

The four notes (three short, one long) are instantly recognizable as the most famous opening to a classical piece. Beethoven refers to the pattern throughout the symphony. (There is some technical debate about whether to call it a theme or a motif, but no matter: this thematic unity would inspire Berlioz, Schumann, Liszt, and countless other composers.) Praising the work, Romantic poet and critic E.T.A. Hoffman described it as “one of the most important works of the time,” and in another vein, American composer, humorist and conductor Peter Schickele used it for the extremely funny “Beethoven 5th Symphony Sportscast.”

As an even greater indication of this symphony’s place in posterity, when the two Voyager spacecraft were launched in 1977, they included golden discs of representative data about life on earth, chosen by a NASA committee chaired by Carl Sagan (author of *Cosmos*). Alongside diagrams, photographs, star charts, spoken word greetings, recordings of animals, human laughter, heartbeats, and a kiss, were included folk songs, jazz, and compositions by Bach, Mozart, Stravinsky and Beethoven. The representative example of the Symphony, as a genre, is the entire first movement of Beethoven’s 5th. Now in interstellar space, two recordings of this piece (with London’s Philharmonia Orchestra) are traveling outward at a speed that, it is estimated, will bring one of them to a planetary system in about 40,000 years.

The second movement, *Andante*, is in theme and variations form, a familiar pattern which may invoke Haydn’s later symphonies. Also from the classical tradition, the third movement is in fast triple time with an ABABA form. Beethoven poses a musical question, answered by the first movement’s motif, first in the horns then emphasized by the whole orchestra. The B sections (the Trio) are built on vigorous fugal string writing, before an unsettled and mysterious episode finally ends the movement.

The triumphant fourth movement emerges, with the orchestra’s three trombones joining the orchestra, silent up to this point. As an improviser, Beethoven had a reputation for testing the endurance of his listeners, and it’s impressive how he does this in the symphony, by returning to music of the third movement, before an exaggeratedly long and energetic coda.

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