

1. Allegro con brio
2. Andante con moto
3. Allegro
4. Allegro

The writer of program notes is inevitably faced with some difficulty in describing what is probably the best-known work in the entire classical music repertoire. That difficulty can also affect the listener, since the sheer familiarity of the piece can sometimes in itself be a barrier to the full appreciation of what is, despite everything, still one of the great masterpieces of the early nineteenth century. Perhaps the answer is to listen, as it were, with fresh ears, and put oneself in the place of the audience at the first performance in December 1808, who, even if they were familiar with the Eroica, must surely have been astonished at the force and compressive power of this awesome vision of triumph over tragedy.

The pounding beats of the first movement's famous main subject, which Beethoven himself called "fate knocking at the door" dominate the entire movement to an unprecedented degree, indeed to such an extent that the concentration on rhythmic development derived from this short figure virtually excludes any melodic or textural elaboration at all.

In almost all his earlier works in C minor, Beethoven modulates to A flat major before approaching the relative key in the exposition. Here he moves straight to E flat, relating the second subject as closely as possible to the first by the use of the compressed thematic material, thus minimizing as far as possible the differences between the minor and major sections of the exposition and achieving maximum drive and continuity. The concentrated development section is followed by a massive coda, in which Beethoven typically is concerned to integrate new development ideas into the later passages of the movement even if the idea derives, as in this case, from earlier material.

The slow movement is effectively a set of continuous variations, linked by an alternating theme. After the principal subject, which is given out by violas and cellos over a pizzicato bass, the secondary theme begins quietly in the same key (A flat) but after a moment's hesitation suddenly breaks out triumphantly into C major. Psychologically this is of great significance since this is destined to be both the mood and key of the all-important last movement.

Beethoven temporarily suspended work on the symphony after finishing the second movement, knowing that the scherzo would have to be something special. It is indeed a remarkable movement, and needs to be seen in relation to the violence of the opening allegro and the triumph of the finale. The extreme contrast between the dawning suspense of the shadowy

pianissimo figure rising from the depths of the orchestra, with its varied shapes, its apparently hesitant endings and its wayward tonality (B flat minor), and the answering fortissimo horn call, its repeated notes recalling this rhythm of the first movement, seems to symbolize a mental rather than a physical conflict. In the extraordinary hushed restatement of the first section the tonal uncertainty disappears and the horn call and its continuation dominate the thematic action. When the transition to the finale is eventually reached, the device of suspending the sense of harmonic and thematic movement as a portent of coming resolution, which Beethoven had hinted at in the first movements of this symphony and the preceding one, is now applied in a new and altogether more dramatic context.

The brilliant finale, with its additional piccolo and trombones (used for the first time in a symphony) resolves all uncertainties, with the recall of the scherzo material before the recapitulation providing final evidence of the interrelationship between the movements. This is indeed, to use Paul Bekker's term, a "finale-symphony", one in which the earlier movements lead inexorably to the C major finale as the triumphant culmination of the work; with it the concept of the symphony is notably extended.