

ESO Fall Concert, Nov. 15, 2025

PROGRAM NOTES

by Joshua Berrett

*Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, Op. 28

Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

Bavarian composer and conductor Richard Strauss astounded the musical world early on. In the words of one commentator, he had “a natural affinity for fame.” When he was just 20, one of his pieces of juvenilia—an F minor symphony, now forgotten—was being performed half-way across the world by the New York Philharmonic. But what soon secured for him everlasting fame was a series of tone poems, starting with the 1889 *Don Juan*. These orchestral compositions, all associated with extra-musical story lines, include such works as *Don Quixote*, *Death and Transfiguration*, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and the piece opening this evening’s concert. They all fall under the heading of “program music,” exemplifying what was called “music of the future,” and following the lead of composers such as Liszt and Wagner.

The score of *Till Eulenspiegel* (1895) is as intricate as its subject is impudent—a subject traceable to the long-standing legend of the eponymous rebel and prankster. Framed by a “once upon a time” melody and highly episodic, it follows a loose refrain structure. At the same time, there is a certain organic unity because of resemblances among themes and motifs. For example, the opening “once upon a time” theme turns out to be a lyrical foil anticipating Till’s arrogant strutting theme. But after the brief introduction, what really sets in motion the pranks of our trickster is the sly French horn solo on and off the beat; it becomes a vital refrain of its own.

A few pointers about Till’s initial adventures: we start with his ride on horseback—a theme where the tail end becomes more and more important for its derisive tone and unifying function as the piece unfolds. Things then briefly slow down as he sweet-talks a pretty girl, only to quickly move on to wreak chaos in the marketplace and saunter off. Liturgical music is then mocked with an unctuous melody announced by clarinets, bassoons, and violas. This music is greeted by anxious quasi-penitential sounds—a four-note pattern mocking the opening of the “Dies Irae” from the requiem mass. Then there is Till’s “sermon on high”—an exaggerated solo violin glissando starting at the top of the E string and plummeting all the way down to an open G string.

Till continues on his wild ride, but his pursuers eventually catch up with him. He is condemned to death to the mock-serious tones of the full orchestra. And we are sure Till is finally done for as we hear a series of high-pitched clarinet squeaks—that derisive motif again. The “once upon a time” material then returns slightly expanded, including a passing reference to Wagner’s *Siegfried Idyll*. But the prankster ends up having the last laugh!

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*Andante festivo* (JS 34 a and b)

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

*Andante Festivo* is a short ceremonial piece—“full-throated and hymnic”—originally written in 1922 for string quartet to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a sawmill’s founding. It is also cited as the only sound document we have of Sibelius conducting his own music—something that took place in a worldwide radio broadcast on New Year’s Day, 1939. The country was then in the midst of the Winter War, an armed conflict with the Soviet Union.

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Symphony no. 6 in F major (“Pastorale”), Op. 68.

Ludwig Van Beethoven (1770-1827)

*Allegro ma non troppo: Cheerful impressions received on arriving in the country.*

*Andante molto mosso: By the brook*

*Allegro: Peasants’ merry making*

*Allegro: Storm*

*Allegretto: Shepherd’s hymn of thanksgiving after the storm.*

Beethoven’s “Pastoral” symphony is arguably the most personal of his nine symphonies. The inscription on the original manuscript of the first violin part is revealing. “Pastoral Symphony or a recollection of Country life. (More an expression of feeling than painting).” This is music all about Beethoven’s deep love of nature. As he wrote in one of his letters:

How glad I am to be able to roam in wood and thicket, among the trees,  
and flowers and rocks. No one can love the country as I do...My bad hearing\  
does not trouble me here. In the country, every tree seems to speak to me,  
saying ‘Holy! Holy!’ In the woods, there is enchantment which expresses all things.”

It is a work that was premiered at a remarkable event -- an all-Beethoven concert of December 22, 1808 at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna, at which the Fourth Piano Concerto as well as the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies were first heard, together with the Choral Fantasy and its prefiguring of the “Joy Theme” from the Ninth Symphony.

Following an initial folk-like drone in fifths in the lower strings, the sonata-form first movement is especially notable for how it communicates Beethoven’s sense of wonder. His characteristic trait of working with tiny motifs is fused with a slow harmonic rhythm; that is, he will dwell on the same harmony for multiple measures, as if to say, “Listen, isn’t this just wonderful!”

“Scene by the brook,” like the first, induces a relaxed mindfulness in the listener, except that Beethoven sounds even “lazier” here, repeating himself and seemingly sounding reluctant to move on. And the brook keeps murmuring away. One is hardly aware that this movement, like

the first, follows the outline of sonata form. In the words of Donald Francis Tovey, “[the music] never loses flow or falls out of proportion. The brook goes on forever; the importance of that fact lies in its effect upon the poetic mind of the listener basking in the sun on its banks” Notable too are the imitations of birdsong in the movement’s closing measures as flute, oboe, and clarinet become the voices of the nightingale, quail, and cuckoo.

The third, fourth, and fifth movements are interconnected to create sharply contrasted soundscapes. The third movement is the equivalent of a scherzo. Some of it recalls the music of rustic bands and what Beethoven likely heard “at such places as the tavern of the Three Ravens in the country outside Vienna.” There is also a beguiling oboe solo that hints at what later became “Oh Where, Oh Where Has My Little Dog Gone?” Adding earthiness to the proceedings is some vigorous stomping.

Allegro: Storm features what is among the most compelling instances where Beethoven’s gift for tone painting is on full display. Most telling is the build-up of suspense before the storm breaks in all its fury. Evocations of thunder, lightning and howling winds heighten the sense of drama.

The folk-like drone reappears as the Shepherd’s hymn of thanksgiving begins with an actual *ranz des vaches*. This “Rows of Cows” tune is a traditional Swiss Alpine melody originally played on the alphorn. Growing organically out of this is the hymn of thanksgiving itself, introduced with an innocent purity as the first violins sing out. The sense of joy and gratitude keeps building and building until Beethoven, in a masterstroke in the coda, injects a tone of quiet reverence, offering his humble thanks to the divine.

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*About the author. A member of the first violin section and an ESO board member, Dr. Berrett is a professional musicologist and is internationally recognized for his publications in such diverse areas as the history of the symphony and jazz. Dr. Berrett, along with Lynne Berrett, his wife, created and maintain [Agelessmindproject.org](http://Agelessmindproject.org), a 501c (3), which has a Substack presence as well.*