

BEETHOVEN'S PASTORAL WORLD: THE MEDIATION OF NATURE AND MUSICAL
EXPERIENCE

by

SARAH RACHEL HOFFMAN

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Abigail Fine, Chair of the Examining Committee

Date June 9, 2026

Committee in Charge:	Abigail Fine, Chair
	Joyce Cheng, Institutional Representative
	Sunmi Chang
	Lindsey Rodgers

Accepted by:

Leslie Straka, D.M.A.
Director of Graduate Studies, School of Music and Dance

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LECTURE DOCUMENT ABSTRACT

Sarah Rachel Hoffman

Doctor of Musical Arts in Music Performance

Title: Beethoven's Pastoral World: The Mediation of Nature and Musical Experience

This lecture document examines Beethoven's Symphony No. 6 ("Pastoral") as a work that shapes the listener's experience of a constructed natural world. I argue that the pastoral and the sublime are not simply descriptive labels, but ways of shaping how listeners experience nature through music. These shifts are articulated through changing conditions of temporality and perceptual distance, as well as distinctions between stable musical semiotics and the sublime as produced through sonic conditions. Drawing on both topic theory and 18th-century philosophical accounts of the sublime, I trace how the symphony constructs a pastoral world, subjects that world to pressure in the fourth movement, *Gewitter, Sturm*, and restores it in the finale without effacing the disruption. In doing so, my project clarifies how the symphony presents a version of nature that is stylized and idealized rather than grounded in ecological reality.

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DEDICATION

To Pantalaimon, my inimitable four-legged friend.

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INTRODUCTION

Beethoven's Symphony No. 6 ("Pastoral") is often received as one of the most familiar instances of music about the natural world in the Western canon. Concertgoers routinely encounter the work through programming that presents it as a celebration of nature and, for many performers, those same frameworks shape how they understand and perform the symphony. Outside of the concert hall, the work has taken on a life of its own to be invoked as a totem of environmental advocacy and climate discourse, transforming it into a broad cultural touchstone for considering the natural world during the Anthropocene.¹

And yet, a distinct tension emerges here. The symphony was composed in 1808 as an elaboration of the pastoral tradition in art and its ubiquitous images of shepherds, idyllic rolling hills, and provincial villages. The pastoral, however, does not present nature in its ecological actuality, nor does it imagine nature as possessing intrinsic value independently of human concerns. Rather, it renders a version of nature filtered through human desire, feeling, and imagination, where landscapes are domesticated and made aesthetically pleasing. This distinction—often overlooked outside of musicological and art historical scholarship—carries significant weight for how Beethoven's Sixth Symphony is understood. The point of contention is not that the work is associated with nature, but rather that "nature" itself often functions as a self-evident category. Concert programming, program notes, and contemporary cultural discourse frequently group together works concerned with landscapes, oceans, storms, birdsong, and ecological preservation as though they articulate a shared conception of nature. A pastoral

¹ One notable example is the Beethoven Pastoral Project that was launched in conjunction with the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) in 2021 to honor Beethoven's 250th birthday. The initiative positioned the symphony as a symbol of environmental awareness and climate action. UN Climate Change Secretariat, "Beethoven Pastoral Project Promotes Climate Protection," UNFCCC, June 2, 2020, accessed May 15, 2026, <https://unfccc.int/news/beethoven-pastoral-project-promotes-climate-protection>.

symphony, a sublime musical storm, and a contemporary work commissioned to advocate for ecological preservation do indeed all engage with the natural world, and yet they do so through fundamentally different aesthetic frameworks and with different assumptions regarding what nature is and how humans should or should not relate to it. Treating them as interchangeable under the umbrella category of “nature music” flattens those distinctions and obscures the unique ways different works construct the natural world and humanity’s relationship to it.

The subject of this lecture document—Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony—participates in both pastoral and sublime constructions of nature. Because music is a temporal medium, it offers a unique opportunity to observe how these two aesthetic modes interact and overlap. The pastoral is a world defined by a set of parameters that shape how nature can be understood and experienced. In the symphony, the sublime—an encounter with a vast and overwhelming force—places pressure on the parameters of this carefully constructed pastoral world. In turn, the pastoral and the sublime do not simply offer two images of nature, but rather two ways of organizing the listener’s experience of it.

In this lecture document, I approach Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony by investigating how it positions the listener in relation to the pastoral and the sublime and, more broadly, how it orients the listener to the natural world as mediated through them. I trace how the symphony constructs a stable pastoral world, how the fourth movement, *Gewitter, Sturm*, subjects that world to pressure through the sublime, and how the finale restores it without effacing that disruption. Throughout, I focus on how these shifts are not only represented within the music but also enacted in the listener’s experience. Specifically, I consider how the symphony shapes the listener’s sense of stability, spatial distance, and temporality, as well as how those dimensions shift as the pastoral world is established, strained, and restored.

My project has both conceptual and practical value. For those who study representations of nature in the arts, this project demonstrates that the pastoral and the sublime are not merely descriptive labels but operative modes that organize perception. Specifically for art historians, my project shows how familiar aesthetic conventions in the visual arts operate in a temporal medium, through sound. I show how aesthetic mediation operates in a different sensory domain, as well as how a single piece of music can embody both pastoral coherence and the sublime, with the transition between them made perceptible. In keeping with the theme of time, my project also highlights a dimension of the pastoral that becomes apparent in music. Unlike a painting that presents a finished scene, the pastoral in Beethoven's symphony is a process that, in turn, can be maintained or strained across time. In musicology, the de facto frame for Beethoven's Sixth Symphony is often in relation to the Fifth—absolute versus program music, struggle to triumph versus pastoral lyricism. My project highlights the Sixth Symphony as doing different conceptual work that is not captured by this comparison. My goal is to reframe a familiar work by clarifying how musical processes orient the listener to particular constructions of nature, thereby shaping their experience.

On a practical level, this project gives interpretive weight to musical decisions that are often considered a matter of taste. Many performers likely understand the pastoral and the sublime more intuitively as generalized styles or characters; I make that understanding both historically grounded and rooted in the notion of music as experiential modes. This shapes, for instance, decisions of articulation, dynamics, and pacing in passages built on repetition—a common musical device across the symphony. A performer's understanding of whether the repeated motives unfold with a sense of suspended time or with propulsion can either enhance or flatten the listener's experience of the shifts between pastoral stability and pressures of the sublime.

CHAPTER 1

THE PASTORAL AS STYLIZED REPRESENTATION

Defining the Pastoral

When we think of art, literature, and music about nature, the pastoral genre likely comes to mind. We imagine a shepherd with his pipe, sheep grazing on rolling hills, and villages that are quaint and provincial, their people equally so. For city folk with their bustling cosmopolitan lives, it is not surprising that they gravitate towards images of nature that are filtered through their own idealization. Indeed, any reference to actual agrarian labor or hardship falls outside the genre's expectations and has historically been considered "crassly vulgar."² Rather than depict or engage with nature directly, the genre selects and stylizes aspects of rural life that conform to a beautiful, harmonious, and human-scaled version thereof. It is precisely within this distance between idealization and lived reality that the pastoral finds both its audience and its allure.

In this chapter, I explore the pastoral as a mediated and stylized representation of nature, shaped by cultural and aesthetic imaginations rather than as a depiction of nature itself. Drawing on Raymond Monelle's account of the pastoral's origins, I trace how the genre has developed as an idealized and anthropocentric construct that privileges human desire over ecological realities.³ I then turn to Leonard Ratner's concept of topic theory to establish the framework for understanding how instrumental music can signify the pastoral through a culturally accepted lexicon of conventions. With Monelle and Ratner as our backbone, I examine a core set of pastoral topics and their corresponding musical signifiers to show how they coalesce into a

² Raymond Monelle, *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military, and Pastoral* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 201.

³ Monelle, *The Musical Topic*, 185.

coherent sound world that renders a version of nature that is legible, mediated, and perfectly suited to the human scale.

The conventions that have come to define the pastoral date back to Ancient Greece with the poet, Theocritus, and his collection of 30 poems, *The Idylls of Theocritus*. The poems, all set in 3rd century BC Sicily, are bucolic. That is, they relate to shepherds, rural life, and nature and are, in Theocritus' case, idealized, unselfconscious versions of these things. His characters are musical shepherds who reflect the speech and circumstances of rural life, grounding Theocritus' pastoral world in realism rather than allegory. The shepherds are grounded in the immediacy of the scene that we meet them in, whether that be an amoebaeon singing contest⁴, a love ritual, or unstructured leisure. Thematically, *Idylls* anticipates associations between the pastoral and pathos—specifically eros (erotic love) and death that take deep root as the pastoral genre expands and develops.⁵

We see this expansion and development come to fruition around 300 years later with the great Roman poet, Virgil, and his collection of 10 pastoral poems, *Eclogues* (equally referred to as *Bucolics*). Virgil transforms the pastoral world he inherited from Theocritus into a place of mythos, rich with allegory. Virgil set his *Eclogues* in Arcadia—a real location situated in the mountains of central Greece's Peloponnese region. The region was populated by pastoralists, or sheep and cattle farmers. During Classical Antiquity, Arcadia was also alleged to be inhabited by Pan, the Greek god of nature, whose mythical patronage includes shepherds and flocks, rustic music, fauns, satyrs, and fertility. In *Eclogues*, Virgil rejects the unglamorous reality that the real peasant folk faced in Arcadia's barren, rugged, and austere mountain landscape. Instead,

⁴ A type of singing competition that originated in Ancient Greece.

⁵ Monelle, *The Musical Topic*, 185–86.

Virgil borrows and reimagines Arcadia as a construct, a lush utopia of forever springtime. In Virgil's Arcadia, the real Arcadian herdsmen are immortalized through a romanticized, simple lifestyle: singing as opposed to working, leisure instead of hard labor. For instance, the Fourth Eclogue, "The Golden Age," tells of a time when wickedness did not exist and all men were unadulteratedly happy. Instead of labor, conflict, or violence, mankind fixated exclusively on "love and song"⁶ in service to Pan and Apollo and, in turn, lived in harmony with their eternally benevolent landscape. However, in Virgil, that simplicity can no longer remain endlessly simple as does Theocritus' because Virgil's shepherds face exile from the land, as well as awareness and reflection on this loss. In the Ninth Eclogue, a herdsman who has been usurped from his farm sings a disheartened lament, yearning for the gods of olde whose guardianship over the land they once patronized and were, in turn revered by, has faded as time marches on. The mythos of the Golden Age—a state of naïve harmony with nature that, once lost, can never be revived, veils the pastoral genre from this point forward with an aura of loss and lament.

This shift was theorized by the late 18th century thinker Friedrich Schiller in his essay "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry."⁷ Written during a period of early industrialization, Schiller contends with the artist's relationship to nature, framed in opposing dispositions, in an increasingly modern world. The naïve artist lives in unselfconscious harmony with nature, while the sentimental artist is consciously aware of their separation from nature and longs to return to a unified state. Here, we find a reflexive emotional condition shaped by the awareness of the absence, which Schiller refers to as the sentimental condition.⁸ At the heart of the pastoral, we

⁶ Monelle, *The Musical Topic*, 186.

