

EL PASO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
FEBRUARY 16 & 17, 2024
PROGRAM NOTES

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born December 17, 1770 — Bonn, Germany

Died March 26, 1827 — Vienna, Austria

Symphony No. 6, Op. 68 F major (Pastorale)

One charming aspect of the classical music world is that there's something for everyone. There are dozens of genres to choose from to fit your needs. In the mood for some big orchestral sounds? Go for a symphony. How about beautiful singing with piano? Pick some German lieder. Whatever you fancy on any given day, there's great music out there for you.

On an occasional basis some composers have tried "mixing" things up, taking a genre that is clearly defined and altering it using a musical medium that is totally unrelated. This can be exciting and fresh and there are many famous examples of this in the literature - some good, some a little lackluster. But who was the first to really pull this off effectively? That would be Beethoven.

Ludwig van Beethoven's most critical works are his nine symphonies, and little did he know that they would become the gold standard examples within the genre and would be the works all other symphonies would be compared against for the next 100 years. However, there was one Beethoven symphony that stood out from the rest and set the standard for orchestral works that were trying to exist "outside the box."

Beethoven's *Symphony No. 6 in F Major, Op. 68* was a serious oddball for its time. While the traditional structure of a symphony contains four movements, *Symphony No. 6* had five. While traditional symphonies left the interpretation of the music up to the audience, *Symphony No. 6* did it for you, by having titles, or a theme, for each movement. With that theme being nature, Beethoven nicknamed the piece "Pastoral."

The *Pastoral Symphony's* debut was a story for the ages. It was first programmed in 1808 at one of the most notorious concerts in history — a four-hour program that also featured Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5*, *Piano Concerto No. 4*, and *Choral Fantasy* — all challenging works that overwhelmed the performers who were working with far too little rehearsal time. Luckily for Beethoven, the concert was not as well attended as it could have been due to other concerts happening that day throughout Vienna. Regardless, it is astounding to know that some of the most famous music of all time had such a dismal first appearance.

The *Pastoral Symphony* would inspire a deluge of programmatic works for symphony orchestra, such as Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* and the tone poems of Richard Strauss, adding to the endless evidence that points to Beethoven being music's most famous innovator.

Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky

Born May 7, 1840 — Votkinsk, Russia

Died November 6, 1893 — St. Petersburg, Russia

Symphony No. 6, Op. 68 B minor (Pathétique Symphony)

Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky rightly sits on the pedestal of our most beloved composers, most certainly those of the latter half of the 19th century. His music is legendary, not only for seeing countless performances in concert halls, but for appearing regularly in everyday life via movies, television shows, commercials, and holiday events. To many, Tchaikovsky's music is instantly recognizable, whether you know the man behind it or not.

Not unlike his music, Tchaikovsky's personal story is riveting. Being somewhat of a late bloomer, he began his higher education in music whilst already in his twenties, although quickly advanced to become a faculty member at the Moscow Conservatory of Music. Perhaps the busiest year of his life would be 1877 when he would complete the first of his three legendary ballets: *Swan Lake*; marry a former student; and begin his famous correspondence with Nadezhda von Meck, the mysterious patron whom he would never meet.

In hopes of dousing public suspicions in regards to his homosexuality, Tchaikovsky married Antonina Miliukova, a former student of his from the Moscow Conservatory. Although the marriage would legally remain intact until Tchaikovsky's death in 1893, Miliukova and Tchaikovsky would separate less than two months after taking their vows. Their break-up would be initiated by Tchaikovsky who had no sincere romantic interest in Miliukova. She, on the other hand, was deeply infatuated with her husband and was devastated by the exposed falsehood behind their relationship.

That same year, Tchaikovsky would secure the most critical patron of his career. Nadezhda von Meck would pay Tchaikovsky an exuberant salary which would fund the vast majority of the composer's work over the next 15 years. A few pieces were even discreetly dedicated to von Meck (*Symphony No. 4*, for example). The legendary twist behind this correspondence is that Tchaikovsky and Von Meck would never meet in person per an agreement between the two of them. Although this idea most certainly arose from von Meck, her exact reasons behind the decision may never be known ... whether be it a fear for what Tchaikovsky's close friendship may bring, or insecurities about her own persona.

A complex personal and professional life did not help Tchaikovsky's notorious struggles with his mental health. Severe anxiety and depression would haunt Tchaikovsky until his death, and insecurity would prevent him from appreciating his own work. He was not satisfied with any of his compositions upon their completion — a great irony, given that he is one of the most popular romantic composers being programmed today.

A fine portrait of both Tchaikovsky the brilliant musician *and* the tragic persona is *Symphony No. 6 in B Minor, Op. 74*. Written the same year as the composer's death, *Symphony No. 6* would be the final publication from Tchaikovsky while he was still alive. The composer's additional opuses would all be published posthumously.

Symphony No. 6, which would become known as the *Pathétique Symphony*, is special and unique on several accounts. It contains a vastly different style and language when compared to its composer's other symphonic works, particularly the symphonies. It would also see a performance conducted by Tchaikovsky himself that would fall only days before the composer's death.

Tchaikovsky's symphonies are famous for their bombardments of raging sounds and over-the-top emotions. Their full-on aural assaults seem more fitting for Italian operas than symphonic works, but

nonetheless they are easily some of the most intense nineteenth century examples of the genre. Not the *Pathétique Symphony*, however. *Symphony No. 6* takes a different route, one of walloping grief and mature emotional expression that is far gentler in its delivery (yet still profound). Although the *Pathétique Symphony* certainly has its moments of intensity, it is as if a different hand is writing down the notes, dictating to the audience about a tragedy that has fallen upon a close colleague or friend. This is profound when realizing the work was premiered only nine days before Tchaikovsky's demise and can be considered a farewell message, a final musical statement expressing all that is grievous and difficult within a single human life.

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