone, friend, foe or patron, with nature he was at peace.