

Symphony No. 1 in C major, Op. 21

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

B. December 16, 1770, Bonn, Germany

D. March 26, 1827, Vienna, Germany

Premiered April 2, 1800 in the K. K. Hoftheater nächst der Burg in Vienna.

Scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings (approx. 25 minutes).

Fittingly, the 29-year-old Beethoven premiered his first symphony in the year 1800, at the dawn of a new century. The work is from Beethoven's early period and is greatly influenced by his teacher, Franz Joseph Haydn. Despite its homages to the older generation, it is very much a forward-looking work with glimmers of the innovations to come from the great composer.

Beethoven challenged his listeners with new sounds from the very beginning. Whereas most classical symphonies open unambiguously in the chosen key of the piece in order to establish the central tonality in the listener's ear, this symphony begins far removed from C major, with a sequence of tonic-dominant chords that serve to confuse the tonal landscape. The movement that follows is light and bouncy, although the thick textures and virtuosic writing for winds belie Beethoven's hand.

The second movement features a stately theme, introduced fugally, and a more subdued second theme. The lyrical writing for woodwinds, in particular for the oboe, is especially exquisite. The third movement, though labeled *Menuetto*, resembles the more stylized and usually faster *Scherzo* that would be one of Beethoven's great contributions; this is not music for dancing, but intended to be performed by highly trained musicians in a concert hall.

The finale of this work opens with another curious introduction. Here is a clear indication of the dominant: after a full-orchestra G, the first violins playfully make their way slowly up the G-major scale, creating tension that propels the tempo onward and prolonging the arrival at tonic C. The rest of the movement is lighthearted and virtuosic, featuring heavily scalar writing for the strings and strong brass parts to bring the work to a ringing close, but not before one of Beethoven's characteristic climactic sequences of alternating tonic and dominant chords in the final measures.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed Beethoven's Symphony No. 1 on Feb. 26, 2000 with Resident Conductor Thomas Wilkins conducting.

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Program note by Sarah Gerk, doctoral student in musicology at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre and Dance.