⁷ Friedrich Schiller. *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*. Translated and edited by Julius A. Elias. New York: F. Ungar Publishing Co., 1967.

⁸ Frederick C. Beiser. *Schiller as Philosopher: A Re-Examination*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

can see Schiller's notion of naïveté with Theocritus, whose constructed world is immediate and unselfconscious, no aspect of it lost and longing to be recovered. Virgil's pastoral world already looks toward the sentimental, tinged with yearning for a harmony with the landscape that can no longer be spontaneously experienced. This shift is significant because it reveals pastoral's malleability as a construct rather than a stable reflection of any single lived reality. Its specifics can therefore shift to reflect this lost unity between humans and the natural world.⁹

While Arcadia, one of the pastoral's central constructs, was initially sourced from a definite location in Greece, the myth conflating Arcadia to utopia led to its excavation and then transcendence beyond any one locale. For example, by the Renaissance period, Arcadia became synonymous with notions of Christian paradise or heaven. Within the arts, the pastoral genre came to feel especially personal because, beyond solely his duties to the sheep and to the gods, the pastoral shepherd was also often envisioned as an artist. This is hardly a stretch with the pastoral's associations with making art through Pan and Apollo, the shepherd's pipe, and music-making equating the leisurely freedom. That being said, the real-life artist never actually inhabits the role of shepherd, never projects himself fully into his art in the style of self-insert. Rather, the artist is imagined functioning as a visitor in the idyll, not actively participating in agrarian or communal activities, but rather observing from the sidelines and sketching down what he sees. It is an aspect embedded in pastoral art—this inkling that, should we widen the frame ever so slightly, we will find the artist lingering in what had previously been just out of sight, revealed to us a voyeur. The artist, “longs to return to nature, to primitive simplicity”,¹⁰ and the pastoral is the escape through which they find a remnant of mankind's lost unity with nature.

⁹ Monelle, *The Musical Topic*, 186.

¹⁰ Monelle, *The Musical Topic*, 195.

Here, within the landscape of verdant rolling hills and gentle shepherds, with our artist as witness to them, we can explicitly name the pastoral as a fundamentally anthropocentric genre. Describing the pastoral as idealized is not to claim that the genre is wholly fantastical; shepherds, the lush countryside, and birdsong all have counterparts in the material world. Rather, the pastoral systematically privileges and foregrounds those aspects of nature and rural life that conform to its values of beauty, tranquility, and leisure. The landscape is imagined as a fertile eternal springtime because such a disposition complements and supports human repose. The shepherd is firmly the subject, with the landscape the object of projection, consolation, and fantasy. Their harmony with nature is affective or symbolic; it does not masquerade as an accurate representation of agrarian labor systems. Rather than invite any sort of reciprocal relationship between humans and their natural environment, the pastoral landscape is silent, agreeable, and predictable—endlessly malleable to human idealization. In this sense, what is mourned when that harmony is ruptured is the loss of such a simple and tranquil state of existence; lament is not directed towards ecological damage or any sort of climate crisis.

Topic Theory and the Pastoral in Music

If the pastoral genre itself is an idealized and anthropocentric construct, its realization in instrumental music likewise reflects human conceptions of nature rather than nature itself. The genre's imagery is straightforward enough to evoke in literature and the visual arts, but the question of how a sonic medium can unequivocally portray, for example, a rustic townscape, is more complex. Instrumental music may strike one as particularly enigmatic in this regard because of its indeterminate nature; language tends toward fixed meaning while musical meaning is, by contrast, promiscuous. Take for instance the word "storm" which, in the English language, refers to rain plummeting the Earth, often accompanied by thunder and lightning. It is worth

noting that these specific, fixed meanings we have attributed to words are both arbitrary and culturally situated. There is no intrinsic relationship between a word (or signifier) and what it means (signifies). Meaning is imparted by a given culture, and its people implicitly subscribe to that semiotic system by virtue of having been born and raised in it. In contrast, a storm can be represented through any number of musical utterances rather than through a single fixed signifier.

This fixed lexicon of conventions in instrumental music does indeed exist, and most individuals are more than likely fluent in decoding their culture's musical signifiers without even realizing it. Semiotic musical cues have existed in Western art music for centuries; understanding and navigating the implications indicated by specific musical gestures is a form of cultural literacy not dissimilar to recognizing metaphors or idioms in everyday speech. Think for a moment—you can likely recognize a lullaby when you hear one, as well as associate it with the imagery of tucking a young child into bed for the night. This is not because the lullaby itself depicts the sound of child sleeping but instead because, at some point in your life, you regularly encountered a lullaby in this context. As a result of this cultural exposure, you now likely well versed in recognizing the musical hallmarks of a lullaby, thus illustrating how instrumental music can signal social function and affect through convention in unconscious ways.

In 1980, the American musicologist, Leonard Ratner, published his cornerstone book, *Classical Music: Expression, Form, and Style*, in which he identifies and explicitly names the cues, conventions, and signifiers of musical genres as *musical topics*.¹¹ These include dances, military and the hunt, and the pastoral. Ratner emphasizes that topics are portable—that is, they

¹¹ Leonard G. Ratner, *Classical Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York: Schirmer Books; London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1980).

carry genre association and signification even when presented in isolation from their original context. He refers to these transplanted, isolated signifiers as *styles*. Note that here, “style” does not refer to a composer’s broad musical language, but rather to the isolated appearance of a topic in a reduced or referential form outside of an embedded genre context. For example, a minuet topic can appear in a symphony to signify courtly elegance.¹² Likewise, a pastoral topic can evoke pastoral images and affects without necessarily requiring the entire work to inhabit that genre. Should topics appear as “fully worked-out pieces”, they may be referred to as *types*. Critically, Ratner does far more than solely identify and label musical topics in the style of a dictionary or taxonomy. He goes a step further to frame topics as “subjects for musical discourse,” showing how composers employ them to create meaning across time. This means that musical meaning does not arise from a topic alone, but rather from how composers situate multiple topics—whether they be seemingly complementary or disparate—in dialogue with one another. In practice, this can look like pastoral calm undercut by agitation (storm and stress). Musical meaning can also arise from inflecting topics—exaggerating, fragmenting, or augmenting them. Through this destabilization, the culturally informed listener still recognizes the topic, but with a different affect, a principle that will prove central in understanding how pastoral materials are transformed in Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony.¹³

While Ratner lays the groundwork for musical topics, British music theorist, Raymond Monelle, drills deeply into pastoral-specific topics in his book *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military, and Pastoral*.¹⁴ Monelle codifies that the pastoral genre in music is expressed through a representational code and explicitly lays out its musical signifiers along with their corresponding

¹² An aristocratic dance from the 17th and 18th centuries.

¹³ Ratner, *Classic Music*, 9–27.

¹⁴ Monelle, *The Musical Topic*.

signified. These include: an oboe melody indicates a shepherd with his pipe, a drone bass indicates bagpipes or French *musette*, the Siciliana's lilting compound meter indicates tranquility and cyclic time, stylized birdsong indicates nature made musically conventional and pleasing, stylized folksong indicates the *Volkslied*. Collectively, these topics cultivate the pastoral's broader sense of spatial openness and fluid temporality.

The image of a shepherd with his pipe (pipe referring to a petite, end-blown flute, not a smoking pipe) is perhaps the most iconic of pastoral imagery. The simple shepherd's pipe—traditionally made from cane, wood, or bone with a few finger holes—has historically seen several relatives including the *aulos* and pan flute.¹⁵ The pan flute may ring an etymological bell with Pan, the Greek god of nature who was, as previously discussed, plaited with both the pastoral genre and music making. These wind instruments in their adapted forms came to signify rustic leisure, harmony with nature, and human presence at its most natural, intimate, and unmediated: through bodily breath. In modernity, this symbolism has migrated into the orchestra through reed-timbred instruments such as the oboe as the pastoral genre compresses multiple real instruments into one symbolic shepherd's pipe.¹⁶

The drone bass as a pastoral signifier in orchestral settings is typically appropriated to the warm and rich low strings rather than a designated drone instrument such as bagpipes or the French *musette*. Regarding their origin within the pastoral genre, bagpipes were indeed often played by shepherds and peasants throughout Europe since the Middle Ages. The French *musette*, on the other hand, was notably not played by any actual peasants. It was instead created for the French nobility in the 16th century to allow them to live out their pastoral fantasies from

¹⁵ The pan flute is also commonly referred to as panpipes or syrinx.

¹⁶ Monelle, *The Musical Topic*, 207–8.

the comfort of their own châteaux. The musette, a small, bellows-down bagpipe, was favored for having a sweeter, more refined sound than its authentically rustic bagpipe counterpart, as well as for its small bellows that alleviated any unsavory facial expressions produced by blowing into a bagpipe's mouth-pipe. In highlighting this shift from the bagpipes to the musette, we can see how the musette and the low strings perform comparable aesthetic work by domesticating and sanitizing the bagpipe's originally coarse and piercing timbre. This substitution reinforces the pastoral genre as rustic country living fantasized into something comfortable, ideal, and aesthetically agreeable.¹⁷

Moderately paced compound meter—typically 6/8 or 12/8 time signature—often appears as a pastoral signifier for its invitation of embodied ease. This ease is born out of associations with bodily swaying, unhurried time, and a sense of continuous and cyclic flow or, within the context of the pastoral genre, leisure and tranquility rather than labor. Aiding this along is that compound meter, with its circular groupings of three, avoids sharp accents and smooths over angular metric edges. What results is a feeling of temporal suspension, where time floats by without propulsion in an endless and glorious springtime. As a pastoral signifier, compound meter frequently appears in the form of the *siciliana*.¹⁸ The *siciliana*'s associations with Sicily, from which its etymology is derived, are speculative rather than concretely historical, making the *siciliana* a stylized suggestion of picturesque rural life rather than a historically grounded one.¹⁹

Regarding birdsong, we must take care to differentiate its use within the pastoral's representational context from its treatment in later, more naturalistic works. Pastoral birdsong is stylized and conventionalized to function as a signifier of idealized nature. The differences

¹⁷ Monelle, *The Musical Topic*, 208–15.

¹⁸ A dance meter in slow 6/8 or 12/8 time that is characterized by its inclusion of dotted rhythms.

¹⁹ Monelle, *The Musical Topic*, 215–20.

between pastoral portrayals of birdsong and naturalistic portrayals are thrown into stark relief when considered next to the innumerable 20th and 21st century works that incorporate field recordings of literal birds singing. Think Respighi's *The Pines of Rome* or David Monacchi's *Fragments of Extinction*. Pastoral representations of birdsong should additionally not be confused with the approach of Oliver Messiaen, who embarked on expeditions to notate birdsong in their natural habitat. Messiaen's use of birdsong operates in the realm of mimesis, or imitation by employing unorthodox rhythms and pitches to accurately reflect each bird species' idiosyncratic song, rather than conventional musical gestures.²⁰

The pastoral approach to *Volkslied*, or “folksong” is, like birdsong, another place that necessitates careful distinction between actual folksong and its treatment in other musical contexts. An inexplicable quality of simplicity in all things is central to the pastoral genre, and this applies to both the music its fictional populace creates and to the music that the composer creates to portray their fictional lives. Those captivated by the pastoral genre—city folk with busy lives who were far removed from rustic life in the country—had no interest in anthropological authenticity regarding folk music. They were instead invigorated by the notion of the *Volksseele*, or “soul of the people” who were collectively mythologized to embody their unlettered country's pure and innocent spirit. The *Volksseele* was also postulated to possess a deep and enigmatic wisdom that had been lost among the prosaic nature of modern life.²¹ Within the pastoral genre, the *Volkslied* generally employs simple melody, diatonic harmony, modal inflections, and symmetrical phrasing. This contrasts the research of 19th-century folk music enthusiasts including Ludwig Erk and Franz Magnus Böhme, whose anthropological catalogues coexisted

²⁰ Peter Hill. *Messiaen*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005.

