



Classics Concert Insights Lecture

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BEETHOVEN SYMPHONY #4 (1807)



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“A slender Grecian maiden between two Nordic giants.” (Schumann)

MUSICAL HISTORY:

- Middle Ages and Renaissance.
- **Baroque** (1600-1750): Bach, Handel, Vivaldi.
- **Classical** (1750-1803): Haydn, Mozart, early Beethoven.
- **Romantic** (1803-1900): Late Beethoven, Brahms, Schumann, Tchaikovsky, Mahler.
- **20th Century**: Stravinsky, Copland, Bartok.

BEETHOVEN BIOGRAPHY (1770-1827):

- Born and raised in Bonn; father was musician.
- Moved to Vienna 1792, studying briefly with Haydn and Salieri.
- Early career as a piano virtuoso; compositions receive praise.
- 1796 Beginning of hearing loss.
- 1802 Heiligenstadt Testament.
- Napoleonic Wars 1802-1815. Vienna occupied twice by the French, 1805 & 1809.
- 1807 Fourth Symphony.
- 1808 Fifth & Sixth Symphonies premiered.
- 1811 Stopped performing or conducting due to hearing loss.
- 1815-20 Decline in compositional output; custody battle for nephew.
- 1824 Ninth Symphony; Beethoven personally conducted it.
- 1827 Died of alcoholic liver disease.

BEETHOVEN'S CAREER (1770-1827):

- **Viennese Period** (1790-1802): Classical works; Symphonies #1-2, Piano Concerti #1-3.
- **Heroic Period** (1803-1815): Romantic works; Symphonies #3-8, Piano Concerti # 4-5, Violin Concerto.
- **Late Period** (1815-1827): Symphony #9, Great Fugue.

BEETHOVEN'S COMPOSITIONAL STYLE:

- The composer's need for expression supersedes other concerns, including musical form.
- Rhythm assumes thematic importance. *“It is astonishing how many of Beethoven's themes can be recognized by their bare rhythm without quoting any melody at all.”* (Tovey)
- Thematic unity; large compositions built from small ideas.

HISTORY OF THE SYMPHONY:

- Composed mostly in 1806, concurrently with Symphony #5. Shares compositional features with the Fifth.
- There are very few preliminary sketches for this symphony, uncharacteristic of Beethoven. He seems to have composed it with much ease.
- Greenberg suggests that this is because the Fifth provided the material Beethoven needed for the Fourth.
- Premiered in March 1807 in a private concert in Vienna for Prince Lobkowitz, a major benefactor.
- Dedicated to Count Franz von Oppersdorff, an aristocrat and Beethoven admirer who commissioned the work.
- NOTE: 1806 was a very productive year for Beethoven. He composed eight major masterpieces: Appassionata Sonata, three Razumovsky String Quartets, Fourth Piano Concerto, Violin Concerto, Symphonies # 4 and 5.

POPULARITY:

- Beethoven's Fourth is one of his least commonly performed symphonies.
- It suffers from being sandwiched between two grand works, the Eroica and Fifth, "*a slender Grecian maiden between two Nordic giants.*" (Schumann)
- Many have considered the Fourth a regression after Eroica, to a smaller scale and Classical style. Many others have come to Beethoven's defense, expounding on its novel aesthetics, strength of composition and momentum.

INSTRUMENTATION:

- Beethoven employs a Classical Era orchestra characteristic of Mozart or Haydn.
- The tympani emerges as a dramatic factor. (Lockwood)

MOVEMENTS:

- ADAGIO – ALLEGRO VIVACE: Slow introduction – Sonata Form
- ADAGIO: Slow movement; quasi Sonata Form
- ALLEGRO VIVACE: Scherzo; A-B-A-B-A
- ALLEGRO MA NON TROPPO: Sonata Form

FIRST MOVEMENT: 2/2 meter; B-flat minor-B flat major

INTRODUCTION:

The symphony begins with a slow, hushed, mysterious, somewhat ominous introduction, ambiguous in its key area. It sets up an expectation of tension and suspense that is soon wiped out as it unexpectedly transitions into lively, energetic music.

