

BEETHOVEN

Symphony No. 4 in B flat, Op. 60 Leonore Overture No. 3, Op.72a

William Steinberg - The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra

William Steinberg (originally Hans Wilhelm Steinberg) (August 1, 1899 – May 16, 1978) was a German conductor. He was born in Cologne, but left Germany for (what is now) Israel in 1936. He decided to leave Germany because the Nazis had removed him from the Frankfurt Opera in 1933 and had limited him to conducting all-Jewish orchestras. Eventually, together with Bronislaw Huberman he founded and conducted the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. Steinberg left for the United States in 1938. He conducted the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra from 1945 to 1952. From 1958 to 1960 he conducted the London Philharmonic Orchestra. From 1969 to 1972 he conducted the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He was also principal guest conductor of the New York Philharmonic from 1966 to 1968. He is best known for directing the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra from 1952 to 1976. William Steinberg was given a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. He died in New York City.



Beethoven's Fourth Symphony has suffered an unenviable fate, that of obscurity. Standing as it does immediately after his heroic Third and just before his tragic Fifth, it was, in Robert Schumann's words, "a slender Greek maiden between two Norse gods." The comparison is apt; like that Grecian girl, this symphony has been utterly overshadowed by its indomitable neighbors. Yet the piece is no less masterful than its companions. In fact, the Fourth Symphony is in many ways an ideal example of Beethoven's style, for it blends the gracious Classicism of his early years with the hearty orchestrations of his later works. If it is less profound than the symphonies that precede and follow it, that is merely a product of the composer's state of mind, for in 1806 when Beethoven wrote the Fourth Symphony, he was enjoying a rare period of happiness. In this work, as in its contemporaries, the Fourth Piano Concerto and the Violin Concerto, we have proof that Beethoven was not always the anguished artist.

The Fourth Symphony was written for Count Franz von Oppersdorf. A relative of Beethoven's patron Prince Lichowsky, the Count met the composer at the prince's summer home near Troppau where Beethoven was enjoying a prolonged vacation. The occasion was a private performance of Beethoven's Second Symphony, which Count von Oppersdorf enjoyed so much that he immediately commissioned a new symphony, offering the composer a grand sum for the work's dedication. At the time, Beethoven was at work on what would eventually become the Fifth Symphony, a work he had started in earlier, darker days. Now, calmer and more contented, he set that traumatic score aside and began a cheerier symphony for the Count, one more in the mood of the Second Symphony that the Count had found to be so pleasing. Work proceeded quickly. The new symphony premiered in March of 1807 on a private concert at the palace of Prince Lobkowitz, another Beethoven patron. The Fourth Piano Concerto and the Coriolan Overture were also heard on that occasion. Only after the concert was Count von Oppersdorf presented with the symphony, a slight of protocol that he did not appreciate, particularly as he had heard rumors that the work was not well received. He would never again do business with Beethoven.

The Fourth Symphony is filled with musical jokes, mostly jokes aimed at other musical insiders, though there are also jokes for the rest of us. Beethoven's whimsical mood reveals itself even in the symphony's opening moments. He attaches a slow introduction to the head of an otherwise fast movement. This, in itself, is not unusual. Haydn, for example, did it with great frequency, but the theory always was that the slow introduction would introduce that which follows, hinting clearly at the key to come, rather in the way that an opera overture will quote snippets of the arias and choruses to be heard later in the work. Beethoven, however, has no plan of being so transparent. His key changes meander here and there, and when he finally does arrive at exactly the place that had been hinted at by the opening chord, a harmonically tuned colleague would have reacted with disbelief.

The symphony's other three movements also have their idiosyncrasies. In the lyrical second movement, the strings are awarded an exquisite flowing melody that is constantly interrupted by a recurring "heartbeat" rhythm that sometimes forgets its place in the background and comes surging out into center stage. After each interruption, the strings resume their flow, seemingly oblivious to the offense. It is as if the strings are Ingrid Bergman and the heartbeat is Peter Lorre, each character operating in its own world.

The third movement is ostensibly a minuet. At least, that is what Beethoven calls it, but he exaggerates. Here is no graceful courtly dance in powdered wigs. It is too lively, too syncopated, and far too reminiscent of a boisterous folk dance. A minuet, after all, should have the aura of champagne, but Beethoven has chosen to create one that is far more evocative of beer.

By comparison, the fourth movement is fairly straight-forward. It is a brisk and bustling rondo that might have originated at Haydn's desk. Yet the frenzy and fervor that characterizes much of the movement is abruptly derailed in the final page. Sudden tempo changes force the conductor to stay on his toes, and a final brief bassoon solo sounds, more than anything else, like a parting chuckle.

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1 Leonore Overture No. 3, Op. 72a 13:54

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2 Adagio; Allegro Vivace 11:30

3 Adagio 9:00

4 Allegro Vivace 5:39

5 Allegro Ma Non Troppo 6:32

Recorded by Command Classics in 1961 Engineer Mastering - George Piros

Engineer Recording Chief - Robert Fine Producer - Enoch Light



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