PROGRAM NOTES by Steven Lowe

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
BORN: December 16, 1770, in Bonn
DIED: March 26, 1827, in Vienna
WORK COMPOSED: 1801

A year before his confessional though unsent letter known as the “Heilgenstadt Testament” Beethoven’s hearing had not yet deteriorated to the point of despair so powerfully expressed in that epistle intended for his brother. Though hints of his worsening affliction had appeared as early as the late 1790s, he was in 1801 enjoying great celebrity as both a virtuoso pianist and a notable composer. He had already completed his audacious First Symphony, which puzzled and even angered contemporary audiences and commentators, but his Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 5, “Spring,” ruffled no feathers. In its amiable lyricism the work reflects the composer’s abiding love of nature absent anything as tempestuous as, for instance, the storm limned in the “Pastoral” Symphony that lay but a few years in the future.

The Sonata’s nickname seems to have been bestowed by others who found the opening Allegro suggestive of spring, no doubt deriving from the vernal loveliness of its primary theme, announced by the violin and echoed by the piano. Throughout this engaging movement, the two instrumentalists trade off complementary statements of that theme as if mimicking each other in a playful conversation during a tranquil walk in the woods.

It is the piano that initiates the following Adagio molto espressivo with an aria-like theme answered in kind by the violin. If the Allegro seems like a carefree amble, this movement conveys serene stillness, as if the strollers stopped to sit and enjoy the scenery.

More of a conversational nature is found in the Scherzo: Allegro molto, witty and animated. The two instruments follow each other in almost canonic fashion, each figuratively on the heels of the other, thereby creating delightful syncopations that further enhance contrast with the preceding Adagio. Note that in the mid-movement Trio the instruments play together before separating for a repeat of the “A” section’s energy and syncopation.

The closing Rondo: Allegro ma non troppo also revels in a happy mixture of syncopation, triplets and bountiful lively trills. Good humor is the byword, finding the composer in an especially buoyant state of mind. The Rondo theme itself sounds like an appreciative nod to Mozart.

© 2016 Steven Lowe