

BRAHMS & BEETHOVEN

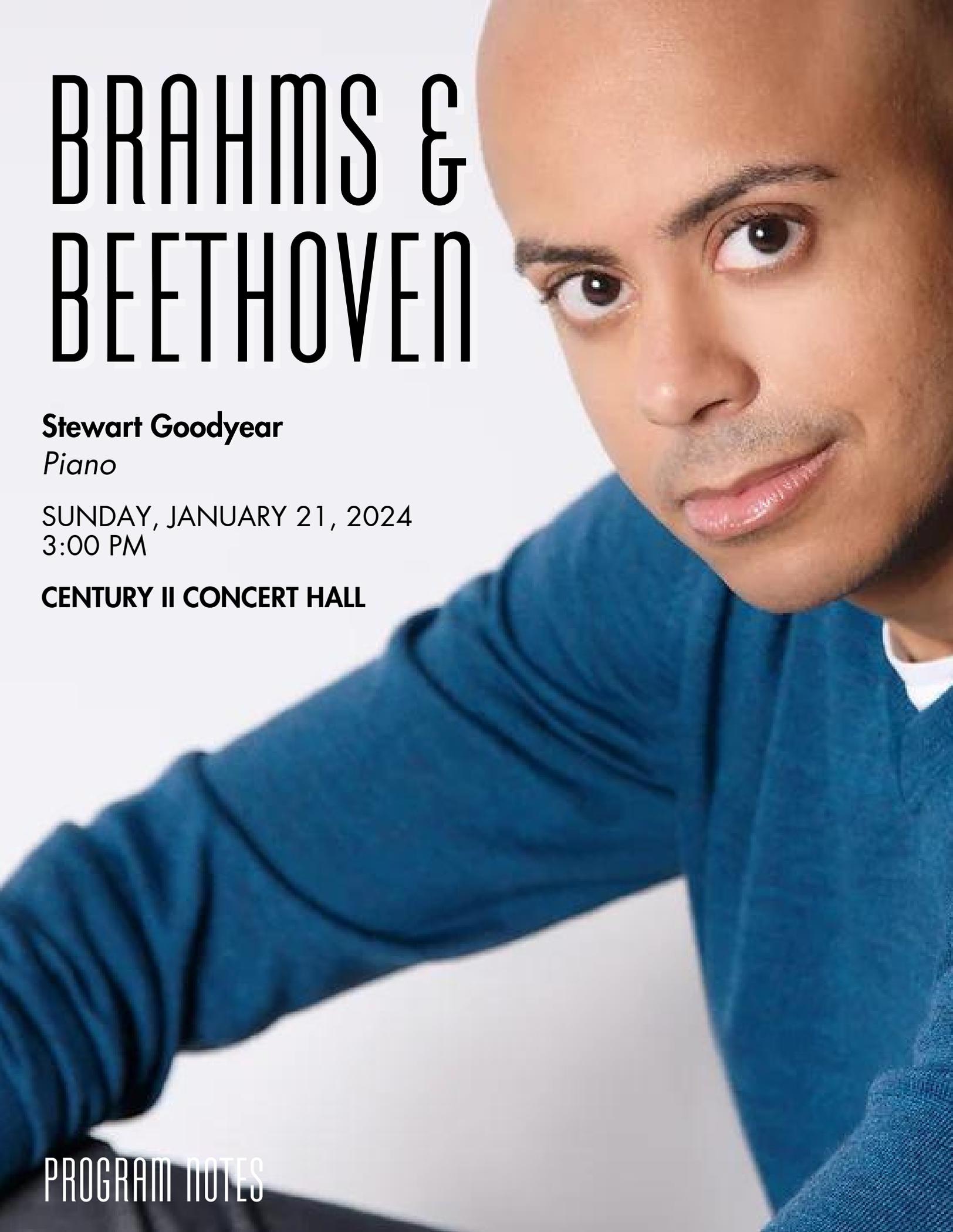
Stewart Goodyear

Piano

SUNDAY, JANUARY 21, 2024
3:00 PM

CENTURY II CONCERT HALL

PROGRAM NOTES



JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born May 7, 1833 in Hamburg, Germany

Died April 3, 1897 in Vienna Austria

Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat Major, Op. 83

1. Allegro non troppo
2. Allegro appassionato
3. Andante
4. Allegretto grazioso

Last performed by the Wichita Symphony on October 24 and 25, 2015, with pianist Lukas Vondracek and Daniel Hege conducting.

By the 1880s, Johannes Brahms was one of Europe's leading composers. He had long since fulfilled the prediction of Robert Schumann, who wrote in 1853, that Brahms was "one whose mastery ... spring[s] fully armed from the head of Jupiter ... has arrived." Robert and his wife, Clara, recognized the young man as a genius by hearing him play some original piano works. Their hope was that Brahms would become the heir to Beethoven's legacy. By 1880, Brahms had proven himself to be that heir with a catalog of works that included two symphonies, a piano concerto, a violin concerto, chamber music, piano works, and over one hundred songs, all of which remain part of the standard repertoire of musicians today.

The Brahms of 1880 was no longer a young man noted for his virtuoso piano playing. He settled into the image most of us think of him as – bearded with a portly belly. He never married. He looked forward to vacations in Italy with friends who enjoyed drinking and spent his summers in small villages in Austria and Switzerland, where he did his serious composing. Vienna served as his winter residence when he wasn't concertizing.

As the 19th Century progressed, musicians divided themselves into two camps, both claiming to be the rightful heirs of Beethoven's legacy. On the one hand, those who promoted program music were taking their lead from Beethoven's "Pastoral Symphony" and the Ninth. These were pieces about something, a story, or an image evoked by the music. Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* was an early example. Liszt, Smetana, and Wagner followed that path.

