

# Symphony No. 4 in B-flat major, Op. 60

## Ludwig van Beethoven

Viewing Ludwig van Beethoven's Fourth in the context of his corpus of nine symphonies, listeners may be tempted to focus on what the piece is not rather than on what it is. What it is not, most immediately, is his Third Symphony (*Eroica*) or Fifth Symphony, those two punch-packing exercises in superhuman grandeur and titanic power. Robert Schumann captured the Fourth's relationship to its neighbors when he called it "a slender Grecian maiden between two Nordic giants." Hector Berlioz viewed it as a return to an earlier sound-world. He wrote:

Here, Beethoven entirely abandons ode and elegy, in order to return to the less elevated and less somber, but not less difficult, style of the Second Symphony. The general character of this score is either lively, alert, and gay or of a celestial sweetness.

This symphony, then, reflects the Apollonian side of a composer whose Dionysian aspect may enjoy broader popularity.

Even if a certain Classicism reigns over Beethoven's Fourth, the work brims with athletic vigor and admits both contemplative rumination and puckish humor. It reveals itself as a descendent of Haydn's symphonies in certain respects, while at the same time it looks forward to the Fifth Symphony in some of its compact compositional processes. Actually, one could say that it looks sideways to the Fifth, since the Fifth was begun before the Fourth.

Beethoven was pressed for cash when he wrote his Fourth Symphony, trying to cover his own expenses as well as debts piled up by his relatives. Although he was accustomed to renting modest residences outside Vienna in which to spend his summers, he decided to forego that pleasure in 1806. He did get away at the end of summer, though, heading with

his patron Prince Lichnowsky to Silesia. There they paid a visit to Count Franz von Oppersdorf, who maintained a small private orchestra at his castle. Oppersdorf was so enthusiastic about music that he required everyone on his staff to play an instrument, and he was delighted to entertain Lichnowsky and Beethoven by having his musicians perform the composer's Second Symphony.

Musicological opinion used to hold that the count commissioned a new symphony and Beethoven leapt at the chance. Practicality dictated that Beethoven had to set aside work on his Fifth Symphony, already in progress, long enough to complete the Fourth, which he dedicated to Count Oppersdorf. In return, he received 500 florins, a

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## IN SHORT

**Born:** probably on December 16, 1770 (he was baptized on the 17th), in Bonn, Germany

**Died:** March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

**Work composed:** summer and early autumn of 1806; dedicated to Count Franz von Oppersdorf, who purchased certain rights to the early performance of this symphony if he did not literally commission it. It may have been played by the count's orchestra in Oberglogau, Silesia, prior to the March 1807 concert in Vienna, but there are no records to prove it.

**World premiere:** in March 1807, with the composer leading a private performance in the Vienna home of Prince Franz Joseph von Lobkowitz

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** November 24, 1849, Theodore Eisfeld, conductor

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** December 12, 2015, James Gaffigan, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 32 minutes

respectable fee for such a commission. But a careful examination of surviving documents suggests instead that Beethoven had this piece essentially finished before he left on the trip, and that he wrote it simply because he wanted to rather than as “work for hire.”

The Fourth Symphony seems to have given its composer rather little trouble. Few preliminary sketches exist, and those that do give no evidence of the agonizing experimentation and reworking that often scream forth from Beethoven’s drafts. Following in the steps of his teacher Haydn, Beethoven launches his Fourth Symphony with a hushed, introspective introduction, harmonically evasive but emphasizing the minor mode. As distinguished a listener as Carl Maria von Weber reviled it for not possessing enough notes to fill up the space it occupied. “Every quarter of an hour,” he complained sarcastically, “we hear three or

four notes.” This leads to a rapidly ascending scale figure that cuts through the darkness and breaks apart into ever smaller fragments, not unlike a firework explosion disintegrating into sparkling shards. Suddenly, it seems that the orchestra has embarked on what will be a thoroughly playful fast movement. The second movement also recalls Haydn through a recurrent rhythmic pattern, along the lines of the accompanying figures that pop up in that composer’s *Philosopher* and *Clock* Symphonies. In the third movement, Beethoven has replaced the classical minuet with the high energy of a scherzo filled with cross-rhythms; and the finale is a boisterous outpouring of good spirits that at places reaches a point of hilarity.

**Instrumentation:** flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.

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## Listen for ... the Bassoon Joke

Beethoven’s gruff sense of humor comes to the fore in the finale of the Fourth Symphony, which includes a passage that is sometimes referred to as “The Great Bassoon Joke.” The scurrying opening theme announces the perpetual-motion character that will pervade the movement, and the development section keeps listeners on the edge of their seats, wondering where everything is heading. Where it’s heading is where development sections always head: to the recapitulation, the point where the movement’s main theme is expected to return to launch its concluding argument. But once there, the theme is stated not by the full orchestra but rather by a single bassoon, chortling a bit bumptiously (although marked *dolce*) through the flurry of rapid-fire 16th notes.



The orchestra swoops in to pick up the tune, and nearly makes it to the movement’s end before threatening to break down in exhaustion. A few instruments manage to puff out the theme *pianissimo* at half its tempo — and then, with a final surge of energy and a few boisterous chords, Beethoven’s Fourth buoyantly crosses the finish line.