²¹ Matthew Gelbart, *The Invention of “Folk Music” and “Art Music”: Emerging Categories from Ossian to Wagner* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 57–59.

with more fanciful approaches, such as that of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*.²² Like these imaginative projects, the pastoral treats the *Volkslied* as a symbolic shorthand for rustic simplicity, grounded in pretense. Through this pretense—where folk life is imagined and not encountered—the pastoral maintains its characteristic distance.²³

The sense of spatial distance and openness that suffuses the pastoral genre is not a discrete musical object in the same sense as, for example, the pipe, bass drone, and compound meter. Rather, openness is an affect that emerges from a constellation of pastoral codes and techniques, some of which I have already discussed. This affect arises through an interplay between unhurried harmonic rhythm, where space feels stable and languid rather than directional and driving; thin and transparent textures instead of sonic saturation; a preference for middle to upper registers to avoid heaviness and gravity; pedal tones for how they anchor harmony without forward motion; and gentle antiphony-like gestures, where sound seems to travel to and fro, as though from the crest of one hill to its neighbor. The perfume of nature's open space that these components render is, crucially, safely proportioned to human scale. It is not boundlessness, destabilizing, or overwhelming, nor is it immersive in actual ecosystems.

When considered in tandem with our knowledge of musical semiotic systems as a fixed lexicon that functions not unlike language, these topics coalesce into a sound world that is cohesive and legible to listeners familiar with the semiotic conventions of the pastoral tradition. This sound world is built on distance between subject and object, or signifier and signified,

²² *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* is a collection of German folk poems and songs edited by Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano that revived enthusiasm for the *Volkslied* and paved the way for the 19th century's romantic nationalism; see Britannica Editors, "Des Knaben Wunderhorn," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed April 17, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Des-Knaben-Wunderhorn-by-Arnim-and-Brentano>.

²³ Monelle, *The Musical Topic*, 220–26.

allowing nature itself to be held at arm's length and be molded into something beautiful, benign, and perfectly proportioned and suited to the human scale.

CHAPTER 2

THE SUBLIME AS AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Philosophical Approaches to the Sublime

Consider a moment in your life where you were struck by an extraordinary feeling. Perhaps, while visiting a massive waterfall, you were overwhelmed by the scale of what you were witnessing. You cannot even absorb its full scope at once, so you register it in fragments. Observed from the relative safety of an overlook or boat, its awesome power is every bit as terrifying as it is compelling.

Such moments of incomprehensible infinity and overwhelming natural force are where we meet the sublime. In modern philosophical accounts, the sublime is often characterized as ineffable; a confrontation with something so vast that our cognitive and sensory capacities are dwarfed in the face of it. It does not reside inherently inside an object, nor does it exist discretely in the mind of the observer. Rather, it emerges through an encounter between the two, as the observer recognizes their own smallness and vulnerability. The confrontation itself approaches pain in its intensity yet remains strangely compelling and even pleasurable. This paradox of dread and delight distinguishes the sublime from other experiences that involve disorientation, fear, and pain. Because such awesome power is encountered from a substantial distance, the mind can reflect on its own limitations to fully grasp it. Fear becomes awe, terror becomes exaltation. The sublime is, in many ways, elusive, and philosophers have attempted to pin it down for centuries for what it reveals of the human condition.

In classical accounts of the sublime, the concept was first theorized by the philosopher, Longinus, who locates it within the realms of language and rhetoric. While on the surface, this may feel a great distance removed from how we colloquially think of the sublime today, the

emotional force at the heart of the sublime—something ungraspable and wondrous in equal parts—remains the same.²⁴ Our later thinkers—namely Burke and Kant—will relocate that force out of rhetoric, rooted in human expression, and into encounters with the natural world. The key concept that Longinus identifies in the sublime is its ability to transport the listener beyond ordinary experience. Instead of critically considering an argument, the listener experiences what Longinus calls *ekstasis*, or ecstasy, as the sublime rhetoric “takes the reader out of himself”.²⁵ The experience is emotionally searing, yet still fleeting, transient; a brush with an inexplicable Other there and gone.

Fast forward to the mid-18th century, when numerous factors converge to spark renewed interest in the sublime and yield what becomes our modern conception thereof. Earlier philosophical discussion about aesthetics often treated concepts including beauty, terror, and awe as inherent to objects—universal truths of how the world objectively was. Enlightenment-era thinking saw a shift towards subjectivity as philosophers turned their attention to instead consider *how* humans perceive the world. What happens in the mind when we encounter beauty, terror, or awe?

The 18th century also saw a broad cultural attitude shift towards untamed landscapes; Alpine mountains, rugged coastlines, and barren ruins in all their dramatic glory enthralled the cultural imagination. Their wildness, their unknowable danger, was seductive in stark contrast to the earlier European ideals inherited from Classical antiquity, as exemplified by the pastoral’s cultivated landscapes. In the visual arts, the 17th and 18th centuries saw landscape painting

²⁴ Sarah Hibberd and Miranda Stanyon, “Sonorous Sublimes: An Introduction,” in *Music and the Sonorous Sublime in European Culture, 1680–1880*, ed. Sarah Hibberd and Miranda Stanyon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 1–7.

²⁵ Casper C. de Jonge, “Ps.-Longinus on Ecstasy: Author, Audience, and Text,” in *Experience, Narrative, and Criticism in Ancient Greece: Under the Spell of Stories*, ed. Jonas Grethlein, Luuk Huitink, and Aldo Tagliabue (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 148–171, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198848295.003.0008>.

emerge as an increasingly distinguished genre in its own right rather than being relegated to the background of historical or religious scenes. This direct focus on the landscape and, in turn, its effect on the viewer, was part and parcel with contemporary questions of whether humans are part of the natural world or separate from it.²⁶ Landscape contemplation was also consonant with contemporary ideas that art should engage with the ungraspable, that which lies beyond human understanding and rationality. Writers and artists began describing landscapes in terms of aesthetic categories: the beautiful, the picturesque, and the sublime, each of which aided in naming and interpreting different emotional responses to them. This is to say, the sublime's prominence in the 18th century in no way replaces the beautiful in the aesthetic imagination. Rather, the two coexist as contrasting aesthetic responses to nature.²⁷ This shift was reinforced by the rise of travel culture as educated Europeans increasingly undertook journeys such as the Grand Tour²⁸ and chronicled their responses—awe, exhilaration, fear—to the spectacular landscapes they encountered.²⁹ Philosophers began considering these brushes with the vast, the overwhelming as aesthetic experiences worthy of contemplation and offering deeper insight into the human condition.

Overlaying this constellation of factors, the 18th century sees aesthetics begin to emerge as a formal philosophical discipline with its own distinct field of inquiry.³⁰ Notably, the word “aesthetics” (derivative of the Greek word, *aisthēsis*, meaning felt experience, or knowledge

²⁶ Allen Carlson, “Aesthetics of Nature,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 127–133.

²⁷ Emily Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 100–107.

²⁸ The Grand Tour was a customary trip across Europe (with Italy as a prominent landmark), often undertaken by well-to-do young men as an educational rite of passage in the 17th to early 19th centuries.

²⁹ Royal Museums Greenwich, “What Was the Grand Tour?,” accessed March 23, 2026, <https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/art-culture/what-was-grand-tour>.

³⁰ Hibberd and Stanyon, *Sonorous Sublimes*, 5.

obtained through the senses) is introduced by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten,³¹ and allowed for philosophers to delve into the mechanisms and minutiae of aesthetic concepts—such as the sublime—as psychological and physiological phenomena.³² Prior to the 18th century, questions about art or beauty do appear, though they were scattered across literary criticism, philosophy, and rhetoric and generally not addressed systematically as aesthetic experiences. 18th-century thinkers bring to light questions of *why* humans consider certain things beautiful and others overwhelming.³³ In turn, the emergence of aesthetic theory allows for systematic categorization, and the sublime is now treated as something that can be considered in terms of its constituent features and effects.

Table 1. Musical Conditions of the Sublime (Kantian and Burkean Frameworks)

Type of Sublime	Mechanism	Musical Features	Listener Experience
Kant	Scale exceeds perceptual comprehension.	- Extended or disrupted phrase structures. - Extended processes of accumulation. - Textural density. - Registral expansion.	- Cognitive strain. - Failure to grasp the whole.
Burke	Force acts on the body.	- Extreme dynamics. - Dense lower register textures. - Sudden contrasts. - Rhythmic insistence.	- Physiological response (tension, adrenaline).

³¹ Paul Guyer, “18th Century German Aesthetics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, last modified July 13, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aesthetics-18th-german/#Bau>.

³² James Shelley, “The Concept of the Aesthetic,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2018 Edition, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/aesthetic-concept/#ConAes>.

³³ Hibberd and Stanyon, *Sonorous Sublimes*, 6–7.

This brings us to Edmund Burke's treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, that was published contemporaneously with Enlightenment-driven interest in psychology and sensory perception.³⁴ In it, Burke seeks to meld the emerging discipline of aesthetics with human subjectivity by explaining how aesthetic *experiences* affect human emotions and the nervous system. Burke relocates the sublime from rhetoric to awe-inspiring encounters with the natural world. He does so by drawing a concrete distinction between two aesthetic categories that he explicitly names: the beautiful and the sublime. For Burke, the beautiful is the sort of aesthetic experience associated with delicate and gentle qualities, like those found in pastoral landscapes. These qualities render the landscape approachable, human-scaled, and harmonious, inviting the observer to linger and tension to dissipate by producing by in turn feelings of pleasure and affection.³⁵

But the sublime—Burke's sublime—is something else entirely. Where the beautiful was a balm, an emollient to the mind and the senses, the sublime is a shock of raw, elemental force. In Burke's account, it is marked by vastness and polar extremes that overwhelm the senses, jolting the observer to the limits of ordinary perception.

For Burke, these qualities arise from experiences related to danger or terror, though the sublime is only produced when the observer remains at a safe remove. Should the danger be immediate and the potential for injury or death palpable, the experience would be purely traumatic rather than reflective. This produces a paradox: because the danger is perceived rather than endured, the experience is electrifying, thrilling, and wondrous. The power of nature's

³⁴ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; New York: Columbia University Press, 1958).

