

San Juan Symphony

April 21-22, 2012

Program Notes

by Michael Allsen

Our final program celebrates Spring with musical pictures of nature—first a gentle Impressionistic tone poem by Delius, *On Hearing the First Cuckoo of Spring*. 15-year-old pianist Zhu Wang then joins us for Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 21*, which includes a wonderful pastoral moment in its famous *Andante*. And of course the most celebrated work of all about Nature is Beethoven's sixth symphony—a day spent in country lounging by a brook, dancing with peasants, seeking shelter from a thunderstorm, and expressing the simple joy of being outdoors on a glorious springtime day.

Frederick Delius (1862-1934)

On Hearing the First Cuckoo of Spring

*This brief tone poem was composed in 1912, and first performed in Leipzig on Oct 2, 1913.
Duration 7:00.*

Delius, sometimes called the “English Impressionist,” took a rather roundabout path into music. He was born in England, to German parents. Though he was quite talented as a child, his father was opposed to a musical career, and when Frederick was 21, his father sent him (apparently at Frederick's request) to work on a citrus farm near Jacksonville, Florida. Out from under his family's wing, Delius found a counterpoint teacher, and spent more and more of his time with music, eventually leaving the farm and establishing himself as an independent music teacher in Virginia. His father finally agreed to pay for formal training in music, and in 1886, Delius returned to Europe to begin studies at the Leipzig Conservatory. The connections he made there were invaluable: particularly with the Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg. Though Grieg, already a well-known figure throughout Europe, was nearly 20 years older than the young Englishman, the two formed a lifelong friendship. It was a letter from Grieg that finally convinced Delius's father that his son would never return to take over the family wool business. Delius soon moved to France, throwing himself into the artistic and intellectual life of Paris, where he met his wife, the painter Jelka Rosen. Delius spent most his life in France, though in his later years he suffered from the effects of Syphilis. His style is distinctive—atmospheric music full of chromatic harmony, but Delius frequently used folk material: African-American spirituals (a legacy of his time in the American south), and English and Scandinavian folk songs.

On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring is gentle, pastoral music scored for a small orchestra, which Delius uses to paint a kind of transparent watercolor of a quiet springtime day. The cuckoo's distinctive song has been used in musical works since the Middle Ages, but here the composer carefully blends the cuckoo call into the background, until it is heard in the clarinet in the middle of the piece. The main theme is a traditional Norwegian song, *I Ola-Dalom*, which was used earlier in one of Grieg's folk-song arrangements—though it seems that it was their mutual friend Percy Grainger who introduced the tune to Delius. Both younger men were

admirers of Grieg's music, and in 1907, Grainger write to Delius: "The feeling of nature I think is what I like so much in Grieg's best things, and I think we all three have something in common." A few years after he completed *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring*, Delius wrote to Grainger: "Spring for me always means a longing for Norway."

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)
Concerto No.21 in C Major for Piano and Orchestra, K.467

Mozart completed this work on March 9, 1785, just one day before its premiere at a subscription concert in Vienna. Duration 30:00.

Mozart's reputation and success in his early years in Vienna came largely through his private recitals, and public "subscription" performances of his own works. His piano concertos are all works written for this venue—Viennese audiences demanded new concertos at every concert, and Mozart responded with an amazing series of fifteen concertos written during his first five years in Vienna. The bulk of Viennese public concerts occurred during Advent and Lent, and the Lenten season of 1785 was particularly successful for Mozart. In the course of about six weeks Mozart gave no less than six public recitals, played a large subscription concert on March 10, and performed in several additional programs for aristocratic patrons and Viennese musical colleagues. His new C Major piano concerto was the centerpiece of the March 10 concert. Written at the last possible moment before the concert, and in all likelihood sight-read by the members of the orchestra, the concerto was also designed to showcase an innovative new fortepiano design. According an advertisement for the concert: "On Thursday, March 10, 1785, Kapellmeister Mozart will have the honor of giving in the Imperial and Royal Court Theater a Grand Musical Concert for his own benefit including not only a new, just finished fortepiano concerto to be played by him, but also an especially large fortepiano with pedals will be used for improvisations." The pedals do not seem to have been the soft and sustain pedals familiar in modern pianos, but a series of reinforcing bass notes played in the manner of an organist's foot pedals.

Though it has the traditional sonata-form outlines of a concerto first movement, the *Allegro* is larger and more "symphonic" in conception than in many of Mozart's earlier concertos. The main ideas are presented in the orchestra's opening passage, an understated military-style theme, and a gentler idea played by the woodwinds. When it enters, the piano does not play the main theme, but rather maneuvers the orchestra into playing it through a short cadenza-style passage. Rather than strictly following the form of the orchestra's exposition, the piano has a striking minor-key passage before presenting the second theme. The lengthy development is largely given to the piano, and contains sudden harmonic twists that must have startled and delighted Mozart's audience in 1785. True to form the recapitulation ends with a pause, and a space for a solo cadenza, the movement ends with a brief coda.

The *Andante* is one of Mozart's most lyrical movements. With a poignant, searching main theme, it projects a sense of melancholy through the entire movement. (This made it the perfect theme music to the highly romantic, but tragic 1967 film *Elvira Madigan*.) Like many of Mozart's slow movements, this one has connections to the world of opera—in his classic 1945

biography of Mozart, Alfred Einstein describe the movement as “...like an ideal aria freed of the all the limitations of the human voice.”

