The possibility of creating visual associations in sound has stimulated composers’ imaginations from the beginning of the European art music tradition. This penchant for tone painting or text painting can be found in the Italian madrigals of the 16th century, Vivaldi’s Le Quattro Stagione (The Four Seasons), Bach’s St. Matthew Passion and the gloriously blinding sunrise of C major in Joseph Haydn’s oratorio The Creation at the words “...and there was LIGHT!”

It shouldn’t surprise us that Ludwig van Beethoven would choose to portray primal forces of nature in his music, given his fondness for walking in the fields and forests of Austria. Before Vienna became the sprawling metropolis that it is today, it was relatively simple for Beethoven to walk a few minutes out of the city into the countryside, harkening to birdsong and gaining inspiration for his compositions. He carried sheets of manuscript paper with him so that he could record any direct inspiration as soon as it occurred. He often expressed his awe of nature and his love of the outdoors in his diary and to his friends. To his friend Therese Malfatti he wrote:

“"How delighted I will be to ramble for a while 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 which man desires to hear."

As his deafness increased, he found this daily constitutional even more necessary; his frustration in communication due to his deafness made him increasingly irascible.

Though he usually let his publishers or his friends suggest the descriptive titles for his works, for the Pastoral Symphony, Beethoven himself supplied the title and at the first performance included a brief program note for the audience:

Pastoral Symphony, more an expression of feeling than painting. 1st piece: pleasant feelings which awaken in men on arriving in the countryside. 2nd piece: scene by the brook. 3rd piece: merry gathering of country people, interrupted by 4th piece: thunder and storm, into which breaks 5th piece: salutary feelings combined with thanks to the Deity.

As in the Fifth Symphony, Beethoven includes trombones and piccolo in the work, and then unleashing them only during the thunderstorm and keeping the piccolo silent in the final movement. The number of movements is unusual (five instead of four), though the most intriguing aspect of the overall structure is that the final three movements are played without pause, creating a symphony where the weight and emphasis of expression is placed at the end of the work. This structural and emotional emphasis on the finale would lay the groundwork for the imposing choral finale of his Ninth Symphony. Yet even with the expansion of musical form, we can still discern the four standard movements of the Classical symphony within Beethoven’s Pastoral.

The world premiere of the work took place on a freezing winter night in Vienna, December 22, 1808. Beethoven had booked the concert in order to showcase himself and his music. The program was enormous by today’s standards (nearly four hours in length), and comprised the premiere performances of the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, the Fourth Piano Concerto, two movements from the Mass in C major, Op. 86, the concert aria “Ah, Perfido!” and concluding with the premiere of the Choral Fantasy, Op. 80 as well as an improvised piano fantasia
by Beethoven. Lack of adequate rehearsal time, the musicians’ unfamiliarity with the music and the freezing temperatures undermined the artistic success of the concert, though by all accounts those in attendance received the music with great enthusiasm. The weather, the high cost of tickets and the impending invasion of Napoleon’s troops kept many patrons away and Beethoven probably gained no significant financial advantage from the concert.

The opening movement, like the opening of the Fifth Symphony, pauses after the initial melodic phrase. While still a vigorous Allegro, the overall gentle character of the opening movement of the Pastoral is worlds away from the portentous fate-laden start of the Fifth.

The slow movement, titled “Scene by the Brook,” is one of the few movements in Beethoven’s output where time seems almost to stand still. The cellos and violas repeat a gently swaying figure over which violins and then woodwinds waft melodies of great sweetness. At the movement’s conclusion, flute, oboe and clarinets imitate the sounds of nightingale, quail, and cuckoo, respectively.

The third movement is a typical Beethoven scherzo representing a “Merry Gathering of Country Folk.” It is a five-part scherzo, with the contrasting trio section appearing twice and the third appearance of the scherzo being truncated. Beethoven’s sly sense of humor appears when he writes the oboe part to sound “late,” much in the manner of amateur musicians.

The scherzo is abruptly terminated by ominous tremolo rumblings in the cellos and double basses. Beethoven very realistically depicts the storm’s arrival, starting with the light patter of raindrops in the strings. The music gains intensity until he unleashes the full force of the orchestra, with startling thunderclaps from the timpani, flashes of lightning in the woodwinds and ferocious gales depicted in chromatic violin lines.

Eventually the storm passes and the oboe (illustrating a shepherd’s pipe) sings a lilting, plaintive melody in thanks for surviving the tempest. The violins take up the shepherd’s song, and the final movement sings its hymn of thanksgiving without interruption, pausing only briefly for reflection at the very end of the movement before the two gentle final chords give their benediction to the end of the symphony.

Carmina Burana (1937)
Carl Orff (1895-1982)

The most visible artifacts from the European civilization of the Middle-Ages are sacred in nature. After the sack of Rome by Odoacer in 476, much of the knowledge of the ancient world was preserved either behind the stout walls of the monasteries that St. Columba and other Celtic monks founded throughout Europe, or in the libraries of the Eastern Roman Empire and its capital, Constantinople. As social and political order re-established itself in Europe, the great cathedrals of Chartres, York, Cologne and other great cities climbed skywards as the symbols of the Church’s power in medieval society. Monastic copyists produced beautiful illuminated manuscripts of the Scriptures and other sacred writings, which they surrounded with fanciful illuminations and elaborate (and expensive) textural filigree in lush color or in blazing gold. To describe it in a modern sense, the Church controlled a great deal of media content and distribution during the Middle Ages.

