

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born 16 December 1770 in Bonn; died 26 March 1827 in Vienna

Symphony No. 4 in B-flat major, Opus 60 (1806)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Vienna, March 1807; Lobkowitz Palace; Ludwig van Beethoven, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 23 March 1896; Carnegie Music Hall; Frederic Archer, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 32 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: flute, pairs of oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns and trumpets, timpani and strings

On November 13, 1805 Napoleon's army entered Vienna. A week later, Beethoven gave the first performance of *Fidelio* before an audience largely comprising French officers. It failed. The French forces withdrew early the next year, and the local aristocrats, who had fled Vienna before the invasion, returned to their city palaces. *Fidelio*, extensively revised, was presented again on March 29, 1806, but its reception was still cool. Beethoven spent the summer of 1806 away from Vienna. His first visit was to the ancestral Hungarian estate of his friend Count Brunsvick at Martonvásár, where the Count's sisters, Thérèse, Joséphine and Caroline, were also in residence. Journalist and Harvard librarian Alexander Wheelock Thayer, in his pioneering biography of the composer, spread the rumor that Beethoven and Thérèse got engaged that May, and that it was under the spell of that love affair that the Fourth Symphony was conceived. In 1890, a book appeared titled *Beethoven's Immortal Beloved, from Personal Reminiscences*, purporting to be from Thérèse's hand, that recounted the relationship. It was a hoax. ("The Immortal Beloved," to whom Beethoven wrote three unheaded letters, was convincingly identified in Maynard Solomon's 1977 biography of the composer as Antonie Brentano, a married Viennese noblewoman. Solomon also showed the letters to have been written in 1812, not 1806.) The Fourth Symphony was therefore apparently not a musical love-child, though the country calm of that summer, perhaps the most halcyon time of Beethoven's life, may have influenced the character of the work.

After visiting with the Brunsvicks, Beethoven moved to the summer castle of Prince Lichnowsky at Grätz in Silesia. Lichnowsky introduced him to his neighbor in Ober-Glogau, Count Franz von Oppersdorf, a moneyed aristocrat who placed such importance on his household musical establishment that he would not hire a servant unable to play an instrument. Oppersdorf, an admirer of Beethoven's music, arranged a performance by his private orchestra of the Second Symphony for the composer's visit, and, further, commissioned him to write a new symphony. Beethoven put aside the C minor Symphony (No. 5), already well advanced, to work on the commission, and most of the B-flat Symphony was completed during September and October 1806 at Lichnowsky's castle.

It is sweetness subtly tinged with Romantic pathos that opens the Fourth Symphony. The main theme is a buoyant tune given by the violins. The complementary melody is a snappy theme discussed by bassoon, oboe and flute. Inventive elaborations of the main theme occupy the movement's development before a heightened recall of the earlier melodies and a vigorous coda close the movement. Of the second movement, little needs to be added to the words of Hector Berlioz: "Its form is so pure and the expression of its melody so angelic and of such irresistible tenderness that the prodigious art by which this perfection is attained disappears completely." Though Beethoven called the third movement a minuet, it is really one of his most boisterous scherzos. The outer sections of the movement, with their rugged syncopations, sudden harmonic and dynamic shifts and tossing-about of melodic fragments among the orchestral participants, stand in strong contrast to the suave central trio. The finale is a whirlwind sonata form with occasional moments of strong expression in its development section.