➤ PART I:

- Music starts with a quiet, mysterious mood set by a pedal in wind and horns.
- Strings play a slow pianissimo melody, a descending line of thirds. Music is in B-flat minor, a completely unexpected key.
- Bare strings play a step-wise rising falling melody that sounds like sneaky footsteps.
- A two note conversation between strings and winds.

➤ PART II:

- Pedal in winds and horns starts again, played a bit more emphatically.
- Mood remains quiet and mysterious. The harmony moves toward G-flat, still away from the home key.
- Falling melody in strings repeated pianissimo.
- The footsteps return.
- Two note conversation between strings and winds.

➤ PART III:

- Pedal begins a third time. This section is different than the preceding two.
- The music is anticipatory, made of two note motives.
- Music goes through a harmonic progression, ending in B-flat major.

➤ TRANSITION INTO THEME I:

- Sudden loud fortissimo tutti chord ends with loud arpeggio. It cuts through the earlier mood. Pause.
- Another *ff* chord and arpeggio.
- Five more *ff* arpeggios follow, in increasing acceleration, hurling the music forward toward Theme I of the exposition.

➤ NOTE: This introduction was not new.

- Haydn had previously done the same; e.g. Symphony #103 (1795) begins with a long drumroll followed by a slow, solemn, mysterious introduction, ambiguous in key area. A cheerful E-flat major movement then emerges.
- Nevertheless, Beethoven's served as a model for future such introductions: Weber *Der Freischütz* (1821), Mahler Symphony #1 (1889), R. Strauss *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1896), Stravinsky *Firebird* (1910).

EXPOSITION:

- THEME I (B-flat major):
 - The hurling arpeggios lead to an energetic martial phrase in strings (Phrase A), that receive a *dolce* (sweet) lilting response from winds (Phrase B).
 - NOTE: *Dolce* is one of Beethoven's favorite score instructions.
 - Theme I repeated more assertively, the lilting Phrase B loud in strings.
 - A quiet interlude leads to a crescendo and fortissimo statement of sequenced Phrase A motives.
- MODULATING BRIDGE:
 - Brief. Music energetically continues with a rising idea based on Phrase A.
- THEME II COMPLEX (F major):
 - PART 1: A graceful melody begins in canon on bassoon, oboe, then flute, and is extended, receiving a response from strings.
 - NOTE: This melody is derived from the descending thirds of the slow introduction.
 - Crescendo on a rising three note idea (an inversion of the Theme II melody) climaxes in loud chords.
 - PART 2: A rustic melody in clarinet and bassoon, marked *dolce*. Tune derived from Phrase B of Theme I.
 - Melody repeated loud, tutti. Open cadence.
- CLOSING MATERIAL:
 - Quiet string tremolos alternate with two brief fortissimo orchestral gestures.
 - Crescendo on this idea climaxes.
 - Closing theme: simple three note rising idea in strings, punctuated by a closed cadence. Derived from Theme I Phrase A. Heard twice.
 - Closing Theme motive transitions into the idea that began the exposition, seamlessly ushering the Exposition Repeat.
- NOTE:
 - The themes of this Exposition are unlike those of the Classical Era: complex phrasing, "theme groups," assertive and lyrical elements in both themes.
 - The key areas of the themes do, however, adhere to the Classical formula.

EXPOSITION REPEAT:

- Beethoven calls for a verbatim repeat of the exposition. Some conductors follow this instruction, others don't.
- The Closing Material ends differently than the first Exposition. The fast Closing Theme is the same, but at the very end, its main motive seamlessly transitions into Development Part I.

- NOTE: The music is moving with great momentum and this moment is easy to miss. Beethoven did not leave a clear demarcation between these two sections.

DEVELOPMENT:

A brief section, mainly concerned with elements of Theme I.

- PART I: Theme I Phrase A sequenced down in various harmonies.
- PART II: Quiet anticipatory music leads to a pretty passage: Theme I Phrase A alternating with a lush version of Phrase B, in different instrument groups.
- PART III: Abrupt mood change: Phrase A motive dramatically juxtaposed against loud orchestral chords.
- PART IV: Music calms. Leading gestures of the introduction Part III, followed by a statement of Theme I Phrase B. This is extended and developed.
- TRANSITION INTO RECAP: Another quiet, mysterious transitional passage with soft tympani rolls, leads to a dramatic crescendo into the “hurling” music of the exposition.
- NOTE: This transition is already in the home key of B-flat major, the tympani rolls in B-flat making it apparent. Harmonically Recapitulation has already begun, although the listener is not aware of this. Melodically, the passage feels like a long preparation for Recap.

