LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
Symphony No. 4 in B-flat major, Op. 60
*Adagio—Allegro vivace*
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*Menuetto: Allegro vivace—Trio: Un poco meno Allegro*
*Allegro ma non troppo*

**Born:** December 16, 1770, in Bonn
**Died:** March 26, 1827, in Vienna
**Work composed:** 1806
**World premiere:** The time and place of the initial performance of this symphony is uncertain, but it occurred not later than March 1807 (the precise date is unknown), when Beethoven conducted it in Vienna.

With his Third Symphony, the sweeping *Sinfonia eroica* (“Heroic Symphony”), written in 1804, Beethoven transformed symphonic composition to as great an extent as had the entire generation of composers before him. In a single stroke he achieved a boldly expanded concept of symphonic form, harmony, thematic development and orchestral sonority. No less important, he imparted to the symphony an ethical meaning allied to the ideals of individualism and Romantic heroism that were on the rise in the nascent 19th century.

Having taken this decisive step, Beethoven sought to forge ahead, or at least consolidate his gains. Shortly after completing the *Eroica*, he set to work on a symphony that expressed, in more compressed and dramatic terms, a similar “program” of crisis and final triumph as the *Eroica*. This was to be the work we know as the Fifth Symphony, but Beethoven evidently could not sustain the effort required by another heroic symphony so shortly after the labors of the *Eroica*. With sketches for about half the work completed, he laid it aside and, in the summer of 1806, composed a symphony that is in many respects closer in style and spirit to his Second Symphony of 1802.

Beethoven, in return for a gift of 500 florins, dedicated the score of this Fourth Symphony to one Count Franz von Oppersdorff, an Austrian nobleman who maintained a private orchestra. That ensemble may well have played the symphony for the Count’s delectation, but the first known performance took place in March of 1807 at a gathering of Beethoven’s aristocratic patrons in Vienna.

Were the Fourth Symphony the product of any of Beethoven’s contemporaries, it would establish its composer as one of the major musical figures of the period. As it is, the piece stands between two of the master’s most dramatic and popular creations, the Third and Fifth Symphonies, and rather in their shadow. Robert Schumann’s metaphoric description of this work as “a slender Greek maiden
between two Norse giants” leaves much to be desired as characterization, but it does suggest the enduring perception that the Fourth represents something of a lesser achievement among Beethoven’s middle-period symphonies. It is unfortunate that the towering stature its neighbors should obscure the virtues of the Fourth Symphony. This is a finely crafted and beautiful work that fills the formal outline of the classical symphony with music often quite Romantic in character.

Nowhere is this Romantic element more evident than in the opening Adagio, a somber fantasy that ventures to say more than we would expect from an introduction to a symphonic first movement. Through forty spellbinding measures it explores dark and mysterious tonal regions, then suddenly breaks forth with two loud chords and a motif of insistently rising scales into the brilliant light of the Allegro that forms the main body of the first movement.

Beethoven launches directly into the principal theme with the full weight of his orchestral forces. The second subject, by contrast, is given out in a succession of woodwind solos. A slender melody announced by the clarinet and echoed by the bassoon completes the exposition of the movement’s themes. The central development passage has, among other things, a delightful counter-melody playing against the first subject.

The ensuing Adagio is among the loveliest movements Beethoven ever wrote, an exquisite dream-like fantasy, while the third is a scherzo in all but name. Here Beethoven juxtaposes the wind and string choirs to fine effect. The concluding measures offer a surprise from the horns.

The finale gives us many of Beethoven’s most characteristic gestures: sudden dynamic contrasts, abrupt off-beat accents, contrapuntal echoes of thematic fragments. The movement races along in moto perpetuo figuration to its coda, where the composer, in high humor, draws the principal theme out in slow motion before dashing to the final chord.

**What to Listen For**

The very first sounds we hear, tones sustained by horns and woodwinds, create a sense of stillness and expectancy. Mahler does something nearly identical at the start of his First Symphony. The ensuing Allegro has about it a rhythmic energy that can only be called “Beethovenian.” During the central part of the movement, Beethoven adds a wonderfully lyrical element by decorating variants of his principal theme with a broad counter-melody. The same sort of lyricism marks the ensuing slow movement, while the scherzo that follows brings another example of Beethoven’s extraordinary rhythmic vitality. The finale is a whirlwind affair, but enjoy the pauses and surprising slow-motion phrases just before the end.