Yet the reality of the medieval world was that the sacred and secular existed comfortably side-by-side. On Sundays, the faithful stood packed together to worship in cathedrals and churches; during the rest of the week, they flocked to the same cathedral for the town’s weekly market. A close examination of those exquisite
illuminated manuscripts reveals fanciful miniature menageries of fauna and flora that not only serve a decorative purpose, but give us a brief glimpse into everyday medieval life, along with the occasional bit of naughty medieval pornography. Not only did secular writing flourish, but the Middle Ages saw the first flowering of the vernacular languages which produced the first great examples of European literature: Dante’s Divine Comedy, Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, France’s La Chanson de Roland and Spain’s El Cantar de mio Cid.

While those great epics paid some small homage to the power of the Church, poetry and literature of a less exalted nature managed to elude the cleansing authority of Catholicism. The epic Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio relates the often bawdy tales told by a band of nobles who are trying to avoid succumbing to the plague. The farcical Roman de Fauvel turns the courtly love of the troubadours and trouvères topsy-turvy – the central “heroic” noble is a donkey, who is pandered to and fawned over by nobility and clergy alike.

In 1803, a manuscript was unearthed at the Bavarian monastery of Benedicktbeuren: a somewhat risqué collection of poems later known collectively as Carmina Burana (literally “Songs of Beuren,” after the region where the codex was found). Its discovery coincided with a newfound interest in the stories and songs of Europe’s past, such as the ancient folk tales collected by the Brothers Grimm and the publication of the German folk songs known as Des Knaben Wunderhorn.

The 254 poems that constitute the Carmina Burana manuscript were thought to have been written by defrocked monks, priests, clergymen and theology students known as goliards. The goliards wandered the continent as vagabonds, flouting the conventions of civilized life and writing satirical verses praising the glories of nature, drinking and sex. Their verses were overlaid with a cynicism that pleasure was only fleetingly attainable in this life, and that promises of paradise in the afterlife were no more binding than the clergy’s vows of absolute celibacy. The goliards were the predecessors of the hippies and other protestors of the 1960s – social commentators living outside conventional society.

The manuscript found at Benediktbeuren may have been compiled as a collection by a clerk, since the poems are arranged by subject: songs of a satirical nature, love songs, gambling songs, drinking songs and other works. Texts are largely in Latin, though a few of the poems are in Middle High German or Old French. Very few of these poems appear in other manuscripts, suggesting that most of the authors lived in the Beuren region. Some of the poems include rudimentary musical notation along with the texts, but these remained indecipherable until later musical manuscripts that included entire melodies used in the collection came to light.

German composer Carl Orff stumbled across a copy of the first edition of Carmina Burana in a used bookstore in 1931. He was immediately captivated by the texts and felt that their impact would be increased by setting them to music. The poetry is strophic (having a similar rhythmic structure and rhyme scheme within each poem), so Orff deftly intertwines colorful orchestral interludes and interjections within each song to combat the predictability of the verse structure.

While the orchestra for Carmina Burana is a large one (triple woodwinds with multiple auxiliary instruments like bass clarinet and English horn, two pianos, and a huge percussion section), Orff uses his huge orchestral palette to create distinctive timbres that often take on the delicacy of chamber music. Gone is the post-Romantic wash of sound from his previous style; the two pianos and the plethora of percussion provide a pointillist musical backdrop for both the voices and the rest of the ensemble. The melodic ideas are Orff’s imitations of medieval melody – most of the melodic and rhythmic motives are short and repetitious, with ostinato (a constantly repeated melodic/rhythmic idea) playing a major structural role throughout the composition. Ostinato figures also provide subtle bits of word-painting – the underlying repetitive string/percussion figures of the opening O Fortuna give a sense of the inevitability of fate described in the text. At its first performance in 1937 the work included costumes,
sets, staging and choreography in addition to the music – a manifestation of Orff’s belief that a work should include elements of all the arts, a concept reminiscent of Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk.

The work is in three major sections, bookended by O Fortuna, manifesting the text’s reference to the turn of Fortune’s wheel – as with the turnings of Fate, we finish where we started. Taking his inspiration from the original Carmina Burana manuscript, Orff structures the work by subject. Primo vera (In Spring) celebrates the awakening of the earth and of love in the Spring. The orchestra’s lively Tanz introduces the subsection Uf dem anger (In the Meadow), the one section of the work where most of the text is in Middle High German instead of Latin.

The texts of the central In Taberna (In the Tavern) turn darker and more cynical, especially in “Olim lacus colueram,” where the tenor (who has been silent so far) enters on a high A-flat and gives voice to the swan who once swam in beautiful lakes but is now roasted black on a spit. The solo baritone intones the philosophy of the Abbot of Cockaigne, who leads a congregation not of the penitent, but of the inebriated. The men of the chorus conclude the imbibing and revelry with the rousing drinking song “In taberna quando summus,” in which they check off a lengthy list of all those who come to the tavern to drink, defiantly roaring their debauched manifesto in the final lines: “May those who slander us be cursed and may their names not be written in the book of the righteous!”

After the boisterous revelry of the tavern, sweetly undulating flutes introduce Cour d’amours (The Court of Love). Each movement gradually grows in energy (as well in explicitness of text), reaching a climax at the rapturously ecstatic melismas of the solo soprano in “Dulcissime” where the young woman portrayed in the text surrenders to the entreaties of love. The full chorus and orchestra celebrate the triumph of love in “Blanziflor et Helena” before Fortune’s wheel takes its final turn, whisking us from the court of love and returning us to stark reality.