

SYMPHONY NO. 4 IN B-FLAT MAJOR, OP. 60
LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
Born December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany
Died March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Beethoven's light-hearted fourth symphony has frequently been eclipsed by standing between two giants, the massive "Eroica" Symphony No. 3, and the heroic fifth symphony. However, Alexander Wheelock Thayer's famous biography of Beethoven refers to Op. 60 as "the most perfect in form of them all." Sir George Grove commented, "The movements fit in their places like the limbs and features of a lovely statue, full of fire and invention as they are, all is subordinated to conciseness, grace and beauty." Hector Berlioz called it a work "of heavenly sweetness."

The gentle demeanor, balance, and sprightly nature belie the fire within Beethoven's mind and emotions when he started the work in the summer of 1806. Beethoven was emotionally distraught at the beginning of that summer. His brother had recently married the despised woman he called "Queen of the Night," who was three months pregnant at the time of the marriage. *Fidelio* had not been well-received and had inept performances, and Napoleon was causing political and social turmoil all over Europe. For a needed respite, the composer accepted an invitation from the Count of Brunswick to spend time at his summer estate in Martonvasar, Hungary, and also at Prince Lichnowsky's summer castle at Gratz. The countryside in Hungary provided peace ... and Count Brunswick's sister, Therese. Beethoven fell in love quickly, and the two were engaged by summer's end.

Beethoven laid aside plans for the stormy C Minor symphony, which was boiling in his head, and turned to a far more serene musical world, reflecting his happiness and optimism in the tender fourth symphony. It was quickly completed by the fall. A receipt dated February 3, 1807 shows that Beethoven ultimately received a fee of 500 florins from the work's commissioner, Count Franz Oppersdorff (a long-time Beethoven fan), who retained a six months exclusive on performance. The site of the premiere is shrouded in mystery: some say it was at the home of Prince Lobkowitz and others suspect at a private party in the palace of Count Oppersdorf in March 1807.

There are four movements in the fourth symphony. The first opens with a slowly moving spacious introduction, interrupted by six momentous chords announcing the arrival of the jolly first theme, sung by the violins. The second theme emerges in F Major from bassoon, oboe, and flute. A canon follows in a conversation between clarinet and bassoon before a well-crafted, sleek development. Timpani announce a traditional reiteration of the theme. Beethoven grabs our attention with a dramatic crescendo ("one of the most skillfully contrived things we know of in music," Berlioz assessed) before recalling his opening ideas and sealing the section with a bright coda.

The second movement *Adagio* features a glowing, lyrical song spun by the violins. This theme will be announced four times, separated by contrasting interludes. Berlioz commented, "You are seized from the first measure by an emotion, which at the end, becomes overwhelming in its intensity.... Believe me, the being who wrote such a marvel of inspiration as this movement was not a man. Such must be the song of the Archangel Michael as he contemplates the world's uprising at the threshold of the empyrean." A gentle rocking accompaniment supports a poignant first theme based on a descending scale. Then, a second theme emerges from the clarinet. After a tiny development featuring the first theme, a soft kettledrum solo closes the movement.

The third movement is supposedly a minuet, but the atmosphere is far more akin to the rustic character of a scherzo. Woodwinds and horns provide a fine contrast in a trio, which was so pleasing to Beethoven that he repeated it.

The finale echoes the bright spirits of the opening. Sixteenth-notes in perpetual motion run throughout the movement, creating a buoyant, energetic underpinning. Beethoven retains classical format, providing several light-hearted themes, a development, and recapitulation. A playful attitude is exemplified throughout, evidenced in the wispy, swirling melodies, the bassoon conversations with strings, and at the close when, in recalling the first theme, Beethoven recasts it in a slow tempo before unleashing it to snap back to the original tempo. The symphony closes as it began: cheerful, worry-free, elegant, and poised.

Marin Alsop was on the podium for the Orchestra's last performances of Symphony No. 4 in September 2002.