

In March 1807 Beethoven conducted the first performance of the Fourth Symphony at the Vienna palace of his patron Prince Lobkowitz. History has left it somewhat neglected in comparison to his other symphonies, but it is an exciting and innovative piece. Composed at the same time as the Fifth Symphony, careful observers have noted the interlocking descending thirds that begin both symphonies, despite vastly differing characters.

The slow opening is a study in ambiguity, avoiding B-flat major until unexpectedly falling into its boisterous Allegro vivace. Even then, the first movement's development takes some wild detours away from B-flat major, reminiscent more of solo keyboard fantasias than a sonata-form development.

The Adagio second movement is tied together by a simple ostinato rhythm, which introduces a beautiful melody in the first violins, which returns throughout the movement with subtle variations. If it's reminiscent of an aria, it is one with tremendous contrasts, musical heft, and pronounced offbeat sforzandos.

The mercurial Scherzo moves through unexpected modulations, with melodic material skipping across sections. For the first time in a Symphony, Beethoven returns twice to the Trio, which is in a folk-music style, in a grand crescendo-then-diminuendo. The finale is Haydn-esque in its humor. In a fast duple time, it's almost ceaseless in its sixteenth-note ostinato. But where Haydn might make the joke and move on, Beethoven's skill is to press it to its furthest point of endurance, which he does in this finale tour de force.

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