³⁵ Patty Bullard, "Burke's Aesthetic Psychology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke*, ed. David Dwan and Christopher Insole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 60–61.

dominion is an invitation to reflect on the limits of human power, and the brush with that which is vast, dangerous, and terrifying becomes aestheticized in the mind of the observer.³⁶

Thirty years after Burke published his treatise, Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*³⁷ addresses the sublime for how it sits at the intersection of aesthetic judgment and nature's teleology. Kant does not completely uproot the sublime the way Burke did in relocating it from rhetoric to encounters with nature. Rather, the shift from Burke to Kant is a lateral move, where the sublime is still inaugurated by encounters with vast natural forces, but its realization ultimately shifts from bodily sensation to the mind. Nature provides the occasion, but the sublime itself emerges in cognition, as the mind recognizes and reflects on its own limits. For Kant, the sublime occurs when the human imagination attempts to comprehend something it encounters and cannot grasp the totality of it as a unified whole. Yet for Kant, this failure does not amount to submission in the face of nature's awesome power. Instead, another human faculty intervenes in the form of reason. Reason has the capacity to grasp ideas—infinity, grand magnitude, moral will—that overwhelm the sensory experience and exceed the limits of imagination.³⁸

Within this process, reason reasserts itself over nature to give rise to a sense of elevation and confidence regarding human dignity. Kant clarifies this structure by distinguishing two types of the sublime—the mathematical sublime, associated with vast scale that exceeds the imagination's capacity, and the dynamical sublime, associated with overwhelming power that reveals nature's capacity to harm the observer. Like with Burke, the experience is dependent on the observer's

³⁶ Bullard, "Burke's Aesthetic Psychology," 53–64.

³⁷ Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Judgement*. Translated by James Creed Meredith. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952.

³⁸ Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, 56–66.

position of relative safety, allowing reason the chance to recognize that moral freedom exceeds even the most powerful natural forces.³⁹

At the same time, Kant's sublime is not all heroic triumph through and through. The experience begins by confronting us with human limitations—of our physical smallness, of our senses, and of our imagination. These limitations prompt reflection that draws out our humility, our vulnerability, our empathy as human beings within a larger world. Kant's sublime, before its hero moment, has a quieter, more humble underbelly as an invitation for humans to contemplate their place in relation to the natural world.

The Sublime in Music

While discourse surrounding the sublime has long been central in other disciplines—philosophy, literature, the visual arts—its place within musicological critique has been intermittent. Much of the existing scholarship on the musical sublime has focused on its ties to specific historical contexts, genres and traditions—especially related to the 18th century oratorio⁴⁰ or 19th century romantic ideals of instrumental music as transcendent.⁴¹ Sarah Hibberd and Miranda Stanyon's *Music and the Sonorous Sublime* marks a seminal step in centralizing the sublime in music as both significant to the sublime's own history, and to the listener's experience of sound as an aesthetic force.⁴² My lecture document builds on Hibberd and Stanyon's recent work with a narrow focus on how the sublime functions and orients the listener within a single work. By treating it as a musical operation that unfolds and shifts in real time, the sublime

³⁹ Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, 58–66.

⁴⁰ James Webster, "The Creation, Haydn's Late Vocal Music, and the Musical Sublime," in *Haydn and His World*, ed. Elaine Sisman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 57–102.

⁴¹ Mark Evan Bonds, *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1–17.

⁴² Hibberd and Stanyon, *Sonorous Sublimes*, 24–25.

reveals how the listener's orientation to the natural world through music is continually transformed.

Because the sublime is an aesthetic experience rather than a topic, the question of how music engages with the sublime requires a different approach than that of the pastoral. The pastoral is a genre that comes with highly specific, stable iconography that raises the question of how images can be depicted musically. We saw composers find their answer in semiotics, a fixed lexicon through which explicit musical meaning was encoded. Because these images are stable and legible, they produce a consistent aesthetic world—one whose outcome settles into the beautiful, all softened edges and welcoming warmth. Meanwhile, there is no discrete genre that houses the sublime in that same way, no stock scene or fixed repertoire of objects to depict that reliably induces the aesthetic experience. Additionally, the very attributes that enabled the pastoral to translate so well to a semiotic system—stability, clarity, legibility—are at odds with the very heart of the sublime, bound up as it is in resisting comprehension and containment.⁴³ Affective unity breaks down when the sublime's internal paradox pulls us between fear and pleasure. In this territory where meaning resides in contradiction, tension, and paradox, such neat systems of encoding and fixed signs unravel. The pastoral works on its own terms, but those terms do not carry over to the sublime.⁴⁴

Within the context of music, it is useful to consider the different ways in which the sublime can be realized. In Hibberd and Stanyon's *Sonorous Sublimes: An Introduction*, they distinguish between the aesthetics of production, representation, and effect or reception, as derived from German literary theory.⁴⁵ Production refers to the authorial intentions and compositional means

⁴³ Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, 56.

⁴⁴ Monelle, *The Musical Topic*, 3–8.

⁴⁵ Hibberd and Stanyon, *Sonorous Sublimes*, 15–16.

through which the sublime is made. Representation considers whether the work constructs a protagonist who experiences the sublime. Effect and reception look to how the music is experienced by listeners. For the purposes of my project, I focus on the latter two aesthetic modes. Because my project is organized around how the sublime is portrayed in music and encountered by the listener rather than compositional intent, I set aside production. I call these two modes of operation the representational sublime, where the encounter is staged within the musical world, and the experiential sublime, where the music acts directly upon the listener.

Strauss' *An Alpine Symphony* is a prime example of the representational sublime, where the music is framed through the narrative of an eleven-hour ascent of an Alpine mountain, from just before daybreak to nightfall. The piece is centered around a human point of view from within the musical world—our climber—who experiences and stewards the listener through the ascent as it unfolds. Even though this protagonist is never explicitly named, their role as our experiencing subject is implicit across the piece through the leitmotiv-esque “Ascent Theme,” as musicologist David Larkin refers to it, that “strongly suggests a stereotypical lone male protagonist of an *echt*-Beethovenian sort.”⁴⁶ We, the listeners, are musically guided by that subject-position and are aligned with it, but we are not collapsed into that firsthand, experiential role. There remains enough narrative distance—through the protagonist’s intermittent theme, the symphony’s structure as a whole—for sublime encounters to be understood as represented rather than solely experienced directly.

While the representational sublime stages an encounter within a musical narrative, the experiential sublime sheds that narrative distance to instead act directly upon the listener. Instead of an in-music subject portrayed as confronting a powerful force, we are greeted with that force

⁴⁶ David Larkin, “What the Climber Saw”, 432.

directly through sonic conditions of magnitude, instability, and saturation that strain human perception to its limits. Consider, for instance, the finale of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5. Its heavy, dread-inducing theme and its relentless, hammering repetitions—both compounded by orchestral saturation and an insistent, breakneck tempo—produce a sense of outward-facing pressure rather than unfolding of narrative progression.⁴⁷ There is no constructed protagonist experiencing this, and the listener is no passive observer of someone else's encounter. Instead, they are caught within it.

While the sublime has been historically associated with absolute music in musicological discourse,⁴⁸ the distinction between the representational and experiential sublime should not be mapped onto the model of absolute versus program music. The two approaches are parallel frameworks that ask different questions. Program and absolute music are categorical distinctions that classify the whole of a piece on the level of genre, especially in relation to the presence or absence of an extra-musical narrative. In contrast, my framework is more functional, meaning that it describes how the music operates on the level of listener experience at a given moment. This distinction is subtle because the two approaches often cross each other. Going back to our recent musical examples, *Alpine Symphony* is a programmatic work, but it can still contain moments where the sublime encounter bleeds over to act directly on the listener. Likewise, Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 5* is not a programmatic work, but moments can still create distance through musical features such as its processional character, which feels organized and directed, or its ceremonial tone, which makes the music feel deliberately presented.

⁴⁷ Marina Frolova-Walker and Jonathan Walker, *Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), chap. 2, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197566329.003.0002>.

⁴⁸ Hibberd and Stanyon, *Sonorous Sublimes*, 13.

Because the sublime is an experiential phenomenon rather than an object's fixed attribute, representations of the sublime cannot remain purely representational. That is to say, musical representations of the sublime are only legible if the music itself embodies its conditions, as there is no semiotic system through which the sublime can be signaled.

In portraying the verdant countryside, the pastoral genre tends to participate sonically in the aesthetic world it evokes. Topics often represent the beautiful, the balanced, and the human-scaled, and can also produce a corresponding aesthetic experience for the listener. Yet for the pastoral, the relationship between depiction and experience is not intrinsic in the same way it is for the representational sublime. A beautiful aesthetic experience is not a requisite for pastoral genre recognition because its meaning lives in a stable and consistent semiotic lexicon. In other words, it is not strictly necessary for the pastoral to produce that which it seeks to represent.

Likewise, the sublime's recognition is less stable than that of the pastoral. The same musical conditions may be experienced as sublime by one observer and not by another, depending on how those conditions are perceived and processed by individuals. The musical sublime relies on tendencies, not guarantees. It emerges through recurring conditions that strain the listener's cognitive and perceptual limits. In this sense, it follows Kant's account, where the sublime arises when the imagination is faced with something too vast to be fully comprehended.⁴⁹ Within our context, the mathematical sublime emerges when the scale of the music is too vast for the listener to grasp all at once. The listener then experiences a corresponding cognitive strain as the imagination strives and fails to synthesize what it confronts into a coherent whole. Such an experience arises when the music establishes a sense of expectation and proportion only to then exceed or dissolve them. This can occur when phrases resist cadence, when processes of

⁴⁹ Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, 58–62.

accumulation extend beyond anticipated points of release, or when textural density and registral expansion exceed the listener's ability to grasp the whole.

The musical sublime can also manifest in a more Burkean sense where, instead of sheer magnitude, sonic force presses against the listener with such intensity that the resulting response is physiological—goosebumps prickling as the nervous system floods with adrenaline that is as pleasurable as it is uncomfortable.⁵⁰ The listener feels acted upon rather than a distanced observer as they are drawn into an encounter that pushes the body into a state of stress or even distress. At the same time, the mind remains aware of the safety and ritual of the concert hall beneath what the body registers as immediate danger. These effects arise through musical conditions that act directly on the body, including extreme dynamic levels, dense and saturated textures (particularly in the lower registers), sudden contrasts that trigger the startle response, and persistent rhythmic drive that produces a physiological response in the listener.

We saw in the 18th century a turn towards wild, untamed nature as site associated with the sublime, its scale and power aestheticized within the frame of human perception. Instrumental music offers a parallel medium through which such encounters can be staged by cultivating perceptual conditions. While the musical sublime can and often does engage with themes and depictions of nature, subject matter alone does not produce the sublime, nor does sheer musical intensity. That being said, the experiential sublime is not rare. Many orchestral works, especially from the late 19th and 20th centuries, brush against or produce experiential sublime effects. However, whether a sublime experience is produced hinges on whether musical excess—of scale, texture, or dissonance—makes the listener actually feel the breakdown or exceeding of familiar idioms. Music that is dense, dissonant, and fragmented from the outset lacks a stable

⁵⁰ Bullard, *Burke's Aesthetic Philosophy*, 55–56.

sense of proportion or expectation and therefore never stages a boundary being crossed. Music that establishes proportion and continuity to then stretch or exceed it allows the listener to experience a loss of grasp and, in turn, confront the limits of their own perception.