RECAPITULATION:

- THEME I: (B-flat major) Truncated, but each phrase, A & B, doubled in length.
- BRIDGE: Loud, in full orchestra, with a strong rhythmic drive.
- THEME II COMPLEX: (B-flat major) Repeated, as in Exposition, but, in keeping with the Classical formula, in the home key.
- CLOSING MATERIAL: Same as in the Exposition.
- NOTE: Most Classical Era Recaps are verbatim repeats of the Exposition, all in the home key. This one is so, except for the truncated recap of Theme I. Why? Perhaps we’ve heard it enough, especially since Development was all about Theme I.

CODA:

- Hurling music leads to a variation of Theme I Phrase A, stated twice.
- Theme I Phrase B also stated twice, punctuated by loud, fanfare-like exclamations.
- Concluding chords, loud and celebratory.
- NOTE: Beethoven is well known for his extended codas that are in effect second development sections. This Coda isn’t one of them. It is a typical Classical Era coda, brief and to the point, serving only one function: conclude the movement.

SECOND MOVEMENT: 3/4 meter; E-flat major; quasi sonata form

There are different interpretations of the structure of this movement. Some view it as a Rondo, others as a Sonata Form variant.

EXPOSITION:

- BRIEF INTRODUCTION; THE OSTINATO:
 - The movement begins with a quiet two-note ostinato in second violins.
 - This is derived from the falling melody of the First Movement Introduction.
 - NOTE: This ostinato will permeate the entire movement.
- THEME I (E flat major):
 - A lovely, aria-like melody unfolds leisurely in first violins. The passage is marked *cantabile* by Beethoven.
 - It is accompanied by the ostinato.
 - Music rises to a climax, on an emphatic orchestral statement of the ostinato.
 - Variation of Theme I in winds, slightly louder, still accompanied by ostinato.
 - Another climax on the ostinato, a variation of the earlier one.
- MODULATING BRIDGE:
 - Dramatic horn/wind fanfares alternate with a lyrical string melody. Repeated three times.
 - Transitional passage in strings prepares the way to Theme II.
- THEME II (B-flat major):
 - A sweet, quiet melody in clarinet, in conversation with strings.
 - Melody continues in bassoon, then clarinet, with ostinato in accompaniment.
 - Ends in a closed cadence after a brief climax.
- CLOSING MATERIAL:
 - *Dolce* melody in bassoon, then winds, with a busy string accompaniment. The ostinato ticks on.
 - Climaxes on loud orchestral chords based on the ostinato.

DEVELOPMENT:

- PART I: THEME I RE-STATED
 - Ostinato introduction is followed by Theme I, in an ornamented variation.
 - Music rises on the ostinato.
 - NOTE: This episode is the main cause of the different interpretations of the movement. Some consider it Recapitulation before Development; others, simply part of the Development; yet others see it as typical of a Rondo.
- PART II: ANGST
 - A surprise! Dramatic shift to E-flat minor.

- Music abruptly assumes a gravitas it previously lacked.
 - Loud, sustained orchestral chords form a chromatically descending, tragic melody.
 - NOTE: This melody is derived from the falling idea of the First Movement Introduction.
 - NOTE: Some scholars have attributed this passage to Beethoven's "Immortal Beloved" episode of unrequited love.
- PART III:
- First and second violins, otherwise unaccompanied, perform a chorale-like passage, marked *espressivo* by Beethoven.
- PART IV:
- The ostinato returns in bassoon, creating an impression that we are entering Recap. Not quite!
 - The falling motive of Part II developed in flute, juxtaposed against the ostinato.
 - Brief wind transition into Recap.

