

Beethoven's Seventh Symphony premiered in December 1813, alongside the Eighth, and Wellington's Victory, in a charity concert for veterans organized by Beethoven's friend Johann Maelzel (also inventor of the metronome).

Unlike most of his other symphonies, Beethoven begins the first movement with a slow introduction – full-orchestra chords punctuate a stately parade of entering instruments. With towering constructions of upward scales and half-notes, and also some lyrical musings, the introduction grows more massive. Suddenly, as if making a shocking discovery, the orchestra stumbles into the note “E,” an expectant note in A major. From this single note, Beethoven teases out a rhythmic pattern (or motif), perky at first, progressing through every instrument (and mood) for the rest of the movement.

The second movement is a deeply personal Allegretto. A melody of simple poignancy emerges from within the persistent ostinato. If the mood strikes a listener as generally sad, there are moments of ‘forced’ happiness, which return to the minor key all too soon.

Often sprightly, sometimes heavy (like a big dog believing itself to still be a puppy!), the Presto's infectious energy is contrasted with sections of lyrical grandeur, through the woodwinds' singing melody, and the timpani and trumpets' almost martial call.

Following the third movement's abrupt end, we are launched into the highly charged and muscular Finale. When program annotators invariably quote Richard Wagner's label for this movement as “the Apotheosis of the Dance,” the emphasis should be on “Apotheosis,” meaning the highest expression of an idea that something can be: just when the listener thinks the movement has peaked, this athletic orchestral tour-de-force pushes the musicians yet further!

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