



Jessie Montgomery (1981 -)

Strum!

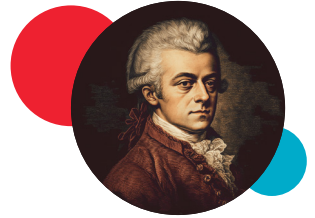
Raised on the Lower East Side of Manhattan by parents who were politically active artists, Jesse Montgomery writes that she has “created a life that merges composing, performance, education and advocacy.” Since 1999, Montgomery has been affiliated with the Sphinx Organization: a Detroit-based non-profit that supports young African American and Latinx string players. She served as their composer-in-residence and received their highest honor, the Sphinx Medal of Excellence. Through the 2023-2024 season, Montgomery is the composer-in-residence of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, where she curates their contemporary music series. Montgomery has an ever-growing body of work performed frequently by leading orchestras and chamber ensembles.

Strum began its life as a string quintet in 2006. It was revised into a string quartet and then a piece for string orchestra, completed in 2012. The piece challenges string players to shift rapidly between different playing techniques: *arco* (using the bow), harmonics, *pizzicato* and — of course — strumming. Montgomery writes,

“Within *Strum* I utilized texture motives, layers of rhythmic or harmonic ostinati that string together to form a bed of sound for melodies to weave in and out. The strumming *pizzicato* serves as a texture motive and the primary driving rhythmic underpinning of the piece. Drawing on American folk idioms and the spirit of dance and movement, the piece has a kind of narrative that begins with fleeting nostalgia and transforms into ecstatic celebration.”

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 - 1791)

Piano Concerto No. 21
in C Major, K. 467



In February of 1785, Leopold Mozart arrived in Vienna to check up on his newly married and already famous son. Wolfgang had written to his father about the hectic life he now led, joking that, after having played 22 concerts in 38 days, “I don’t think that in this way I can possibly get out of practice.” Still, it seems that Leopold was not prepared for the constant buzz of musical activity that was now his son’s life. Wolfgang’s life was a nonstop stream of socializing, teaching, composing, and performing. He wrote a dozen piano concertos between 1784 and 1786, while still having time to complete *The Marriage of Figaro*, compose the Symphony No. 38, and churn out a number of string quartets and smaller works. He was speeding through composing, with copyists at times completing orchestra parts just hours before concerts, and premieres taking place with very little rehearsal. Leopold watched in disbelief as Wolfgang’s piano was shuttled between his home and concert venues day after day. These were to be the busiest and most successful years of the composer’s short life. Wolfgang was an efficient musical machine.

It is hard to imagine that, out of such a frenetic existence, something as sublime as the Piano Concerto No. 21 could emerge. The second movement of the concerto — one of the most famous middle movements of Mozart’s output — is so expressive that critics and musicologists consistently use words like “floating” and “dreamlike” when describing it. It is operatic in its range of emotion, with the piano singing a simple melody over orchestral accompaniment. In contrast to the beautiful melody, the insistent motion of the accompaniment sounds restless. Maynard Solomon, one of Mozart’s biographers, describes the movement as “unrelieved, time-stopping beauty.”

The sublime second movement is sandwiched between contrasting fast movements. In each you can hear how the concerto form evolved under Mozart’s influence. The soloist, no longer content to always alternate in large swaths with the orchestra, instead frequently enters into dialogue with it. Listen to how the piano sometimes sounds as though it is in conversation with a section of the orchestra. And, in Mozart’s hands, the writing for the solo piano became more varied and demanding. These concertos were, after all, a chance for Mozart the pianist to show off.

During his visit to Vienna, Leopold Mozart had the distinct pleasure of meeting the composer Franz Joseph Haydn. In the following months, Leopold frequently recounted the elder composer's remark: "I tell you before God, and as an honest man, your son is the greatest composer known to me by person and repute, he has taste and what is more the most profound knowledge of composition." After hearing this piano concerto, it is easy to believe that this was not merely flattery for a proud visiting papa.



Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Symphony No. 6 in F Major, Op. 68, "Pastoral"

Ludwig van Beethoven is often portrayed as a stormy, tragic artist. He was tortured by the loss of his hearing, by constant financial and romantic woes, and by political upheaval in his hometown of Vienna. This Beethoven composed the dark and driving Symphony No. 5.

But there was another side to Beethoven, which we catch a glimpse of in his Symphony No. 6 — a work composed, premiered, and published alongside his Fifth. In the Sixth Symphony, we hear the Beethoven who loved nature, who frequently escaped the city to wander the countryside, and who left Vienna almost every summer to compose in a rural setting. Beethoven once disclosed in a letter to a friend: "How delighted I will be to ramble for awhile through the bushes, woods, under trees, through grass, and around rocks. No one can love the country as much as I do. For surely woods, trees, and rocks produce the echo that man desires to hear."

At first listen, Beethoven's fifth and sixth symphonies may sound worlds apart. But they do share some interesting characteristics. In both, he stitches together the final movements with no break. And in both, he delays the entrance of piccolo and trombones for a dramatic entry in the fourth movement. But the similarities end there. The Sixth stands apart from Beethoven's symphonic output as the only one where he deviates from the standard four-movement symphonic structure, adding a fifth movement. And in the Sixth Symphony, Beethoven, who typically avoided revealing extramusical connections in his music, shared with his listeners what he sought to express.

Most of Beethoven's titled works either gained those titles due to dedications or were given titles later by someone else. The "Moonlight" and "Appassionata" sonatas, for example, were not named by the composer. Only one other Beethoven symphony bares a title: the composer initially titled the Third Symphony "Bonaparte," later crossing that out and replacing it with "Sinfonia Eroica." At the top of a violin part used at the premiere of the Sixth, an extensive title is given: "Pastoral Symphony / or / Recollection of Country Life / More an Expression of Feeling than a Painting."

Beethoven also titled each of the movements of the Sixth Symphony, and even noted specific points in the score where he intended to portray something extramusical. In the first movement — "Awakening of cheerful feelings on arrival in the countryside" — Beethoven writes typical pastoral music; listen for a drone accompaniment and repetitive melodies. In "Scene by the brook," the second violins, violas, and cellos, provide a 16th-note motif that suggests running water. At the end of this slow second movement, Beethoven noted specific birdcalls in a cadenza-like woodwind passage: the flute is a nightingale, the oboe is a quail, and two clarinets play the cuckoo.

In the third movement — "Merry gathering of country folk" — Beethoven evokes dance music played by an amateur town band. The revelry is interrupted by the arrival of "Tempest, Storm" (the fourth movement). Cellos and basses play the rumblings of distant thunder before violin eighth-notes sound the first rain drops. The movement climaxes with the timpani's loud thunder, the piccolo's lightning, the sound of wind coming from string arpeggios, and then a heavy downpour played by the strings. The storm clears for the fifth movement: "Shepherd's song. Cheerful and thankful feelings after the storm."

Notes by Sarah A Ruddy, Ph. D.



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