RECAPITULATION:

- Ostinato in tympani.
- A louder, more expressive variation of Theme I in flute, then in flute & clarinet with sighing strings in accompaniment.
- Crescendo and climax on ostinato.
- NOTE: As in the First Movement, the Recap of Theme I is truncated, heard once.
- Bridge: repeated as in the exposition.
- Theme II recapped in clarinet conversing with strings, now in the home key of E-flat major. Climaxes.
- Closing Theme, *dolce*, in strings and winds.
- Closing Theme motive in strings with concluding chords in winds in a passage marked *perdendo* (dying away) creates the impression the movement is about to end.
- Not quite!

CODA:

- Brief recall of Theme I in winds.
- In a pianissimo passage, a rising motive from the Closing Theme is stated by horns, strings and winds.
- Loud orchestral climax! This slow movement will not fade away quietly.
- Solo tympani beats the ostinato.
- NOTE: Beethoven was the first composer to treat the tympani as a real musical instrument. This passage is a good example.
- Another loud orchestral chord provides a majestic conclusion to the movement.

NOTES:

- This is a “*really slow*,” slow movement (Steinberg), rare in Beethoven’s oeuvre. “*Not until the Ninth would Beethoven again write a symphony with a really slow ‘slow movement.’*”
- The persistent ostinato of this movement creates a rhythmic undertone unexpected for lush, lyrical music. Most composers would have accompanied with equally lush counter-melodies. “*Its inner contrast between a pervasively rigid rhythm and the most gloriously free melodic invention Beethoven had yet achieved, creates a unique fascination, a sublime discomfort of mind and sense.*” (Simpson)

THIRD MOVEMENT: 3/4 time, B-flat major, A-B-A-B-A form

A: Scherzo

- A: Theme (B flat major) is a jagged upwards melody in orchestra, followed by ascending-descending scales in strings and winds. It ends with a rising climax.
- A: Theme repeated verbatim.
- A’: Variation on the theme:
 - Jagged melody extended in a developmental passage (D flat major).
 - Brief climax.
 - Theme is re-stated (B flat major).
 - Louder, more extended climax.
- A’: Variation on the theme is repeated.
- NOTE: This first Scherzo is the longest. Each return will be progressively shorter.

B: Trio

- Trio theme (B flat major) is a rustic melody. Winds converse strings in a passage that evokes country bands that Beethoven frequently encountered.
- Extended variation of Trio theme.
- Louder version of theme, with thicker texture. Rises to fortissimo, then gradually falls.

A: Scherzo

- A: Scherzo theme, stated once.
- A’: Also stated only once.

B: Trio

- Repeated verbatim.

A: Scherzo/Coda

- A: Scherzo theme, stated once.
- A' truncated: The climax of the variation only.
- Brief, fortissimo concluding chords.

NOTE:

- This is the first instance in music history that the traditional A-B-A structure of a third movement was extended to A-B-A-B-A.
- Beethoven used the same structure in his Symphony #7.

FOURTH MOVEMENT: 2/4 time, B-flat major, Sonata Form

This is a lively movement with fast, rhythmic momentum and many soft-loud juxtapositions, some humorous.

EXPOSITION:

- THEME I COMPLEX (B-flat major):
 - Strings quietly play a busy, chattering melody of 16th note motives, quickly interrupted by a brief *forte* explosion from orchestra after two measures.
 - Strings continue on, busily.
 - A dance-like melody in strings, echoed by winds, breaks the chattering momentum. This is the only “tune” in the theme complex.
 - Fast crescendo to a *fortissimo* orchestral climax based on the chattering motives, ends with a closed cadence.
- MODULATING BRIDGE: Continues loud and fast, without losing the momentum of the first theme. Brief.
- THEME II (F major):
 - A rustic melody, *dolce*, initially in oboe, then flute. Extended in strings.
 - Quiet winds converse with loud strings in a brief developmental passage based on the theme.
 - Loud strings continue to an orchestral climax.
- CLOSING MATERIAL:
 - Orchestral explosions alternate with quiet chattering strings.
 - Loud closing theme in strings, based on Theme II.
 - Climax and a closed cadence.
- NOTE: These different sections of the music go by so fast that they are difficult to identify. The momentum is briefly broken only by the tuneful melody of Theme I and the beginning of Theme II. These are easy to hear.

EXPOSITION REPEAT:

- Beethoven's score calls for it. Optional for some conductors.

