

Beethoven's Pastoral: Reflections of Home

Concert Guide



George Walker

Folksongs for Orchestra

First performance: 1992

Approximate duration: 15 minutes

[Listen](#)

George Walker (1922–2018) was born in Washington, DC. Both of Walker's parents were pianists, and he started learning to play at five years old. At age 14, Walker played his first recital and then went on to study music at Oberlin Conservatory and the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. As time went on, Walker continued his education, performed extensively, and received many awards. In 1945 he became the first Black musician to perform a recital at New York Town Hall, to graduate from the Curtis Institute of Music, and to perform as a soloist with the Philadelphia Orchestra.

George Walker completed his *Folksongs for Orchestra* in 1990. It was premiered by the Baltimore Symphony in 1992. Each of the four movements is inspired by and quotes directly from an African American spiritual: "Going to Lay Down My Sword and Shield" (mvt. 1), "And They Crucified My Lord" (mvt. 2), "My Lord, What a Morning" (mvt. 3), and "O Peter, Go Ring Dem Bells" (mvt. 4).

The piece opens with a contemplative introduction before the familiar tunes can be heard. With each movement, the mood changes. Walker's intention was "to set these melodies in an interesting way, in a respectful orchestral manner."

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Samuel Barber

Knoxville: Summer of 1915

First performance: 1948

Approximate duration: 16 minutes

[Listen](#)

[Lyrics](#)

Samuel Barber (1910–1981) was born in West Chester, Pennsylvania. Barber learned piano and showed an interest in composing early on. In 1924, he enrolled at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia where he studied piano, composition, singing, and conducting. Through his career as a composer, many of his works—including *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*—took inspiration from literature.

Knoxville: Summer of 1915 was composed in 1947 when Barber was commissioned by soprano Eleanor Steber and Serge Koussevitzky, conductor of the Boston Symphony, to write a piece for soprano and orchestra. For the text, Barber chose the poem “Knoxville: Summer of 1915” by American author and poet James Agee (1909–1955). In the poem, Agee describes a day in his hometown of Knoxville with his family. Having lost his father in a car accident in 1916, Agee’s poem captures a moment during the last year that his family was whole.

Barber, too, was dealing with loss while he composed this piece: his father and aunt were both terminally ill. Agee’s text and Barber’s musical setting create a poignant experience of nostalgia—looking back to a happier time with mixed emotions.

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Ludwig van Beethoven Symphony No. 6, "Pastoral"

First performance: 1808

Approximate duration: 39 minutes

[Listen](#)

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) was born in Bonn, Germany. Beethoven loved nature. While living in the bustling city of Vienna, he never failed to take his daily walk to enjoy the outdoors. In 1802, he spent a summer in the town of Heiligenstadt, hoping that the fresh country air would help to heal his many ailments, including the beginning of his hearing loss. Beethoven began sketching ideas for his sixth symphony in 1803 with notes that read, "Murmur of the brook" and "The more water, the deeper the tone." Beethoven added to these sketches for the next few years before devoting himself to finishing the piece for its premiere in 1808.

Beethoven premiered his sixth symphony alongside his famous fifth symphony and several other pieces in an extravagant, four-hour concert. While his fifth symphony is dramatic throughout, his sixth symphony is very peaceful, a side of Beethoven not often heard. Beethoven himself named the piece "Pastoral Symphony" with an added note in the program reading, "more an expression of feeling, than painting." While it is clear that Beethoven aimed to evoke scenes of nature, he didn't want to tell the listener exactly what they were hearing. Beethoven once wrote, "The hearer should be permitted to discover the situations for himself. He who has ever conceived an idea of country life ought to be able, without many indications, to think of the author's meaning."

Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony has five movements, unlike most symphonies which have four. The first movement is labeled, "Awakening of cheerful feelings on arrival in the countryside" and opens with a lilting melody in the violins. The second movement, "Scene by the brook," feels like a waltz. The third movement, "Merry gathering of country folk," is alternately gentle and rambunctious. A rapid motion of the string instruments' bows called *tremolo* (like the word "tremble") creates the sounds of "Thunder, Storm" in the fourth movement. This flows directly into the fifth movement, "Shepherd's song. Cheerful and thankful feelings after the storm," which shifts to a major key and a brighter mood.

Beethoven's Pastoral: Reflections of Home will be performed on October 30, 2026 in Powell Hall at the Jack C. Taylor Music Center with Stéphane Denève conducting.

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Discussion Questions

- George Walker completed his education and began his career before the American civil rights movement, which reached its peak in the mid-1950s. He received many accolades over the years and said the following in 1987:

"I've benefited from being a Black composer in the sense that when there are symposiums given of music by Black composers, I would get performances by orchestras that otherwise would not have done the works. The other aspect, of course, is that if I were not Black, I would have had a far wider dispersion of my music and more performances."

How might Walker's career have been affected by the time and place in which he lived?
- Each movement of Walker's *Folksongs for Orchestra* is based on an African American spiritual. Listen to one of the recordings linked below and then listen to the corresponding movement by George Walker. Ask students to raise their hands when they hear quotes from the folksong. What musical elements does Walker change or manipulate in his setting? Why do you think he made that compositional choice? If time allows, listen to other movements and do the same.
- Knoxville: Summer of 1915* describes a day in the childhood of poet James Agee. Read [the lyrics](#) with your students and then ask them to write a short poem about a past experience in their own lives. Like Agee, they should describe a scene using their senses. Describe in their poem what they see, hear, smell, and feel.
- Beethoven named each movement of his Pastoral Symphony with broad descriptions of scenes in the countryside. He purposefully does not describe what specific feelings the piece is supposed to evoke. Listen to one of the movements again with the title in mind. As you listen to Beethoven's musical choices, describe the images you perceive in the music.
- Learn from the pros! Discuss how the experience of seeing and hearing the SLSO has informed your own music-making. What did you see or hear the SLSO musicians doing that you could strive toward, both individually and as an ensemble? What do you think it would take for you to perform with a professional music ensemble one day?
- Following the concert, complete the following statements with your students: "I noticed...", "I enjoyed...", "I wonder..."

Spiritual

Walker Movement

["Down by the Riverside"](#)

[Movement I](#)

["They Crucified My Lord"](#)

[Movement II](#)

["My Lord, What a Morning"](#)

[Movement III](#)

["O Peter, Go Ring Dem Bells"](#)

[Movement IV](#)

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