CHAPTER 3

BEETHOVEN'S SYMPHONY NO. 6: THE PASTORAL AND THE SUBLIME IN DIALOGUE

Beethoven's Sixth Symphony—the *Pastoral* Symphony—is, in many ways, the *pièce de resistance* of the pastoral genre. It was written by a man who was a known lover of nature but spent most of the year residing in the bustling metropolis that was early 19th century Vienna. In retreat from his usual urban habitation, Beethoven would spend his summers in the serene countryside surrounding Vienna, finding both solace and consolation in nature in the wake of his worsening deafness. He wrote innumerable letters to friends and acquaintances expressing his desire to up and leave Vienna to instead bask in the gentle outdoors of the countryside: "...at the present moment my spirit can only feel at ease in the presence of the beauties of nature, and so far I have made no arrangements anywhere else to give free play to this irresistible inclination of mine."⁵¹ This healing and reverent quality that nature was believed to possess was a well-established attitude in Beethoven's time. In the early 1770s, Christof Christian Sturm published *Reflections on the Works of God in Nature*.⁵² Here, he considers a mode of engaging with the natural world that is grounded in human feeling, moral reflection, and divine order. Sturm promotes a sort of God-in-landscape nature worship, where divine presence can be seen in all aspects of the natural world, from forests and fields to the spheres themselves. Nature—landscapes, weather events, the cosmos—point beyond themselves to God's benevolence, order, and wisdom. Sturm treats nature as a catalyst for human feeling and spiritual restoration, rather

⁵¹ Ludwig van Beethoven, letter to Joseph Xaver Brauchle, March 1815, quoted in David Wyn Jones, *Beethoven: The Pastoral Symphony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 20.

⁵² Christoph Christian Sturm, *Reflections on the Works of God, and of His Providence, Throughout All Nature, for Every Day in the Year*, trans. "By a Lady" (Dublin: William Jones, 1790).

than an entity with agency, intrinsic value, or inviting of reciprocity.⁵³ This all points to an approach to nature contemplation that is fundamentally anthropocentric, where nature was valued in relation to human benefit rather than considered on its own terms. *Reflections on the Works of God in Nature* was widely circulated in German-speaking countries at the turn of the 19th century, and Anton Schindler reported that Beethoven owned and annotated a copy.⁵⁴ Whether or not this specific connection can be confirmed, Sturm's text, alongside the long tradition of the pastoral in music, offers a clear articulation of a broader culture of nature piety that resonates strongly with the *Pastoral* Symphony.

The symphony itself unfolds as a sojourn through the countryside that Beethoven himself so yearned for: an idyllic haven teeming with living things, gurgling brooks, and the smell of petrichor after a great storm. The music positions its audience as the subject, with the landscape as the object of contemplation and observation. There is no indication of an in-music human protagonist, no shepherd character functioning as a listener proxy or narrative agent. Instead, we are released to simply bask and find our own spiritual restoration in the feelings that the idyll evokes.

In 1808, shortly before the symphony's premiere, Beethoven wrote in a letter to his publisher, Breitkopf and Härtel: "The title of the symphony in F is *Pastoral Symphony* or *Recollections of Country Life—More Expression of Feeling Than Painting*."⁵⁵ In this letter, Beethoven frames the symphony as "recollections of country life"—not as a depiction of nature itself, but as nature experienced, mediated, and remembered. The natural world in the symphony

⁵³ Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 177.

⁵⁴ David Wyn Jones, *Beethoven: The Pastoral Symphony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 20–21.

⁵⁵ Monelle, *The Musical Topic*, 243.

is therefore one filtered through human subjectivity. Because “recollections” implies memory rather than immediacy, the symphony is shaded by a degree of pastoral nostalgia and retrospective longing. This is not to say the symphony is elegiac or tragic in the manner of Virgil’s *Eclogues*. Still, Beethoven’s framing suggests a degree of landscape idealization through memory. When paired with the epigraph, “more expression of feeling than painting.”⁵⁶ it becomes apparent that these recollections are intended to be heard affectively rather than pictorially. While this epigraph discourages the listener from fixating on what may or may not be directly depicted in the music as pictorial, there is distinct tension here because Beethoven participates in tone painting across the work. Indeed, instances of tone painting—birdsong, the storm—are some of the most memorable in the Western canon. There is a self-consciousness to the sentiment, a note of apology in Beethoven’s handwaving attention away from the tone painting that he does so beautifully. While this bashfulness reflects a broad cultural devaluing of imitation alongside an elevating of instrumental music’s capacity for expression, the reality of the work invites a softening of the binary that Beethoven himself introduces. Rather than one overtaking the other, painting and expression of feeling link hands as painting becomes the means by which feeling is produced.⁵⁷

Pastoral convention already presents a stylized, idealized version of nature, and Beethoven’s symphony extends this representational distance even further. By presenting pastoral nature as something to be felt and remembered, Beethoven introduces an additional layer of mediation where the listener does not encounter the bucolic directly, but rather a recollected and affectively filtered version of it.

⁵⁶ This epigraph also appeared neatly situated on the title page of Beethoven’s original score.

⁵⁷ Monelle, *The Musical Topic*, 243.

This emphasis on human feeling rather than landscape depiction is underscored by the programmatic titles Beethoven gives each movement: *Erwachen heiterer Empfindungen bei der Ankunft auf dem Lande* (Awakening of cheerful feelings on arrival in the countryside), *Szene am Bach* (Scene by the brook), *Lustiges Zusammensein der Landleute* (Merry gathering of country folk), *Gewitter, Sturm* (Thunder, Storm), and *Frohe und dankbare Gefühle nach dem Sturm* (Shepherd's song. Cheerful and thankful feelings after the storm). The landscape is drawn into relief only in relation to the feelings—cheerful, merry, thankful—that humans gain from experiencing it. There is no claim that the music itself *is* the countryside, or brook, or country folk, with one notable exception. This comes in the form of the fourth movement, *Gewitter, Sturm*, which, as its more directly referential title suggests, functions as a dramatic, generic, and structural outlier.

Outside of the storm, there are moments of explicit pictorialism throughout the other movements, though their presence does not rupture the pastoral's representational framework because they retain an element of stylization. The symphony overall is cast in F major, a key frequently associated with the pastoral conventions in the 18th century, though this symphony absolutely reinforces the association to modern ears. Historically, this affiliation came about through convention, which in turn established F major's pastoral connotations. Horns were a common feature of pastoral music through their association with the hunt topic, which itself is a close thematic relative of the pastoral topic.⁵⁸ Open fifths on the horn evoke an open, rustic sonority that is integral to both the hunt and the pastoral topics. F major, in turn, sits comfortably on the natural horn, reinforcing this association.

⁵⁸ Monelle, *The Musical Topic*, 35.

Movement-by-Movement Analysis

Everything about the first movement, “Awakening of cheerful feelings on arrival in the countryside,” beckons feelings of serenity and calm, both of which are evoked through Beethoven’s use of pastoral topics to convey countryside imagery. The opening of the first movement is a provisional thing, so quiet and unobtrusive that one cannot be faulted for missing the exact moment the music begins. We are met in bar 1 with a viola and cello drone set in a perfect fifth—F and C, or tonic and dominant in our home key—offering a gentle, stylized suggestion of the piercing and reedy bagpipes associated with shepherds and peasants.

The image shows the first four measures of the first movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 6. The tempo is marked "Allegro ma non troppo *).". The score is for five parts: Violini I, Violini II, Violenze, Violoncelli, and Bassi. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or F minor) and the time signature is 4/4. The music begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. In measure 1, Violini I plays a quarter note F4, a quarter note G4, and a quarter note A4. Violini II is silent. Violenze and Violoncelli play a half-note F3, and Bassi is silent. In measure 2, Violini I plays a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, and a quarter note D5. Violini II is silent. Violenze and Violoncelli play a half-note G3, and Bassi is silent. In measure 3, Violini I plays a quarter note E5, a quarter note F5, and a quarter note G5. Violini II plays a quarter note F4, a quarter note G4, and a quarter note A4. Violenze and Violoncelli play a half-note C4, and Bassi is silent. In measure 4, Violini I plays a half-note F5, Violini II plays a half-note F4, Violenze and Violoncelli play a half-note F3, and Bassi is silent. All parts end with a fermata over the final note.

Fig. 1, Symphony No. 6, I, mm. 1–4.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Ludwig van Beethoven, *Symphony No. 6 in F Major, Op. 68* “Pastoral,” full score (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1998).

The first violins play an elegant, unhurried melody on top of the drone bass topic only to roll to a drowsy halt on the dominant under a fermata in bar 5. Following the fermata, the melody picks up some meandering momentum but maintains its initial languid quality. The dominant pedal we first saw in bar 4 returns and is significantly extended in bars 16-26 with a short, ascending motive looped 10 consecutive times on top of it by the first violins.

The image shows a musical score for measures 16-20 of the first movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 6. The score is for Violins I and II, Viola, Violoncello, and Bass. Measures 16-20 show a repetitive ascending eighth-note motif in the first violin, which is looped 10 times. The other instruments provide a harmonic drone. Dynamics include 'cresc.' and 'f'.

Fig. 2, Symphony No. 6, I, mm. 16–20.⁶⁰

The repetition of such a short and simple figure performs the cultivated simplicity that defines the pastoral genre, while also beginning to alter our sense of temporal flow. The looping has a hypnotic effect, reshaping our sense of time within the idyll. There is no hurry to move onward—no driving harmonic rhythm or contrapuntal complexity that is associated with a sophisticated, cosmopolitan lifestyle. Make no mistake, however—the repetitious quality of this music in no way makes the music static or dull. The variant across these repetitions is dynamics,

⁶⁰ Beethoven, Symphony No. 6, I, mm. 16–20.

with a crescendo marked across bars 16-20 and a decrescendo marked in bars 21-24, bringing us down to pianissimo. Swell and recede, wax and wane. This extended hairpin has a pronounced organic and easy quality, where the music seems to represent a filling of the lungs to capacity before gradually releasing. Through Beethoven's gentle and coaxing use of dynamics—a device heard throughout the symphony—our sense of time feels nebulous, subjective; floating, drifting, and removed from real-world immediacy. The decaying exhale of our looped motive yields to a coalescence of the primary theme, taken up by the oboe and evocative of pan pipes. We see repetition as an indicator of simplicity again in the secondary theme, beginning in bar 67, with the descending arpeggiated eighth note figure.

The image shows a musical score for measures 66 through 74. The instruments listed on the left are Cor. (Fa), Viol., Vle., Vc., and B. (Bass). The score is written for two staves per instrument. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor). The time signature is 4/4. The music begins in measure 66 with a crescendo marked across measures 16-20 and a decrescendo marked in measures 21-24. The Viol. I part features a descending arpeggiated eighth note figure. The Vle. part is marked 'arco' and 'pp'. The Vc. part is marked 'arco' and 'p'. The B. part is marked 'p'. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Fig. 3, Symphony No. 6, I, mm. 66–87.⁶¹

While Beethoven utilized dynamics as the sole variant in our first instance of repetition, he now turns to instrumentation and register as well, with this S theme traversing from the first to the second violins and then to the celli before the winds—clarinet and then flute—take over and become additive rather than exchanged. This theme evokes a sense of sound traveling to and fro across an open landscape in how it gently circulates across the orchestra. The metaphorical baton exchange between instruments is seamless and the harmonic accumulation in the winds produces a consonant, blended texture that alludes to the ease of communal exchange in a shared space, where life is simple and harmonious. We have ample time to linger in the S theme—to dwell in it

⁶¹ Beethoven, Symphony No. 6, I, mm. 66–87.

as a prismatic thing that each different instrument will reveal something new and beautiful.

