

**A**s I sit here in a medical facility, waiting to be called, surrounded by people wearing masks because of the pandemic, I hear the welcome sound of someone playing a piano. A staffer, dressed head to toe in personal protection equipment, is taking a break from their critical work to play a mix of holiday tunes and standards both popular and classical in an effort to lift the spirits of patients, caregivers, and workers. The music rises up through the five-story atrium and out into the waiting areas on each floor. Every note I hear carries with it the sound of hope and a reminder of our resilient nature in a very dark time in our history.

On any given day, it seems the news about the environment and forests in particular is also

overwhelmingly dark. Wildfires are so large that a new term—*gigafire*—has been coined to describe them. New temperature records are being set both locally and globally. Drought, disease, invasives: these and other environmental factors are devastating forests around the world. If the news were a music genre, it would be a dirge.

For decades, the interpretation of forest history has been largely declensionist; that is, telling a tale of degradation and despair, giving a bleak picture of the past, and often offering little hope for the future. But not all forest history is a tragedy, not every song a lament. There have been “composers” of history who instead write of progress. Of course, what is necessary for measuring progress is that one must have a dark period from which to emerge. Think of Beethoven’s Sixth, the *Pastoral*



*Symphony*. The fourth movement, “The Storm,” evokes thunder and rain before bringing the audience to the last movement, what the composer subtitled “Cheerful and thankful feelings after the storm.” To a historian, words are our musical notes. When strung together, sentences combine to create movements; an article documenting progress is a symphony of accomplishment and promise. There are stories of recovery and hope to be found in forest history, just as there are musical works like the *Pastoral Symphony* that take the listener through a dark passage before giving way to music that raises spirits, much as the piano notes heard in that atrium did.

Though it’s important to analyze problems, at the same time it’s vital to discuss what’s working and what’s improving. Articles in this issue like Stephen Pyne’s can educate us about those problems, even if the ending has yet to be written. What others like Adam Sowards and Gordon Small convey is the value of optimism in the face of long odds. We need such stories to remind us of the transformative powers of hope, so that while we are in the midst of the storm, we know that some day we may again have cheerful and thankful feelings after it has passed.

