PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

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

Symphony No. 4 in B-flat Major, Op. 60

Beethoven composed this symphony in the summer and fall of 1806. He led the first private performance in March 1807, in Vienna, and the first public performance on April 13, 1808, in Vienna's Burgtheater. The score calls for flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. Performance time is approximately thirty-two minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Beethoven's Fourth Symphony were given at the Auditorium Theatre on March 17 and 18, 1893, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on November 4, 5, 6, 7, and 9, 1999, with William Eddins conducting. The Orchestra first performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival on July 6, 1939, with Sir Adrian Boult conducting, and most recently on July 1, 1997, with Pinchas Zukerman conducting.

Generations of music lovers have described—and sometimes dismissed—Beethoven's even-numbered symphonies as lyrical and relaxed compared to their spunky, coltish, odd-numbered neighbors. The Fourth, in B-flat major, has suffered from that fate perhaps more than any. Not long after Beethoven's death, Robert Schumann called it "a slender Grecian maiden between two Nordic giants," and, at the end of the nineteenth century, George Grove—the Grove of the celebrated Dictionary of Music and Musicians—commented that this symphony "is a complete contrast to both its predecessor and successor, and is as gay and spontaneous as they are serious and lofty." Grove thought that this accounted for the fact that it had not yet "had justice done it by the public." And, as Grove might have predicted, in our own time the Chicago Symphony has played the Third and Fifth symphonies with much greater regularity. Schumann was perhaps the first musician to warn us not to overlook the Fourth's own special qualities:

Do not illustrate his genius with the Ninth Symphony alone, no matter how great its audacity and scope, never uttered in any tongue. You can do as much with his First Symphony, or with the Greek-like slender one in B-flat major!

Beethoven began his B-flat major symphony in the summer of 1806, when he retired to the country estate of Prince Carl von Lichnowsky—one of the most devoted of the composer's early admirers. This score, as well as the Fourth Piano Concerto and the Violin Concerto, all completed late in 1806, interrupted work on his Fifth Symphony. These three works, often characterized as unexpectedly spacious and relaxed, do suggest that Beethoven was catching his breath before returning to the heroic, titanic struggles of the Fifth Symphony. But they do not mark a shift in his direction (in fact, ideas for the Violin Concerto and the Fifth Symphony exist side by side in his sketchbooks).

We only need to listen to the opening pages of the Fourth Symphony to understand that it was written in the midst of Beethoven's work on the Fifth, and that it is, in fact, more its companion than its antithesis. Beethoven begins with a slow introduction of deep darkness and suspense, not in B-flat major, as the key signature promises, but B-flat minor. (And, like the opening of the Fifth Symphony, it starts with a series of descending thirds.) Beethoven is unusually stingy with notes and hesitant to get moving—the spareness of this passage provoked Weber's scorn—and the symphony seems at first to be stuck in slow motion, which makes the sudden arrival of lively music in the "proper" key all the more startling.
The Allegro vivace is full of activity and unexpected dynamic contrasts—it is playful and witty, but also dramatic. As Beethoven approaches the recapitulation, he suddenly drops down to a pianissimo and coaxes the music back to life over the ominous roll of the timpani. This movement may be less serious and lofty, to use Grove’s words, than the corresponding one in the Fifth, and it is certainly lighter in tone, but it is far from lightweight. In terms of economy and tightly coiled energy, it is every bit the equal of its more familiar counterpart.

The second movement is a graceful and expansive song—the “cantabile” (singing) marking is especially apt—made particularly memorable by a restless, insistent accompaniment that refuses to remain quietly in the background. Schumann, one of the symphony’s first great admirers, found the effect unexpectedly humorous—“a veritable Falstaff, in particular when occurring in the bass or the timpani.”

For the first time in his career, Beethoven enlarges the floor plan of the third movement in order to bring back the trio a second time. (Ever economical, he then cuts short the ensuing third statement of the scherzo with an unmistakable rejoinder from the horns.) The finale is a brilliant exercise in movement and contrast worthy of Haydn in earthy humor and high spirits. It is neither spectacular nor heroic, and does not call attention to itself like some of the more famous Beethoven finales, but brings this symphony to a perfect conclusion.

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

For the Record