Ludwig van Beethoven  
Born December 16, 1770, Bonn, Germany.  
Died March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria.  

Symphony No. 1 in C Major, Op. 21

Beethoven began his first symphony in 1799, finished the work early in 1800, and conducted the first performance on April 2 of that year in Vienna. The score calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-five minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Beethoven's First Symphony were given at the Auditorium Theatre on May 4 and 5, 1894, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on January 22, 23, 24, and 27, 2004, with Pinchas Zukerman conducting. The Orchestra first performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival on August 1, 1936, with Hans Lange conducting, and most recently on August 6, 2008, with James Conlon conducting.

This is a young man's music. As the first symphony by the greatest symphonist who ever lived, one might expect clues of the daring and novelty to come; since it was written at the turn of the century and premiered in Vienna, the great musical capital, in 1800, one might assume that it is with this work that Beethoven opened a new era in music. But, in fact, this symphony belongs to the eighteenth, not the nineteenth, century; it honors the tradition of Mozart, dead less than a decade, and Haydn, who had given Beethoven enough lessons to know that his student would soon set out on his own.

The First Symphony is a conservative work by the least conservative of composers. (Just two years later, Beethoven proudly announced that he would follow a “new path.”) Alexander Thayer, who wrote the first significant book on Beethoven, saw 1800 as a turning point in the composer’s career: “It is the year in which, cutting loose from the pianoforte, he asserted his claims to a position with Mozart and the still living and productive Haydn in the higher forms of chamber and orchestral compositions—the quartet and the symphony.”

It was a bold step for a young composer (Beethoven wasn't yet thirty) to write his first symphony when Haydn’s final work in the form was just five years old and Mozart’s Jupiter a scant twelve. But this was perhaps the best—and certainly the riskiest—way for Beethoven to stake his claim to their territory. Beethoven had moved to Vienna in 1792, the year after Mozart died, and in the famous words of Count Waldstein, he was to “receive Mozart’s spirit from Haydn’s hands.” Beethoven learned plenty from the example of Haydn’s music, but the actual lessons he had with the master didn’t go well, and Beethoven quickly understood that if he was to play a role in this great Viennese tradition, he would have to carve out a place for himself, all by himself.

Beethoven began to sketch a symphony in C major in 1795, and he was still struggling with it during a concert tour to Prague and Berlin the following year. But Beethoven apparently wasn't ready to reckon with this great form yet, and he turned his attention primarily to the piano sonata, which became the vehicle for his most advanced ideas. In 1799, the year he composed one of his real watershed works, the Pathétique Sonata, Beethoven decisively returned to the idea of writing a symphony. The C major symphony he finished early in 1800 is the first of eight he would compose in thirteen years.

On April 2, 1800, Beethoven held a concert in Vienna’s Burgtheater, the first he would give for his own benefit in this opinionated and difficult music center. In a gesture of savvy public relations, he included a
symphony by Mozart and two numbers from Haydn's *Creation* on the program to set the scene for his
own music—some of it new, like the Septet that quickly became one of his most popular pieces, and this
First Symphony. Sadly—inexplicably—the Viennese critics ignored the performance, but the Leipzig
 correspondent called it "truly the most interesting concert in a long time."

Beethoven’s First Symphony is scored for the orchestra of Haydn and Mozart, including the clarinets that
weren’t yet a standard feature, and written in the conventional four-movement form he would soon
transform. Although it’s a surprisingly cautious work from a bold and sometimes brazen composer, it’s
neither faceless nor unaccomplished (and the critics of the time found it neither timid nor derivative).

Beethoven begins, slyly, with the kind of cadences that normally end a work, stated in the wrong key—or,
rather, searching for the right key. (Haydn had used a similar trick in his string quartets, but never to open
a symphony.) Beethoven liked the effect so much that he did something comparable in his next work, *The
Creatures of Prometheus*. The entire movement sparkles with genuine energy and is particularly colored
by the brilliant and inventive writing for winds (one critic complained that "it sounded more like a wind
band than an orchestra").

The slow movement is charming and graceful; it is slight, as sometimes suggested, only by the
composer’s own later standards. Beethoven calls the next movement a minuet, but both his tempo
(Allegro molto e vivace) and a very swift metronome marking argue that this is really the first of his true
symphonic scherzos. (Haydn had begun to write third-movement scherzos in his string quartets, but he
didn’t transfer that crucial development into his symphonies.) The finale, with its humorous slow
introduction, is as playful and spirited as anything in Haydn. It is not yet the heroic or the revolutionary
Beethoven, but it proves brilliantly that the student had learned his teacher’s lessons well.

*Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*

**For the Record**
The Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded Beethoven’s First Symphony in 1961 with Fritz Reiner
performance conducted by Fritz Busch is included on *Chicago Symphony Orchestra in the Twentieth
Century: Collector’s Choice.*