After the unrelenting seriousness of the first movement and the bittersweet emotion of the *Andante*, the finale (*Allegro vivace assai*) is a playful rondo. The main theme, which repeats throughout the movement in alternation with contrasting material is introduced by the orchestra. The mood is light and frisky throughout, except for one brief minor-key episode at the center. Even here, however, this is the mock-seriousness of *opera buffa*, and the mood soon lightens. There is space for one more solo cadenza before a final statement of the main theme, and the movement closes abruptly with a couple of crisp chords from the orchestra.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) **Symphony No.6 in F Major, Op.68 “Pastoral”**

Beethoven composed the Symphony No.6 between 1803 and 1808, and it was first performed in December 1808 in Vienna. Duration 46:00.

“No one can love the country as much as I do.”
- Beethoven

At some point in 1803, Beethoven sketched a brief musical passage of flowing triplets he titled “the murmuring of the brook”—what seems to have been the very earliest idea related to what would become his pastoral symphony. While he collected additional ideas over the next few years, the bulk of the *Symphony No.6* was written in 1808, at roughly the same time as the *Symphony No.5*. Both symphonies were performed for the first time at a benefit concert in Vienna on December 22, 1808. The program for this landmark event also included excerpts from his *Mass in C* and the concert aria *Ah, perfido*, together with premieres of two works with Beethoven himself at the piano, the *Piano Concerto No.4* and the hastily-composed *Choral Fantasy*.

Despite their pairing, the fifth and sixth symphonies are astonishingly different works. While later writers worked hard to hear a “program” (a “story line” or other extra-musical idea) in the fifth, it was probably conceived as an expression of purely musical ideas. The sixth is clearly programmatic, however. Beethoven suggested in his own writings that this work should bring up associations of country life in the minds of its audience. The title “pastoral” is from Beethoven himself, though he was careful to make the distinction between the kind of subtle feelings he was trying express in the sixth symphony and the sensational programmatic pieces that were all the rage in France and Austria at the time. It was this programmatic aspect of the sixth that most excited Romantic musicians—it was clearly the inspiration for Berlioz’s *Fantastic Symphony* and Schumann’s “Spring” symphony to give just two examples.

The “author’s intentions” in the sixth seem to be summed up best in an annotation to one of Beethoven’s sketches: “Pastoral Symphony—who ever also treasures country life can discover for himself what the author intends.” Beethoven’s love of the country is well-known: he enjoyed

long walks in the countryside, and much of the sixth was written in a country house in the small town of Heiligenstadt outside of Vienna.

The sixth is formally innovative, abandoning the traditional four-movement plan in favor of five movements in which the last three form a single dramatic unit. The opening movement (*Allegro non troppo*) is set in a generously-proportioned sonata form, but unlike most of Beethoven's first movements, there is no furious intensity in his development, but a remarkable gentleness of tone throughout. In a violin part Beethoven made brief notes at the beginning of each of the five movements that suggest specific associations, in this case, "Pleasant, cheerful feelings aroused on approaching the countryside." Both main themes are quiet and happy, first a country-dance tune above what might be an unchanging bagpipe drone and then a more active second theme. There are only occasional hints of the minor in the long development section, and when the recapitulation arrives, there is no great drama preceding it, but just the quiet satisfaction of a really good tune being restated by the full orchestra. The coda is also understated: a final rounding off of the main idea surrounded by witty clarinet lines.

This placid mood continues in the second movement (*Andante molto moto* – "Scene by the brook"). Here again he uses sonata form with none of the usual fire and fury. If he did indeed intend this as musical picture of a brook, the constantly undulating string accompaniment is the aquatic background to a series of lovely woodwind themes. Near the end there is a birdlike cadenza for solo woodwinds. As if anyone could miss his intention, Beethoven labeled these passages in the score: "nightingale," "quail," and "cuckoo."

The final three movements are played without a pause. The third movement (*Allegro* – "Happy gathering of villagers") is set as a scherzo, but the tempo is relaxed, as Beethoven launches a set of rustic dances. Two triple-meter themes begin this set, a jolly bagpipe-style tune and a more delicate idea passed among the flute, clarinet, and horn. The contrasting section is a robust duple-meter dance for the full orchestra. All of these ideas are restated, and just when it seems that he is going to round off the movement, there is a quiet rumble, and the texture changes abruptly, as wandering string lines gather intensity above bass tremolos. The "Thunderstorm" doesn't take long to break, and there is a crashing *fortissimo* chord and a series of lightning strikes. Beethoven used a series of shockingly dissonant chords and surprising orchestral effects to paint his storm. The storm passes quickly however, leaving a calm, pastoral duet of clarinet and horn to introduce the finale (*Allegretto* – "Shepherd's song. Grateful thanks to the Almighty after the storm"). The main idea is serene and hymnlike: Beethoven wrote the words "*Herr, wir danken dir*"—Lord, we thank You—in his score at this point. This melody appears in both varied and original forms throughout the movement. Once more, the mood is tranquil throughout, as the movement weaves its unhurried way to a quiet conclusion.