Within the lack of urgency to develop or move forward, we find time suspended, with no call to labor or crisis knocking on our door.

The development section—typically the most driving and unstable section of first movement sonata form—absolves the music of tension rather than builds it. Instead of rapidly voyaging between distant or unrelated key areas, we blossom through dynamics and motivic repetitions that, once again, circulate across the orchestra from the subdominant—Bb major—to D major in bar 163, where we luxuriate in D major for a whole 34 bars. The only hint of minor in the development section is a fleeting 8 bar inflection of G minor 255-262, largely preserving our idyllic pastoral bubble. Even our transition into the recapitulation is softened at the edges, with a harmonic emphasis on IV in preparation of the recapitulation instead of a colossal dominant-tonic propulsion. From here, our return to the primary theme in the tonic key carries a sense of repose—the ease of a restorative and serene homecoming well suited to the pastoral’s human scaled world. The movement ends with a winking fragment of our opening melody from the flute, evoking a lone panpiper, that ascends upward before dissipating to yield the final fulfilling yet gentle cadence.

The second movement, titled “Scene by the Brook” is a scene change, a vignette that relocates us, the listeners, to the utter calm that settles in when situated beside a gurgling brook. Before we dive into the movement proper, however, one should note the structural pause taken between the first two movements; they are not written to be performed attacca. From a narrative perspective, we do not know how much time has passed in the idyll in the space between the arrival at the countryside and the brook. The movement titles do not indicate specific chronology, nor is the music a continuous progression. Do we arrive in the country and then go

right to the brook that same day, or have days or even weeks worth of sunrises and sunsets come to pass between the two? In the midst of this discourse, the clarifying answer is that *it does not matter*. Time in the idyll does not carry the same meaning it does in real life. The pastoral's perfect haven is insulated from the ecological processes—decay, erosion, weather patterns, the seasons—that make duration and labor inevitable (and unavoidable) facts of reality. The idyll forever exists as it does now—permanently ambered beyond the reach of change, both to its landscape and to its people. Should this temporal suspension be ruptured, the pastoral as a construct, a sanctuary from the outside world, would dissolve its very purpose. That being said, do not mistake this as a limitation or fault of the music. Rather, this feeling of suspension, of drifting along through the scenery with a lack of urgency in all things is a central feature of the pastoral genre with its ideals of leisure, peace, and harmony with a version of nature that feels secure for how it is forever unchanged.

There is a corresponding sense of abstraction regarding the brook itself, that is, whether Beethoven had a real brook in mind. Unsurprisingly, the people of Heiligenstadt—the town in which Beethoven resided when he wrote much of this symphony—have claimed Beethoven's brook as their own, but this notion is entirely romanticized local legend.⁶² There is no evidence, musical or otherwise, that brook of this second movement is the Heiligenstädter Bach, nor is this a case of, *it could be any brook*. If time in the idyll is abstract, so too is place; the brook is not a particular location, but rather a specific *type* of place defined by its characteristics.

“Scene by the brook” also marks a shift in the human-nature orientation that begins with considering the movement title. We saw in the first movement, through both its title and its musical content, how human emotion and subjectivity were foregrounded, with the countryside

⁶² Wyn Jones, *Pastoral Symphony*, 38.

as the occasion and setting for such experiences. The second movement instead foregrounds the external setting: the brook itself. In its title, there is no human emotion prescribed, no label of calm or tranquility, thus indicating that nature in this movement is not mediated through human emotion the way it was in the first movement. Musically, Beethoven reduces his reliance on musical topics to incorporate a more mimetic or pictorial portrayal, allowing us to encounter the brook more directly. While water is not a fully codified musical topic in the same way as the pastoral or the hunt, there are certain musical conventions—such as flowing 16th notes—that are commonly used to evoke it. That being said, the movement by no means abandons semiotic logic entirely. Rather, it thins out to function as a broader framing device into which the mimetic gestures that portray water are nestled.

Szene am Bach

Andante molto moto *) **)
con sord.
p

Violini I
Violini II
Violenze
2 Violoncelli soli
Violoncelli (gli altri) e Bassi
p

Fig. 4, Symphony No. 6, II, mm. 1–4.⁶³

⁶³ Beethoven, Symphony No. 6, II, mm. 1–4.

The pastoral signifier that overlays this movement is its 12/8 time signature set at an *Andante molto mosso* pace, evocative of the siciliana's lilt. Nestled within the compound meter are slurred groupings of three eighth notes in the strings—a figuration that cultivates a sense of continuous flow and embodied ease that sounds quite clearly like flowing water or a purling brook.



Fig. 5, Symphony No. 6, II, mm. 5-7.⁶⁴

The oscillating 16th notes beginning in bar 5 settle us into a regular, stable lull, where both the passage of time and the movement of the water are rounded out into cycles. Textures are kept transparent and open, where one can easily pick out individual instrumental lines—the first violins in bars 1-3, the flutes in bars 58-66, for example—gauging the brook as breathable and tempered. Even when the opening theme is taken on by the full orchestra in bar 91, at the start of the recapitulation, the texture is full and rich yet never engulfing. The music's scale never exceeds that which can be comfortably perceived; there is no orchestral saturation or overwhelm to be found here; only repose. Likewise, the movement features an overall slow-moving harmonic rhythm, extended areas in the subdominant (including the second theme in F major

⁶⁴ Beethoven, Symphony No. 6, II, mm. 5-7.

beginning in bar 30), and avoids unstable chromaticism. Collectively, these musical features yield a brook that is contained, manicured, and a great distance away from raw elemental force or real ecosystems. The brook simultaneously leans towards something more pictorial yet is still contained and subdued by stylization to keep it safely within the parameters of our pastoral world.

As we near the end of movement, one of the symphony's most distinctively pictorial moments features in a trio of birdcalls that Beethoven explicitly names in the score *Nachtigall* (nightingale), *Wachtel* (quail), and *Kuckuck* (cuckoo), played by the flute, oboe, and clarinet respectively.

The image displays two staves of musical notation for a trio of birdcalls. The first staff, labeled '129', features a flute part (Fl. I and II) with a 'Nachtigall' (nightingale) call, an oboe part (Ob. I and II) with a 'Wachtel' (quail) call, and a clarinet part (Clar. I and II, Sib) with a 'Kuckuck' (cuckoo) call. The second staff, labeled '132', continues the birdcalls with a flute part (Fl. I and II) featuring a 'cresc.' marking, an oboe part (Ob. I and II) with a 'a 2' marking, and a clarinet part (Clar. I and II, Sib) with a 'a 2' marking. The bassoon part (Fag. I and II) is also present in both staves, with a '[p]' marking in the second staff.



Fig. 6, Symphony No. 6, II, mm. 129–36.⁶⁵

These birdcalls walk a similar line as the flowing brook between mimesis and stylization, though here we have a level of ornithological specificity that the brook lacked. In this sense, they approach the sort of mimetic painting that Beethoven elsewhere resists. The individual birdcalls themselves do indeed resemble the patterns and pitches of their real-life counterparts to varying degrees of mimetic accuracy. The clarinet’s falling major third is markedly close in pitch, rhythm, and timbre to the actual cuckoo, the oboe’s dotted rhythm is a close rhythmic evocation of the quail’s chirp, and the flute’s rhythmic acceleration to a trill is a recognizable interpretation of the real nightingale’s rhythmically unpredictable and highly varied song that does indeed include “clear whistling [and] throbbing drumming.”⁶⁶ Their accuracy, however, is softened somewhat to keep them harmonically embedded, metrically regular, and aurally pleasant as to not fully rupture the pastoral world’s parameters. The birdcalls are kept brief—decorative, ornamental, and carefully curated as opposed to irregular, spontaneous, and naturalistic. Likewise, this trio of birds—the nightingale, quail, and cuckoo—are ecologically

⁶⁵ Beethoven, Symphony No. 6, II, mm. 129–36.

⁶⁶ Simon Barnes, *Birdwatching with Your Eyes Closed: An Introduction to Birdsong*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Short Books, 2012), 258.

unlikely as a cluster. Each of the three favor different habitats, from dense woodland to grassland to marsh, as well as have different circadian rhythms that are reflected in the time of day their singing is active. Nightingales are famously nocturnal singers, though they also herald in the dawn with their aubade, quails are crepuscular (that is, they call when the sun hangs liminal at dusk and dawn), and cuckoos primarily call during the day.⁶⁷ There is no precise ecosystem being cataloged and signaled here; instead, the birdcalls in their pseudo-ornithological accuracy reinforce the brook as a pastoral *type* of place rather than any specific location.

The third movement, “Merry gathering of country folk,” oscillates us from the pastoral as object-centered back to a landscape that is brought to life only in relation to human activities. In this merry gathering, nature is a backdrop for community, with the country folk now depicted as inhabiting the landscape. The focus is no longer solely on the listener’s emotional response to it. The countryside is now brought into relief as a social space, a site for ritual and a stage for collectivism. This third movement follows a scherzo and trio structure, with the scherzo composed to mimic the tendencies and tropes associated with an amateur village band playing folk-style music, and the trio a boisterous, foot-stomping, and folk-inflected dance. The particulars of this conventional symphony structure as adapted here reinforce the pastoral’s construction of rural life as communal, festive, and free from labor or conflict. The scherzo is presented in $\frac{3}{4}$ meter which, while not compound, still lends the music an easy, socially flowing sway.

⁶⁷ Barnes, *Birdwatching with Your Eyes Closed*, 103, 257.

Fig. 7, Symphony No. 6, III, mm. 89–98.⁶⁸

The music is written with a quality of rhythmic ungainliness; the oboe theme in bar 90 starts either a beat too early or two too late to feel kilter, though it does manage to rhythmically right itself in bar 95.⁶⁹ Luckily, this is a low-pressure and rollicking fictional performance space. Because the strings are looping staccato quarter notes on a tonic triad, it feels like our village oboist has ample time and space to course-correct, although we know that the rhythmic offset and realignment are deliberately constructed to be emblematic of a spontaneous folk-style performance. The bassoon has a somewhat comical and bizarre three-note drooping gesture that first appears in bar 95 and accompanies the oboe to the same effect in subsequent renditions of this S theme (bars 103 and 119). This gives the effect of a startled village player jumping in with

⁶⁸ Beethoven, Symphony No. 6, III, mm. 89–98.

⁶⁹ Wyn Jones, *Pastoral Symphony*, 69–70.

a quick interjection before succumbing to distraction or dozing off. The scherzo's orchestration feels companionable, with the S theme exchanged between a trio of oboe, clarinet, and horn. The oboe's reedy tone adds an earthy color, while the horn complements the rustic palette as expansive, open-air corollary with its associations to the hunt topic. Taken together, these gestures present a version of rural life that is playful and unselfconscious by emphasizing sociability and ease.