DEVELOPMENT:

- PART I:
 - Chattering Theme I music developed by strings in a quiet passage.
 - Crescendo ends in a *fortissimo* B note, held in tutti.
 - This brief, dramatic climax stops the momentum and creates the expectation that something important is about to happen.
- PART II:
 - Nothing important happens. Music falls into a quiet reprise of the dance-like melody of Theme I. Stated first in low strings, then violins, then winds.
- PART III:
 - Theme I motives developed by quiet chattering violins alternating with *fp* explosions in low strings.
 - NOTE: *fp* means *forte piano*, a sudden dynamic change from loud to soft.
- PART IV:
 - Quiet chattering strings, same as in the beginning of Part I are followed by a crescendo into a huge, sustained orchestral climax.
 - Loud, sustained chords alternate with explosive descending arpeggios.
 - Music is fast and stormy, moving with forward momentum.
- TRANSITION TO RECAP:
 - Music suddenly quiets down and a solo bassoon states Theme I material.
 - NOTE: The juxtaposition of sustained dramatic music followed by this episode of the solo bassoon "*chortling a bit bumptiously through the flurry of rapid fire sixteenth notes,*" (Keller) is a comic moment.

By now, it should be apparent to the listener that the various loud and important sounding passages in this movement are not so. In this regard, the movement is reminiscent of *opera buffa* (comic opera).

RECAPITULATION:

- Theme I recap is very brief. The solo bassoon statement is followed by a short, loud reference to the theme in full orchestra and the music seamlessly moves on to the bridge.
- The bridge is different than its Exposition version. Loud, fast tutti variation suddenly gives way to a quiet developmental passage where motives are passed around different instrument groups.
- After a brief climax Theme II re-stated, now in the home key of B-flat major.
- Closing material re-stated verbatim.

CODA:

- Chattering strings recall the beginning of Theme I to a brief climax.
- Theme I motive re-stated quietly.
- Huge, explosive climax ends in a leading gesture that anticipates something important.
- In a quiet passage, the dance-like melody of Theme I is recalled by strings and winds.
- Crescendo to a dissonant climax. Pause. Loud tutti chord. Pause. Yet again, the music anticipates something important.
- Now, in the most comic section of the symphony, a pair of quiet, listless statements of Theme I motive appears, first in strings, then solo bassoon. It's as if the musicians are worn-out from all the fast music they have had to play. Will the music fade away?
- In a final Herculean gesture, the orchestra manages one final climax to bring the symphony to a sparkling conclusion.

FINAL COMMENTS:

- *“The symphony is nowadays described as purely joyous.”* (Simpson) It actually isn't totally so. The slow Introduction of the First Movement and the E-flat minor episode of the Second Movement are bleak moments. *“Joy it expresses in abundance, but its point surely is that light is no longer light when darkness is inconceivable.”* (Simpson)
- Many scholars comment on the energy and momentum of the piece:
 - *“The Fourth Symphony is perhaps the work in which Beethoven first fully reveals his mastery of movement.”* (Tovey)
 - Referring to Schumann's *“slender Grecian maiden between two Nordic giants,”* comment: *“We must add that this maiden is an Atalanta in her springy athleticism.”* (Steinberg)
- Lockwood makes an interesting point about a missing musical element in the Fourth: no fugues. *“The same absence of fugal writing characterizes each of the even numbered symphonies (4,6 and 8) as opposed to the odd numbered....The aesthetic dualism of the even and odd numbered symphonies starts here.”*
- Sir Donald Tovey selects the following highlights of the Fourth: *“The solemn introduction (with its)...few notes spread over five minutes; the dramatic hush and crescendo leading to the recapitulation in the first movement; the astonishing middle episode of the slow movement; and the double alternating repetitions of the scherzo and trio.”* These were seen as eccentricities by contemporaries. But now, *“these are features that we recognize as particularly Beethovenish in this work.”*
- Regarding its lack of popularity, scholars realize that the Fourth suffers from comparison with the rest of Beethoven's oeuvre. If it had been composed by any other Beethoven contemporary, *“say, by Clementi or Dušek – it would be exalted as a supreme achievement of orchestral writing, towering above anything else in their catalogues.”* (Keller)