Written by Frederick Morden
Friday, 26 October 2012 05:30

In the middle of the turbulently self-expressive, politically conflicted, structurally groundbreaking nine symphonies of Ludwig van Beethoven is a quiet outlier, a revolutionary work whose only discord is a thunderstorm.

It's hard to believe, but the tumultuous *Fifth* and the mild-mannered *Sixth* symphonies were premiered in the same ice-cold Vienna theater on December 22, 1808. Conceptually contrasting pieces, each work taps into a distinctly different aspect of Beethoven's personality.
No. 5
is an emphatic example of how he portrayed his life through music – bitterness with Vienna, romantic failures, increasing deafness, and frustration with the music politics of the aristocracy. But
Symphony No. 6 ("Pastorale")
is devoid of this me-against-the-world battle. The conflict is gone because Beethoven had no conflict with nature.
No. 6
is simply an observation and organization of what he called "the feelings of nature" put into music, and it enlarged the possibilities for the symphony as a form.

When Maestro Mark Russel Smith cues the Quad City Symphony to begin the *"Pastorale"* on November 3 and 4, don't listen for themes of fate, politics, or philosophy; let Beethoven's retreat into nature be your respite for 40 minutes. He points the way in his musical story by titling each movement so we know exactly what it's depicting – a first for a large-scale symphony.

The opening movement is titled "Awakening of Joyful Feelings on Arrival in the Country" and has a free and easy beat with simple melodies that jump back and forth between instruments like playing children. There are also extended sections of long thematic sequences that provide panoramic "views" of the countryside.

In the second movement, "Scene by a Brook," Beethoven writes unmistakably undulating music in the lower instruments with overlapping waves of babbling melodies in the violins and woodwinds. In a quiet transition, the flute actually imitates a nightingale, the oboe a quail, and the clarinet a cuckoo.

While the first two movements have brief pauses after them, the last three movements are

played without interruption to tie together both the literary drama introduced in the titles and his musical depiction. When the third movement, "Happy Gathering of Country Folk," begins, it sounds like a familiar Beethoven "Scherzo" used in other symphonies, but the form of the music changes abruptly from 3/4 to 2/4 to reveal a hidden passion of the German composer: Austrian country dances. Musicologists have identified the tunes and movements from indigenous Austrian "Forest People," groups that spent a lifetime isolated from city life and that Beethoven discovered on one of his woodland strolls. Beethoven wrote dance music for his country friends, typically a "Landler," with its hopping and stamping.

And there was drinking of the native brew in the music as well. In his detailed biography *Life of Beethoven*
, Alexander Thayer noted that Beethoven's
Sixth
had "the sleep-drunken bassoon" playing extra notes that made the phrases irregular.

With the fourth movement, a storm overshadows the idyllic reverie. Beethoven creates thunder from the basses and cellos, sudden lighting strikes with the timpani, and swirling wind in a chromatic piccolo. If there is tension at all in this symphony, it is within nature – rather than between people – in this vivid section.

After the storm passes, a horn call signals a return to frivolity, and Beethoven goes directly into the fifth and final section called "Shepherds' Song; Cheerful & Thankful Feelings After the Storm." There is a prayer-like section in which Beethoven instructs the orchestra to "whisper," and quietly, they diminuendo to the end with only two chords of "fortissimo" to bring the symphony to its conclusion. By contrast, the "very fortissimo" ending of *No. 5* is repeated for more than 40 measures.

Beethoven's *Sixth* gives us the opportunity to connect to our own pastoral setting. Imagine Iowa farmland with its squares of carefully cultivated rows, a clear, quiet, starry night, the powerfully flowing Mississippi, our abundant wildlife, the pods of forests that dot our countryside. His
"Pastorale"
is, quite simply, a refuge.

The Quad City Symphony Orchestra will perform Beethoven's Symphony No. 6 *– alongside two pieces from Mozart – at 7:30 p.m. on Saturday, November 3, at the Adler Theatre (136 East Third Street, Davenport), and at 2 p.m. on Sunday, November 4, at Augustana College's*

Centennial Hall (
3703 Seventh Avenue, Rock Island
). For more information, visit
QCSymphony.com
.

Frederick Morden is a retired orchestra-music director, conductor, composer, arranger, educator, and writer who has served on the executive board of the Conductors Guild. He can be reached at f.morden@mchsi.com .