The trio section, with its heavy, boot-stomping downbeat accents, lends our musical impressions of the country folk a tangible sense of corporeality while still containing it within the bounds of pastoral stylization. Likewise, while F remains the tonal center, the repeatedly appearing E-flat gives the trio a modal feel—commonly associated with folk idioms more generally—with the flattened seventh borrowed from Mixolydian mode. Phrases are neat and symmetrical, constantly repeated to lend this dance air of straightforward simplicity, where cosmopolitan sophistication can be placed aside in favor of rustic conviviality. All these musical ingredients are stylized to signify peasantry, or peasantry as it would have been conceived of by wistful, urban concertgoers. The pastoral populace here is generic—there are no musical dialect markers that point to specific ethnic groups or regions that music catalogues or documents in an ethnographic fashion. What we have instead is a performance of rural life, where peasants are clumsy, vivacious, warmly communal, and, ultimately, harmless. Labor and human conflict dissipate, banished from the pastoral imagination. In their wake remains festivity, dance, and community; safety, warmth, and welcome. This state of pure social harmony reflects a pronounced innocence and unselfconsciousness that we may also find at the very heart of the pastoral as a genre more broadly—a world in which humans live in guileless harmony with an idealized natural world.

The scherzo's final return in bar 205 marks the first entry wound into the idyll, as its suspended sense of time begins to give way to duration. The violins are our harbingers of disruption when, in bar 213, they transform P theme material from sunny major harmony to ominous minor; B natural, as it has always appeared in this theme, becomes Bb in bar 216. This new iteration loops three times and crescendos through, with the repetition creating a sense of urgency and the minor inflection indicating the first sign of trouble. An optimistic sense of normalcy is briefly recovered before the whole orchestra comes together in a frenetic, presto reiteration of the opening quarter note scherzo motive and we feel proverbial wheels start to fall off. Instead of a resolute close for the movement on the tonic, the final cadence leaves us suspended on a dominant seventh chord. The music is left hanging, making the ending of "The merry gathering of country folk" dependent on its succeeding movement, "Thunder, storm." We saw in the pause taken between movements in the earlier part of the symphony a sense of temporal hopping, with nothing concrete—musical or otherwise—to indicate how those vignettes unfolded in time in relation to one another. This latter half of the symphony introduces linear time—a clear sense of duration—to the idyll and, in doing so, ruptures the pastoral genre's characteristic and fundamental state of temporal stasis/abstract temporality. The storm curtails the country folk's festivities both harmonically and affectively, an omen felt before the first rumble of thunder is actually heard. That final presto feels spontaneous and cinematic, its freneticism suggestive of festivities prematurely cut short, our pastoral inhabitants scrambling for shelter as something Other enters the idyll. Social ritual is abruptly compelled into urgency by a force that exists outside of human control, fracturing the pastoral's carefully maintained sense of security.

As soon as we hit the fourth movement, its title, “Thunder, storm” indicates that focus once again oscillates from feelings back to foregrounding nature, this time bluntly and without the softening that even the second movement’s brook had by prefacing it with “Scene by. . . .” It is simply: storm. We saw with the brook movement that water is not a fully codified pastoral topic, so it makes sense that Beethoven turned to pictorialism again for his second water-centric movement. Although the pictorial nature of the brook existed outside of topic theory semiotic logic, we saw that the brook remained a pastoral type of brook: contained, manicured, and human scaled. This storm movement is where Beethoven applies pressure to the pastoral genre’s boundaries to venture us out of the aesthetic concept of the beautiful—so emblematic and fundamental to the pastoral genre—and into something sublime. The benevolent and human-proportioned nature of every other movement is overtaken by a violent force of nature that has not been brought into existence for the purpose of human repose.

There is no rule, no inevitability dictating that a musical storm must be a cataclysm of biblical proportion the way Beethoven’s storm infamously is. In fact, thirty years prior to the premiere of Beethoven’s *Pastoral* Symphony, another German composer by the name of Justin Heinrich Knecht published a five-movement symphony titled, *Le portrait musical de la nature* that similarly incorporates a storm movement. Knecht’s storm, while dramatic enough to evoke the elements, can be better described as aristocratic and contained; exciting yet inoffensive on both the ears and the sensitivities. A storm that exists within a pastoral framework without imploding it. In Knecht’s storm, textures retain a notable degree of transparency, with clear functional distinctions between instrument groups.



Fig. 8, *Le portrait musical de la nature*, III, p. 52.⁷⁰

For instance, strings often carry fast, scalar passagework, over which the brass may play a fanfare-like motive, while the woodwinds sustain chords. Cadences are clear and phrases regular, allowing Knecht's storm to be sectioned into cognitively digestible chunks. There never passes a moment without legible musical conventions to latch onto, ensuring the listener continuously remains oriented. This musical portrayal of a storm is thus presented not as a rupture, but instead as a spectacle or a scene within the pastoral world. Beethoven chooses otherwise; the full force of his storm, in all its pictorial and violent glory, applies pressure to the pastoral logic that has governed the symphony up to this point.

⁷⁰ Justin Heinrich Knecht, *Le portrait musical de la nature*, full score manuscript, 1784, Universitätsbibliothek der Eberhard Karls Universität (D-Tu), Mk 38, p. 52.

This rupture is brought into immediate relief harmonically by the storm being the only movement in the entire symphony that is realized in a minor key (F minor), made especially striking as an inversion of the majority of the rest of the symphony that is securely rooted in F major. The departure from pastoral equilibrium, with its bright major mode functioning as harmonic corollaries to repose, casts this fourth movement as harmonically dark, destabilizing, and affectively alien to the world previously established.

Thus far in the symphony, our sense of spatial distance has felt open yet still contained and insulated from external forces. Music cannot literally show space or depict a horizon, though it can create the illusion of space through sound. Shifts in register, density, and dynamics can make certain gestures feel distant while others press into the foreground. Thin textures and soft dynamics can give the effect of receding toward an implied horizon, while expansions in volume, registral span, and orchestration collapse that distance, bringing the musical space into immediate proximity. These features emerge in the opening twenty bars, where Beethoven maps depth, horizon, and the storm's gradual approach through texture and orchestration.

Donner. Sturm

19

Allegro *)

Flauto piccolo

Flauto I, II

Oboe I, II

Clarinetto I, II
in Si^b / B

Fagotto I, II

Corno I, II
in Fa / F

Clarino I, II
in Mi^b / Es

Trombone I
Alto

Trombone II
Tenore

Timpani
in Fa-Do / F-C

Allegro *)

Violini I

Violini II

Viola

Violoncelli
e Bassi

8

Fl. I II

Ob. I II

Clar. I
(Si^b) II

Fag. I II

Cor. I
(Fa) II

Cln. I
(Mi^b) II

Viol. I II

Vle.

Vc. e B.

pp

p

cresc.

p

Fig. 9, Symphony No. 6, IV, mm. 1–20.⁷¹

With the opening of the fourth movement, our sense of space expands beyond the pastoral's previously secure bounds. The pianissimo tremolo in the basses is evocative of distant rolling thunder, not yet *here*—where the townspeople are, where we are—but located on the horizon, with the sound traveling through space toward us. Pianissimo spiccato eighth notes from the second violins in bars 3–8 and 13–18 suggest the first pitter-patter of raindrops as the storm edges forebodingly closer. The drizzle texture can also be interpreted as a transformation of the light staccato quarter note figure that opened the third movement's scherzo. This figure, first heard as dance music, is transformed from a marker of human festivity to one that animates the elemental

⁷¹ Beethoven, Symphony No. 6, IV, mm. 1–20.

and the pictorial. Orchestration is kept thin in the opening, with only the basses playing for those first two bars and then the second violin as the primary texture to create a sense of removal, of spatial depth that distinguishes foreground, middle distance, and horizon with the storm initially occupying a horizon that has just now been brought into existence. Through this spatial layering, Beethoven builds anticipation; we are aware that something massive, something dangerous is incoming, and we experience this awareness from a position of relative safety, before the storm fully arrives. The effect is less impact than charged expectancy; we have the time and space to sense and register the storm's potential magnitude before bar 21, when impact touches down in full force. These first 20 bars set up proto-sublime conditions; a threshold marked by the realization that we are about to come face-to-face with something that far exceeds the human scale. If we were thrown into the height of the storm instantly, with no cognitive preparation, we would experience shock followed by chaos. This preparation for impact distinguishes a potential sublime experience from mere noise, which is what plunged into the storm head on would look like.

When the first full onslaught of the storm arrives in the foreground, the here and now space that had previously been our untouchable pastoral bubble gives way, crossing into a different sonic world.

Fig. 10, Symphony No. 6, IV, mm. 21–23.⁷²

Orchestral scale expands as the timpani and trombones play for the first time in the symphony as pictorial crashing thunder. Their entrance weighs down and densifies the acoustic floor, making our sense of spatiality simultaneously feel colossally vast, but equally enclosed and pressurized. Underneath the thunder, strings are rain hammering down in a disorienting cacophony of fortissimo sixteenth notes, quintuplets, and tremolos all stacked on top of one another. Lightning flashes in bars 33, 34, 43, and 44 with the first violin’s sharp, vertical, and

⁷² Beethoven, Symphony No. 6, IV, mm. 21–23.

interruptive gestures, puncturing through the texture and fracturing any sense of musical continuity. The cluster of six successive strikes in bars 51-55 is volatile and unpredictable in its repetition, a blatant contrast to the cyclic and flowing treatment of repetition that we saw in the earlier half of the symphony.

Fig. 11, Symphony No. 6, IV, mm. 96–100.⁷³

In bars 95-102, the celli and basses' sweeping chromatic eighth-note scales are compounded by the sustained piccolo screaming above them to evoke hurricane-speed winds, violent and

⁷³ Beethoven, Symphony No. 6, IV, mm. 96–100.

enthraling. The pastoral's stability, felt through its diatonic harmonic language, is suspended as chromaticism slides and tumbles. Registral contrasts become increasingly extreme with the gaping vertical span between the screeching piccolo and surging low strings. The storm is a deluge of raw kinetic energy and propulsion with the piccolo carried onwards by the continuous motion from below.

These gestures with all their vivid pictorialism are evocative in their specificity, the clarity of what they depict. And yet, in a different way than the second movement, the storm's pictorialism does not stop at depiction—it also stages perceptual conditions ripe for a sublime encounter.

Recall the representational and experiential sublime as two lenses through which the sublime can be expressed in music. In the representational mode, a constructed protagonist is understood to be undergoing a sublime experience that we, the listeners, observe and experience indirectly. In the experiential mode, the music foregoes the filter of an in-music protagonist or populace and acts directly upon the listener, positioning them as the site of the sublime encounter.

Beethoven's storm, given narrative shape and nuance by the two movements that frame it, navigates the precipice between both. The third movement establishes the pastoral populace—our merry country folk—who are only brought into being in the movement directly preceding the storm as though for the very purpose of creating internal stakes—bodies to be threatened. The expectation is set up for the country folk to mediate our encounter with the storm, to absorb or reflect the brunt of its force. Instead, they are effectively ushered off stage to wait it out in the proverbial wings and only reappear once the danger has passed with the movement's end.

