

In the heart of every music-lover there is a cherished place for the "Pastoral" Symphony of Beethoven. Should some malign occult power ever banish it from our midst, it would leave an aching void in the artistic consciousness of the world. Ever since its premiere in 1808, the "Pastoral" has been the great revelation of Nature in music. To it have come those seeking refreshment and strength and escape. Here, for some precious forty minutes, they have found a healing power for the torment of spirit and the stress of daily living. Those who have learned to love every measure of this monument to the outdoors have come to cherish still more the message of profound solace and beauty that Beethoven gleaned from the smiling face of Nature.

And this is as it should be — and as Beethoven willed it. For him Nature was more than a seasonal pageantry of marvels to hear and to see; in the gathering turmoil and turbulence of the years it had become the great healer, the center of repose, the confidante. Flowers, clouds, running brooks, forests of firs, rolling vistas of green spoke to this troubled pilgrim of the countryside. At times it was of man they spoke, of his immemorial dream of world brotherhood and love; at more sublime moments they were the very voice of God. "What sovereignty in a forest like this!" he exclaims. "On the heights there is rest — to serve Him."

It is scarcely surprising to find his English friend, Charles Neate, founder of the London Philharmonic Society, reporting that "Nature was almost meat and drink to Beethoven." Obviously it was that — and more — to a man who days on end, while visiting his brother in a suburb of Vienna, would leave the house at six in the morning, roam the nearby woods and meadows hatless and shouting and flinging his arms about in a frenzy of joy, and return late at night with a headful of musical ideas. And let us remember it was a deaf man who sallied forth on these blissful and fruitful pilgrimages.

When he at length confided his impressions to writing, it was an uncanny inner sense of poetic recall that restored the twofold power of the outer sound and the memory of what it gave rise to within him. There had evolved an inward landscape upon which the panorama of sight and sound had made an indelible imprint. Here were babbling brooks and murmurous thickets, the ominous roll of thunder, the ceaseless hum and buzz of tiny things—all recollected from an audible past and now transmuted by the miracle of art and creation into a new community of sound. It had taken complete deafness, perhaps, to bring Beethoven, the solitary seeker, to the very heart of Nature. If he could no longer "hear" the voice of this other "immortal beloved," he could at least "overhear" what was more important — the abiding marvel of her profound peace and spiritual strength. The sights and sounds, fascinating in their springtime literalness, became in their new context another vast symbol of the affirmation of life.

Yet the sights and sounds are there, however we may choose to dismiss any attempt to read into the "Pastoral" Symphony a literal transcript of Nature. We have, of course, Beethoven's own word that the symphony is an expression of feeling rather than a painting. Again and again he cautions against the precise delineation in music of an object or an event. A note on one of his sketches reads: "The hearer is left to find out the situations for himself." On the other hand, he admitted always having a picture of some

kind in mind when he composed—a picture, and almost certainly a sound of Nature or the lingering echo of a cry or gasp or sigh of human feeling. And there is the irrefutable testimony of the title "Pastoral" and the symphonic guideposts of the movement-by-movement subtitles — all Beethoven's own.

So, as the symphony opens we have every right to close our eyes and behold the spreading Maytime bloom of a noonday countryside; to hear, in the second movement, the purling of the water in the lower strings, the fret and tingle of a spring day in the gathering murmurs of the orchestra; the sounds of nightingale, cuckoo and quail. Can we disavow the picture of frolicking peasants in the third movement, the "glimpse" of a grotesque village bassoonist muttering his three notes each time the town band gives him a charitable opening? Certainly we may be pardoned if, mentally, we run for cover as the drums give us the first sinister rumblings of foul weather ahead. And the calm that follows the storm is the calm of the piping shepherd and the broadening benediction of the sun. It is a "Pastoral" symphony, after all. It is a picture...but a picture "seen" by the eyes of the mind and the soul and thus transformed into a revelation of man's wonder before the unfathomable mystery and miracle of Nature.