

Selection of musical pieces by Julián Rodríguez

Texts by Luis Francisco Pérez

### Ludwig van Beethoven

#### “Szene am Bach” (Scene by the Brook) from the 6th Symphony, *Pastoral Symphony*

Beethoven completed his *Pastoral Symphony* in 1808 in the town of Heiligenstadt, at that time close to Vienna and which today lies within the Austrian capital. It was while resting there that the great German composer wrote what would become known as his *Testament*, on 10 October, 1802. In this document Beethoven confesses in a very affectionate manner the unbearable tragedy of his progressive deafness, to the point that he concludes with this clear intention to commit suicide: “Farewell and do not wholly forget me when I am dead; I deserve this of you in having often in life thought of how to make you happy. Be so. Ludwig van Beethoven”. The *Pastoral* is a love song to Nature (with a capital letter, of course), but it is also a very pious work of profound demonstration of love for the Creator. In a way, he establishes with this symphony a very interesting dialectic tension with the previous one, that is to say with the very terrible and righteous, brutal and beautiful (another kind of beauty) 5th Symphony. It can be understood that, with the *Pastoral*, he wanted to return to an intimate, familiar, domestic, comfortable and, in short, *human*, nature. Structured into five movements (“Awakening of Cheerful Feelings upon Arrival in the Countryside”; “Scene by the Brook”; “Merry Gathering of Country Folk”; “Thunder. Storm”; and “Shepherd’s Song”), it is impossible to say whether it is a programmatic work, at least in the most modern meaning that is present in the tone poems of Richard Strauss. However, based on everything from the title itself to statements made by the composer and other musicians, it is clear that the *Pastoral* aims to describe nature. The “Scene by the Brook”, focussed on here, the symphony’s second movement, is a refined and sensual *andante molo mosso* that gives an intuitive feeling for the flow of the stream’s gentle waters. Years later Beethoven returned and passed by the same stream accompanied by Anton Schindler (composer, friend and one of Beethoven’s first biographers), and approaching the banks said to his companion: “It was here that I wrote the ‘Scene by the Brook’ movement; and from there above, the golden orioles, quails, skylarks and cuckoos composed along with me.” We need add nothing else.

### Franz Schubert

“Der Lindenbaum” (The Lime Tree), “Wasserflut” (The Torrent), “Die Krähe” (The Crow) and “Der stürmische Morgen” (The Stormy Morning), from the cycle *Winterreise* (Winter Journey)

These four songs (*lieder*) by Franz Schubert could have been offered as an example by Nietzsche when, in his book *Daybreak*, he says the following: “The ear, the organ of fear, could have evolved as greatly as it has only in the night and twilight of obscure caves and woods, in accordance with the mode of life of the age of timidity, that is to say, the longest human age there has even been: in bright daylight the ear is less necessary. That is how music acquired the character of an art of night and twilight.” Forgive me for the relative length of the quote, but it seems to me important to use it to introduce a gloss on a composer who is very probably, in historiographical terms, the most *finished*, in both his life and work, exemplar of the Romantic (*nocturnal*) musician, Franz Schubert. Four songs, let it be said, that belong with all justice to one of the most famous, beautiful and popular song cycles: *Winterreise* (*Winter Journey*), which has twenty-four songs in perfect synchrony with the same number of poems by Wilhelm Müller. When a person dies aged thirty-one, as Schubert did, it seems in bad taste to talk about different “periods” of his career, but *Winterreise*, and due to the composer’s incredible inventive ability from a young age, could have been written by him at eighteen, at twenty-five or in the last year of his life, as did in fact occur. *Winterreise* is as much a song to Nature as it is a demonstration of fear before her. However it may be understood, this cycle owes a clear debt to the literary movement, one that had strong connections to music and the visual arts, known as *Sturm und Drang*, which arose in Germany some decades before in the second half of the 18th century. The four songs chosen are wonderful reflections of a nature that is placid and beautiful, as well as aggressive and cruel, particularly in “Wasserflut” (“The Torrent”), where the singer’s voice must reflect the swelling and receding of this mighty flood. *Winterreise*, which begins with the phrase “*Fremd bin ich*” (“I am a stranger”), is one of the highest summits of music composed for the human voice. It is a gift both from Nature and from the creative and artistic intelligence of the human being. It certainly also belongs to the art of the night and the twilight.

