
LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Symphony No. 1 in C major, Op. 21

The year 1800 was not just the beginning of a new century, but the start of a unique approach to music making. The European community was undergoing change in many ways: political transformation with Napoleon's self appointment to First Consul, the scientific discovery of infrared solar rays by British astronomer William Herschel, and a new literary work by Jean Paul entitled *Titan*, were all exciting contributions to the new century when Beethoven premiered his *First Symphony*.

Beethoven's *First Symphony* was significant in that it was the first of nine, but more importantly, it affected the genre of the symphony for many of Europe's composers and all of its listeners for the next century. Beethoven's work introduced a larger time frame for a symphony than previous composers. He also included more prominent and sophisticated harmonic counterparts, and emphasized passion, emotion and aggressiveness in his music.

The *First Symphony* was not entirely met with enthusiasm. Some critics objected to the sudden explosiveness of the music, the bold "dissonances" present in it, comparing the revolutionary works to the styles of familiar masters such as Haydn. Beethoven's reputation was not to be tarnished. By the premiere of the *First Symphony* he was well established in Vienna as a respected keyboard virtuoso and improviser, and a much sought after teacher. Already, by age thirty, he had composed two piano concertos, six string quartets, ten piano sonatas, two cello sonatas, three violin sonatas, five string trios and now a symphony!

Beethoven's *First Symphony* can be viewed as mockery of the 18th century sensibilities in music. He seemed to be boycotting the familiarity and expectation of the symphony as most knew it. To begin with, the *First Symphony* is primarily in the key of C major, but the opening begins with an "off-key" chord twice removed from the key. Furthermore, there is not a single C major chord in the whole of the slow introduction! The finale too begins with a slow introduction; it delivers a different kind of surprise. Here the harmony is only once removed from the home key. The passage in which the violins tentatively creep up the G major scale, one note at a time, trying to get off the ground before the high spirited *Allegro* begins, was sometimes embarrassing for early composers. They thought the audience would laugh at its absurdity and frankness. It was however, structurally, very important, for it is incorporated to the main body of the movement.

The second revolt by Beethoven in this symphony is the matter of instrumentation. The winds are given specific prominence, both in melodic roles and as a choir to offset the string sonority. One early critic wryly noted that the music sounded more like a wind band than an orchestra!

Another element that surely startled, amused, or just plain annoyed early audiences was the title of the third movement, which Beethoven called a minuet, but which sounded like anything but. The dynamic, pounding, rapid, triplet rhythm was absolutely undanceable, in the sense of the aristocratic ballroom dance. Yet we recognize it today as the first of the scherzos that were to find their way into every Beethoven symphony (either in name or in spirit) except the Eighth, and into those by so many other composers throughout the century.