By removing the buffer that representational distance allows for—first the pastoral's semiotic mediation, then the representational sublime's human filter—the storm becomes a more forceful disruption of the representational logic that governs the rest of the symphony. Instead, its

affective delivery is that of the experiential. From the first pitter-patter of raindrops in bar 1, both forms of mediation begin to erode. Maximal orchestration, chromatic saturation, and extreme registral contrasts all come together to both depict excess and to enact it, inundating the listener and confronting them with their own smallness in the face of such vast scale and power.

It is as though we fully expect to see someone else—an unfortunate cluster of townspeople perhaps—left out in the deluge to absorb the storm’s force on our behalf. Instead, with the country folk withdrawn, that mediating position collapses. There is no one left within the musical world to bear the experience for us, and the confrontation is redirected onto the listener. Stripped of this buffer, we are exposed in a way that is disarming and disorienting, saturated with a mixture of dread and thrill that has *just* enough time—roughly twenty seconds—to take hold in the body and mind, alongside the quiet awareness that we remain safe within the tempered concert hall.

The movement is also notably brief, a storm that is all-consuming when it is upon us but quickly moves on to the next town as the movement comes to a provisional end after a mere 155 bars heard in just over three and a half minutes. As it fades away, the sense of spatial distance—of foreground, middle distance, and horizon—that we felt as the storm approached returns, though the cardinal direction is now opposite as tension dissipates rather than builds. A *diminuendo* begins in bar 119, soon to be joined by a harmonic plateau on the dominant beginning in bar 136, that revive our sense of spatial openness, the horizon widening to allow this vast Other to recede from the foreground. In bars 137-139, the final iterations of middle-distance thunder feature a far reduced orchestration with only strings and timpani sounding for a single bar before tapering into a soft quarter note, a marked contrast to the relentless thunder

iterations at the storm's height. The first violin's lightning effect returns one final time in bar 140, its familiar gesture rhythmically somewhat relaxed and now marked piano.

138

Timp. *f*

Viol. I *sf* *p* *f* *p* *p*

Viol. II *sf* *p* *f* *p*

Vle. *sf* *p* *f* *p*

Vc. *f* *p* *f* *p* *dimin.*

B. *sf* *f*

Fig. 12, Symphony No. 6, IV, mm. 137–40.⁷⁴

Our sense of linear time, of the final three movements as dramatically continuous, is anticipated in bar 146. The oboe, our shepherd returned to us, begins his “Shepherd’s song” ten bars before the start of the final movement with a chorale-like gesture that functions simultaneously as both a postlude to the storm and a prelude to the restored idyll that follows. Regarding its retrospective, postlude-like quality, the oboe’s chorale gesture transforms the second violin’s drizzle gesture from the storm’s opening in F minor into glorious C major, marked *dolce*.

⁷⁴ Beethoven, Symphony No. 6, IV, mm. 137–40.

145

Fl. I II

Ob. I II

Clar. (Sib) I II

Fag. I II

Cor. (Fa) I II

Cln. (Mib) I II

Viol. I II

Vle. I II

Vc. I II

B. I II

Solo

dolce

dolce

dolce

pp

pp

Fig. 13, Symphony No. 6, IV, mm. 145–49.⁷⁵

I

Allegro *)

Violini I

Violini II

Violenze

pp

Fig. 14, Symphony No. 6, IV, mm. 1–4.⁷⁶

The storm's disruption is not confined to the movement itself, but instead extends both before and beyond it. Linear time ruptures the idyll's characteristic temporal state of stasis with

⁷⁵ Beethoven, Symphony No. 6, IV, mm. 145–49.

⁷⁶ Beethoven, Symphony No. 6, IV, mm. 1–4.

the storm's rolling in. We see this through the third movement's scrambling finish and the storm movement's attacca start, underscored by the final unresolved dominant seventh chord that averted resolution. Once the storm dissipates, linear time—so antithetical to the pastoral's very function as an insulated haven—persists. The storm and the finale as a single, unfolding event are musically realized through the attacca transition between the two, made seamless by the flute's pan-piper-esque ascending scale that withholds its harmonic resolution until the downbeat of the finale. Like this persistent sense of linear time, the storm's impression lingers after the event itself has passed.

Additionally, the finale's title—“Shepherd's song. Happy and thankful feelings after the storm”—directly references the storm, confirming that this finale unfolds in response to it. This title also makes explicit the return of human subjects—our country folk—to the narrative. Their “thankful feelings” reframe the storm as something to be retroactively interpreted through its preservation of the idyll as a haven. With this retroactive interpretation comes the realization that, for all its overwhelming force, the storm leaves no lasting exit wounds on the land. The pastoral bubble can reinflate and preserve the idyll as sanctitude, the storm come and gone without scorched earth to show for it. The storm's threat is not treated as an autonomous natural process with indiscriminate ecological consequences, but instead as an event whose impact is realized through human interpretation. As such, the storm in all its excess is not musically effaced after the fact but rather reabsorbed into a musical language and an aesthetic world that restores intelligibility.

Likewise, the “Thankful feelings” are not undirected. Taken in combination with the movement's religious allusions, the storm is retroactively shaded with theophanic connotations, though not without precedent. In this respect, the symphony recalls Sturm's God-in-landscape

style nature worship, where all aspects of nature—beautiful and sublime both—point beyond themselves to God’s beneficence as it pertains to humans. The presence of gratitude implies a sort of deliverance, an acknowledgment of a force beyond human control that has spared the country folk from calamity. This sense of deliverance is inseparable from the country folk’s passivity during the storm itself. Their gratitude is oriented towards their own survival and the restoration of the idyll instead of towards the land and its preservation. The very musical parameters that have been reinstated convey a type of landscape—the pastoral—that is primarily oriented toward serving human repose.

Musically, the idyll’s restoration is signified through the clarinets and then the horn’s opening gesture that evokes a *ranz des vaches*—an Alpine horn call traditionally played by Swiss herdsman, typically built on open intervals and designed to carry across open space.⁷⁷

Allegretto *) **)

⁷⁷ Guy P. R. Métraux, “The Ranz des Vaches: Distant Echoes of an Old Swiss Melody,” *The UNESCO Courier* 40, no. 2 (February 1987): 32–33, accessed March 12, 2026, <https://go-gale-com.uoregon.idm.oclc.org/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA4752955&v=2.1&it=r&u=euge94201&p=AONE&aty=ip>.

Fig. 15, Symphony No. 6, V, mm. 18.⁷⁸

The gesture, strikingly clear and simple (especially in the wake of the storm's cacophony), centralizes an open fifth—the antithesis of harmonic tension and drive. Its rhythmic profile is that of lilting groups of three which, considered in tandem with the gesture's iterative quality, produces a rounded, gently cyclical contour that evokes the pastoral's characteristic flowing compound meter. These characteristics come together to yield a sense of spatial openness; the *ranz des vaches*-style gesture, with its open, projecting intervals, feels outward-facing and unbounded, and its candor allows it to be readily taken up across the ensemble. And circulate it does. The sense of communalism that was introduced with the third movement's evocation of a village band returns through the gentle passing of the *ranz des vaches* across the orchestra from instrument to instrument, timbre to timbre. The clarinets present the gesture first with their warm and rounded tone, less penetrating/individuating and reedy than the more ostentatiously pastoral oboe would have been. The gesture elides to the horns and then to the first violins, who extend it into something longer and more lyrical—though still simple—composed almost entirely of thirds and perfect fourth. It is then passed to the second violins, an octave lower, before the clarinets, horn, violas, and celli take up this extended *ranz des vaches* melody together, played in perfect fifths. Through its circulation and the ease thereof, human presence in the idyll returns as a collective, a shared presence.

The finale's broad sonata-rondo form itself enacts the idyll's restoration through its cyclic and predictable logic, with the A theme's return increasingly familiar and secure with every

⁷⁸ Beethoven, Symphony No. 6, V, mm. 1–8.

iteration. While the melodic material itself retains a sense of continuity across each iteration, instrumentation varies and expands, allowing the theme's stability to deepen as the A theme disseminates throughout the ensemble. This is accumulation of a very different sort than that of the sublime's relentless excess. The *ranz des vaches* melody as it returns for A2 in bar 64, A3 in bar 117, and in the coda in bar 237 is colored differently each time—accompaniment textures change, the melody itself transforms into delicate, weaving passagework, and then voiced like a chorale—in confirmation; reassurance that its return is reliable and, in turn, the musical world is once again stable.

Fig. 16, Symphony No. 6, V, mm. 64–69.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Beethoven, Symphony No. 6, V, mm. 64–69.

Fig. 17, Symphony No. 6, V, mm. 116–119.⁸⁰

237

Viol. I

Viol. II

Vle.

Vc.

B.

pp sotto voce

cresc.

p

f

Fig. 18, Symphony No. 6, V, mm. 237–247.⁸¹

Through the movement's rondo form, our sense of time returns to pastoral ideals of cyclicity, rounded and familiar, where return is not only normalized, but expected. The symphony concludes with the *ranz des vaches* theme returning for one final iteration in the horn, muted and marked *pianissimo*, as the pastoral world's presence recedes rather than asserts itself.

⁸⁰ Beethoven, Symphony No. 6, V, mm. 116–19.

⁸¹ Beethoven, Symphony No. 6, V, mm. 237–47.

259 *pp* *ff*

Fl. I II

Ob. I II

Clar. I II
(Si^b)

Fag. I II

Corno I. con sordino

Cor. (Fa) I II

Cln. I II
(Do)

Trb. I II

pp *ff*

Fig. 19, Symphony No. 6, V, mm. 259–264.⁸²

In doing so, the symphony returns us to what we knew from its onset, that the musical world we were entering was a construct—the natural world mediated and idealized—and, beyond that, recollected. Through the fading horn and the gentle yet firm cadence that succeeds it, the symphony does not end by securing the pastoral world, but rather by releasing it. A landscape that has never stood entirely on its own can, in turn, simply fade away without consequence, its dissolution as much a construct as its initial realization.

⁸² Beethoven, Symphony No. 6, V, mm. 259–64.

CONCLUSION

This lecture document has focused on how the pastoral and the sublime in Beethoven's Sixth Symphony operate on the level of listener experience. By tracing how the symphony constructs, disrupts, and restores its pastoral world, I show how the listener is continually repositioned in relation to that world. In turn, the pastoral and the sublime can be understood in music not only as descriptive labels, but as experiential modes shaped through shifting conditions of stability, temporality, and perceptual distance. Likewise, I have clarified how neither mode relates the listener to nature as it exists in ecological reality. This distinction becomes especially pertinent in relation to contemporary musical practices that seek to foreground ecological specificity and reciprocal listening, where the natural world is treated as an active presence rather than as an object of idealization. It can be easy to collapse these different approaches to 'music about nature' into a single, monolithic category when they in fact reflect distinct and historically situated modes of relating to the natural world through music. Attending to these distinctions allows for a more precise understanding—for performers, listeners, and scholars alike—of how works across different periods and aesthetic frameworks engage with nature not as a shared subject, but through fundamentally different modes of construction and experience. What emerges, then, is no single way of experiencing 'music about nature'. Instead, we are greeted with a set of possibilities that invite the listener to attend with a new awareness of how their musical experience of the natural world takes shape.

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