

1. Allegro vivace e con brio
2. Allegretto scherzando
3. Tempo di Minuetto
4. Allegro vivace

Beethoven's eighth symphony was composed in a matter of months in 1812 at Teplitz, and received its first performance two years later in Vienna, at a concert which featured several other works, including the composer's own seventh symphony, with which it was at first unfavorably compared.

For Beethoven, 1812 was a period of deep unhappiness. The 42-year-old composer was facing old age without ever having been married; increasingly withdrawn and antisocial because of his worsening deafness and ill health, it was also the year when he parted from the "immortal Beloved" of unknown identity, with whom he had had a brief and passionate affair. In the same year, the composer's high-handed and futile attempt to prevent his brother Johann's marriage to a housemaid resulted in a permanent estrangement.

There is, however, no real sign of these troubles in the work itself. Often known as the composer's "little" symphony, it is nevertheless a prodigious work in all but length, and was known to have been very highly regarded by Beethoven himself.

The surging confidence of the opening theme, as so often with Beethoven framed by the notes of the tonic chord, is maintained throughout the first movement. One of Beethoven's witty touches is that the first and last measures of the movement are exactly the same - just the sort of device that his teacher Haydn might have used, and indeed the older master's spirit is frequently evident in this work.

Ignoring the customary structure of the symphony, Beethoven then follows this with a unique Allegretto scherzando, effectively a nod to his friend Johann Maelzel. Though it appears that Maelzel was a bit of a charlatan, he had recently revolutionized musical performance by inventing the chronometer, a predecessor to the metronome. For whatever reason, Beethoven was taken with the man, and in homage he wrote this Allegretto with the effect of an ever-ticking metronome in the constant staccato of the woodwinds. This, the shortest of all movements in Beethoven's symphonies, inspired Berlioz to write: "it is one of those works for whom there is no model and no match; it falls out of heaven into the mind of the artist".

After the graceful Minuet and Trio, the final Allegro Vivace makes an exhilarating climax to the symphony. In form, this movement is a traditional rondo, but one whose final coda is expanded to such an extent that it becomes half the movement. In this final section the original material is re-presented and developed with astonishing resourcefulness, and, having eventually reached the home key via a circuitous route, Beethoven hammers out the tonic F major chord no less than 45 times!