### Gustav Mahler

“Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt” (St Anthony of Padua’s Sermon to the Fishes), from the song cycle *Das Knaben Wundernhorn* (The Youth’s Magic Horn)

I think it would very interesting to begin this gloss talking about the *Das Knaben Wundernhorn* book of poems, since the information given will make it easier to understand the musical arguments that were so important for Mahler when he began this composition, a process that lasted more than a decade (from 1892), during which he was also composing his first symphonies. The story has its origin in the first decade of the 19th century and at the height of the fever produced by the artistic explosion of German Romanticism, and in fact its main mentors were two intellectuals who were also major figures in the Romantic movement: Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano. It was they who collected popular and anonymous stories and tales and later published them in the form of a book with the title whose rather approximate translation is *The Youth’s Magic Horn* (and it can be rendered in various ways). The book’s dedicatee, who was none other than Goethe, wrote in his comments on the collection that “every German family should possess a copy of the book next to its recipe books and songbooks.” That is to say, the spirit that animated the preparation of the book was, above all, a popular demonstration of the most completely and nobly *popular* (or family, or domestic, or simple) sphere, if you will allow me to state the obvious. Mahler was not the only composer to set these stories to music, since before and after him Mendelssohn, Schumann, Brahms, Schreker, Zemlinsky, Schoenberg, Webern and Richard Strauss (the list is impressive) took an interest in the same book. However, it was Mahler who achieved the greatest creative heights, and also a work that has been recorded and performed consistently and much more than those by his brilliant colleagues. There is no consensus regarding the exact number of songs that make up the cycle, between thirteen and twenty, especially since singers usually chose to record their own selection from among all the songs, but always included is “St Anthony of Padua’s Sermon to the Fishes”. This delicious and beautiful composition contains within it the spirit of the whole cycle and the book that acts as a guide and inspiration: melodies and airs from a village festivity, military marches, simple humour from the brass section, rural folklore from the period’s background, danceable and somersaulting chords, fanfares and notes that stick in the memory... The *popular*, in effect, taken to the highest and most noble musical and intellectual sophistication.

Richard Wagner

“Forest Murmurs” from the opera *Siegfried*, third part of *The Ring of the Nibelung* cycle

*Siegfried* is, and to say it in a way that is voluntarily prosaic and familiar, the *sweetest* (I do not wish to seek another adjective) opera of all those composed by Richard Wagner. The work is strategically situated in the centre of the Tetralogy, after the prologue *The Rhinegold* and *The Valkyrie*, and with the tremendous finale of *The Twilight of the Gods* still to come. *Siegfried* is an opera of strange and redemptive human beauty, as if Wagner wanted to take a break from epics and superhuman, heroic violence, or at least catch a breath before completing the saga of gods who feel nostalgia for their lost humanity, of humans who desire a divinity they cannot attain, of sub-humans who mine gold from the depths, of crafty monsters, of mythological creatures and dragons, and of giants who act like the aggressive managers of a service provider. So, at the heart of that immense orgy of fantasy, *Siegfried* is a *pure* being, vaccinated against the virus of envy and ambition, of cruelty and emotional misery, and that is why throughout the lyrical drama he is always struggling against something or someone. *Siegfried* only aspires to find his lover on the tortuous path of life and to forget as quickly as possible his greater irritations, the mad saga that he has come from, those unbearable characters who so deserve the purifying fire that is coming, which will wipe them from the face of the Earth. It is no surprise, then, that Wagner wished to give such a noble figure not just an entire opera, but the small and exquisite gem that is “Forest Murmurs”, in the opera’s second act. The musical structure of those murmurs and sounds is like a homage to Beethoven’s *Pastoral*, if rather a troubled one (Wagner was a genius, but not a good person), as if he both wanted and did not want to declare that admiration. What is certain is that “Forest Murmurs” is a song about, as well as dedicated to, serene and *natural* beauty, without traps or tricks, obliging flutes, oboes and clarinets to keep up, in the centre of the piece, a *conversation* of disturbing beauty and sensuality. One might say that this beauty is so sweet that it seems to have been played by the same boy who, instrument at the ready, was immortalized by Edouard Manet in *The Fifer*.

Anton Webern

*Sechs Bagatellen für Streichquartett* (Six Bagatelles for String Quartet)

It is not known exactly when this justly famous work by Anton Webern (Vienna, 1883-Salzburg, 1945) was composed. Yet we can well believe that it was *thought through* between 1910—the year Matisse painted two works of radical importance for 20th century art: *Dance II* and *Music*—and the last year of peace, 1913, when Robert Delaunay created his first *Windows* and the early aesthetic paradigms of pictorial abstraction were debated around Europe. That creative effervescence of a continent experiencing its last years of a false yet joyful *age of innocence* was the framework in which a young Viennese composer not yet aged thirty created his *Six Bagatelles for String Quartet*. This was a work that was undeniably *monitored* by the man who was his teacher in those years, and in some ways was always to be, no less than Arnold Schoenberg, much more than the father of contemporary 20th century classical music, as if that attribute were not enough. The first time we hear this work we may be struck by, as well as a novel and sophisticated use of the instruments’ timbre, a time-related characteristic: *it finishes too quickly*. And that realization (the microcells in Webern’s

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