

Franz von Suppe (1819-1895)
Light Cavalry Overture

You will undoubtedly recognize this piece as it has been used numerous times in movies and on television. Suppe, an Austrian composer of Belgian descent, made his life in the realm of the theater. As a young, inexperienced composer, he had opportunity to rub shoulders with such opera greats as Rossini, Donizetti, and Verdi. He learned much as he heard their music. His first position at a theater as an assistant in music was unpaid, and he had to gradually prove himself and work up in the system. He eventually became very successful, becoming the first major composer of Viennese operetta. To his tribute, he has written 30 operettas, as well as operas, parodies, farces, overtures, incidental music, and even sacred vocal music. His overtures are performed regularly today, and as you hear this piece you will know why. It begins with a brass fanfare in military tradition, and by the middle the overture is in full swing with its jaunty main theme, which contrasts with passionate lyricism interspersed throughout.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Piano Concerto No. 1 Op. 15

As a young man in his early twenties, Beethoven traveled from Bonn to Vienna to complete his musical training. In those years leading up to the turn of the century, he studied with many composers, most notably Joseph Haydn. During this early period, he begins to establish himself as a noteworthy composer, but it was as a pianist that he was first known. Beethoven, remarkably gifted at a young age, began to play the piano early, and by the time he was a young adult his prowess at the piano became legendary. Many contemporary anecdotes describe Beethoven as an extremely focused pianist who could dazzle audiences with not only his technical abilities but also with a deep depth of emotion. He was famous for damaging the light, mostly wooden pianos of the Classical era. His innovative pianistic style actually incited piano craftsmen to further the development of the piano to closer match what we now enjoy as the modern piano. His first three concertos, written in the decade leading up to the 19th century, were composed specifically for Beethoven himself to perform, and as you will hear tonight, he definitely gave himself many opportunities to shine.

As most of his early works, this concerto pays homage to his classical heritage—that of Haydn and Mozart. Most historians will point out that although this concerto is dubbed his “first,” it was not the first he wrote. Rather, it was the first he published. He purposely chose this concerto to act as a gateway to the Viennese musical culture, with the desire that the ambitious score and virtuosic passages would impress audiences, much like it continues to do today.

Antonin Dvorak (1841-1904)
Romance in f minor for Violin

Born in Bohemia and raised as an Innkeeper's son in a village outside of Prague, Dvorak grew up with a love for native Bohemian music. Although he showed musical abilities early, money was tight and opportunities initially slim. With the help of some family members, Dvorak was sent to Prague to study music and he played viola in the Czech National Theater, and had the opportunity to work under the baton of Bedrich Smetana, the original Czech nationalist. As his works were performed and he received notoriety through performance and publication, he eventually obtained a position teaching composition at the Prague Conservatory. In 1892, he received an invitation to be director of the National Conservatory of Music in the United States. During his stay in the US, he was able to gain a deep appreciation for native folk music, notably African American Spirituals. He helped his American students gain an appreciation for their native music, and encouraged them to explore folk elements in order to create a unique voice void of European dominance. He eventually returned to his homeland, and died a nationalistic hero.

Musically, Dvorak's style is firmly rooted in folk idiom of Bohemia. His melodies do not generally quote existing folk tunes—rather, they are highly original melodies inspired by folk tune. This gift for melody, couched within standard Classic forms, and the absence of Narcissistic neuroticism so ever present in much of late Romantic music make him a composer immensely popular not only with his own people but the world over.

The Romance for Violin and Orchestra was written in 1877, and is largely based on a melodic idea he came up with earlier in his String Quartet in f minor from 1873. Receiving no publicity because the quartets were not performed in his lifetime, he extracted the beautiful melody from the slow movement and re-worked it tenderly in this Romance based on a three part song form. Due to Dvorak's apt craftsmanship, the violin part is not only virtuosic, but also poignantly lyrical.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) ***Symphony #6, "Pastoral"***

December 22, 1808, was a significant day in the life of Beethoven and also in the history of music. On that day both his 5th and 6th symphonies were premiered. No two works could so effectively encompass Beethoven's diverse style, as the pieces are nothing alike yet so innovative in unique ways. Where the fifth symphony is full of angst and aggressive triumph, Symphony #6 gently entreats the listener with grace and charm.

Nicknamed "Pastoral," Symphony #6 is an evocative tribute to the beauties and wonders of nature. Although it may be difficult to imagine the Beethoven of the fifth symphony as a lover of nature, a walk in the countryside to observe the natural world was one of his favorite past-times; he said, "No one loves the

country as I do.” Nature themes were not unheard of in music, such as Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*, but Beethoven’s work actually pre-dates a type of music that was to become immensely popular in the Romantic period—program music, instrumental music that tells a story. Even though the trend in subsequent generations was to depict things quite literally in music, Beethoven himself said his Pastoral Symphony was “more an expression of feeling than a painting,” and that “...he who has ever had a notion of country life can imagine without too many descriptive words what the composer intended.”

To enhance appreciation of any programmatic work, it helps to understand the intent and story of the music. Beethoven subtitled each of the movements of the symphony. The first movement carries the inscription, “Awakening of cheerful feelings upon arrival in the country.” The music is gentle and quiet throughout, and the use of wind instruments summons up images of piping shepherd boys. Movement #2, “Scene at the brook,” opens by depicting moving water through the continuously flowing strings in compound meter. The end of this movement features an extended cadenza for a trio of wind instruments that represent different birds: the oboe (quail), clarinet (cuckoo), and flute (nightingale). In the third movement, the music shifts to reflect a “happy gathering of country folk,” who are quite energetically dancing. Their dancing is interrupted by movement four, which represents a storm. It is in this movement that Beethoven is quite literal. As you listen, hear the light patter of rain followed by wind and thunder. The storm is not long, however, lasting under four minutes. The symphony ends with a “Shepherd’s Song,” as the country folk cheerfully offer thanksgiving.