

1. Allegro con brio
2. Marcia Funebre - Adagio assai
3. Scherzo and Trio - Allegro vivace
4. Finale - Allegro molto

One can imagine the reaction of the audience when this great work was first performed in 1805, on finding themselves confronted with a symphony twice as long as usual, with violent contrasts, vehement reiterations, insistent cross accents and passages of theme less, almost timeless suspense. Hector Berlioz summed it up a few years later when he described the Eroica as "so mighty in conception and execution, its style so terse and constantly exalted, its form so poetic, that it is equal to the greatest works of its creator". Posterity might go even further and argue that it marked the single most important turning point in the whole history of the symphony. After the Eroica nothing would ever be the same again.

The first movement establishes the majestic scale of the work with its unprecedented span of 691 measures. The first subject, the soul of the whole movement, is ushered in by the two staccato chords in which all the latent force of the whole piece seem to be concentrated. Throughout the movement the thematic substance is exceptionally rich and abundant, Beethoven having the ability to present his themes in a fragmentary form before welding them into a gigantic whole. One such idea, phrased in pairs of quarter notes across the three-four time signature, generates a huge climax in the development section, which also features an episode in E minor introducing an entirely new subject. Memorable also is the famous passage just before the recapitulation where the strings hold dominant harmonies while the second horn softly intone the opening theme in the tonic; early critics were convinced that the player had simply made a mistake and come in too early! The movement concludes with an enormous coda in which a number of the events of the development are now absorbed into the home tonality and thereby transformed in significance.

The account of Beethoven's furious destruction of the dedication to Bonaparte when the latter proclaimed himself Emperor is well known, as is his later assertion that the somber and tragic funeral march was written for the Emperor's death. The main theme is scored for low lying strings accompanied by rumbling basses suggesting muffled drums. After a solemn fugato in F minor in which the full orchestra joins by degrees there is a passage in which the trumpets and horns loudly appeal in unison against fate over dark sixteenth triplets in the bass, before the eventual rhythmic dissolution of the main theme on its final appearance, so appropriate in its symbolism.

It was an imaginative stroke to follow such a grief-laden ending with a rapid scherzo that runs for half its course in a subdued pianissimo, and to pick out its salient melodic features with oboe or flute in keys other than the tonic, B flat or F minor, saving the home key statement, in E flat, for the sudden and long delayed fortissimo. The trio section is dominated by the three horns.

Just as Beethoven had succeeded in the second movement in transforming the funeral march into a full-scale symphonic form, so in the finale he creates an entirely new type of variation movement, one in which the maximum amount of freedom is achieved in relation to the original material, so that the result might almost be described as a variation fantasy. The basic theme is taken from the composer's own "Promethius Ballet", and the widely varying sections - fugato, march, slow variation, as well as more directly related material, are welded together in a continuous whole. In the final presto the horns, which have set their stamp on the whole work, burst into a final blaze of exultation.