Other composers drew their inspiration from other Beethoven symphonies, the piano sonatas, and string quartets, where music was "absolute" in that it was not explicitly about anything. It was non-representational or abstract. The responses and feelings that the music provoked would come from the music itself and not some extraneous context. Brahms' music fell into this category. Brahms never attempted opera or theater music.² He ceded that turf to Wagner in Bayreuth and Verdi in Italy.

On July 7, 1881, while summering in Pressbaum, a village west of Vienna, Brahms wrote to his friend, Elisabeth von Herzogenberg, that he had completed a "tiny, tiny piano concerto with a tiny, tiny, wisp of a scherzo." He informed another friend that he had finished some "small piano pieces." These announcements were significant coming from Brahms since it had been over twenty years since he debuted his First Piano Concerto, a work that didn't win the favor of audiences initially and which Brahms considered a failure at the time. The date also marked the end of a three-year gestation during which Brahms sketched, revised, and orchestrated his Second Piano Concerto.

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continued

The new “tiny” concerto was anything but. Known for self-deprecating humor downplaying expectations about his latest works, Brahms had composed the longest concerto anyone had written up to that time. Not only was the work long at about fifty minutes, but Brahms added a fourth movement, the so-called “tiny scherzo,” lasting over nine minutes, to the customary three-movement structure.

In October, Brahms performed a private run-through of the new concerto with the Meiningen Orchestra under the baton of the orchestra’s new Music Director, Hans von Bülow. The public premiere occurred on November 9 with the Budapest Philharmonic and Alexander Erkel on the podium in Vienna’s Redouten Hall. Brahms was the soloist for the concerto and also conducted his First Symphony and an Overture by Cherubini. The concerto was a resounding success. Brahms repeated the concerto with the Meiningen Orchestra and von Bülow a few weeks later. During the 1881 – 1882 concert season, Brahms and von Bülow toured with the Meiningen Orchestra, with von Bülow soloing on Brahms’ First Concerto and Brahms conducting. The two men then switched roles for the Second Concerto. Audiences loved the new concerto everywhere, except in Leipzig, where the audience retained their preference for the classical restraint of Mendelssohn. One former student of Brahms noted how his playing had deteriorated since she last heard him ten years earlier. Somehow, Brahms overcame his clunkers and occasional fakery of the difficult piano part to bring his audiences to their feet.

The **first movement** opens almost like a dream from the distance with a solo horn playing an eight-note call, echoed beautifully by the piano with a rising arpeggio and finishing with the horn’s motive. Another eight notes in the horn and a similar echo complete the phrase. The winds expand upon the opening with another phrase. The dynamics are soft, and the tempo is moderate. Then, Brahms surprises us with a cadenza for solo piano. Here, the mood changes abruptly. The mood and technical challenges make it clear that we will be scaling grand heights. We expect the cadenza to come towards the end of the movement. Like Beethoven before him in the Emperor Concerto, Brahms moves the cadenza to the beginning as preparation for the orchestral exposition, which follows in grand style.

The full orchestra enters with the horn’s initial theme, only now the introspective phrase is with confident strides marching forward. New contrasting material quickly follows – a warmly expressive theme leading directly into a jagged, rough-hewn one characterized by dotted iambic rhythms. (Tah – taTah taTah taTah taTah taTah). These materials form the basis of the entire movement as Brahms develops his ideas where the piano soloist and orchestra are equal partners. The pianist has many technical difficulties, including cascading arpeggios, powerful octave passages, and large blocks of chords. It’s no wonder many consider Brahms’ Second one of the most challenging piano concertos ever written.

The **second movement**, the “wisp” of a scherzo, erupts “passionately” with block-like chords in the piano, a unison accompaniment in the low strings, and some woodwind harmonies that add color. The key of D minor lends a dark hue to the music. Without a transition, a contrasting theme appears in the violins, which is taken up and embellished by the piano. In contrast to the opening, Brahms marks this theme to be played “with tranquility and sweetly.” The opening section repeats. Brahms then develops his first themes in a nearly violent struggle between orchestra and soloist for dominance. Suddenly, a bright, rustic tune breaks out in D major at a

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continued

slightly slower tempo. This section would be the “trio” of a scherzo movement. The horns suggest a hunting party. The piano responds with a mysterious and hushed chromatic passage. The piano lands on a new key and finds its passionate tune accompanied by broad arpeggios and octaves. Following a wonderful climax of the hunting tune with piano, horns, and trumpets, the scherzo sneaks back with further development, becoming more agitated as the movement drives to its conclusion.

Sketches from 1878 for this movement suggest that Brahms may have intended the music for the Violin Concerto he composed for Joseph Joachim. One of the leading violin virtuosos of the day and a close friend of Brahms, Joachim suggested that adding a fourth movement to “his” concerto was not a good idea. Consequently, Brahms transferred his ideas to the Piano Concerto.

Following the virtuosity of the first and second movements, Brahms takes us into the intimate world of the **third movement**, where the textures resemble chamber music. Brahms wrote two cello sonatas and later a concerto for violin and cello, but never a concerto for cello. The opening offers a hint at what that might have sounded like by shining the spotlight on the solo by the principal cellist. Knowing a good tune when he found one, Brahms would later rework the tune into one of his late valedictorian songs, *Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer* (“My slumber grows ever more peaceful”). The pianist never gets to play the tune but offers embellishments around it, featuring arpeggios and trills. The opening key of B-flat major becomes turbulent with a change to B-flat minor. Brahms takes us into the remote key of F-sharp major as the music gets soft and begins to slow down. The music seems to hover in suspended time. The cello re-enters with its theme, and the movement ends peacefully.

The **fourth movement** marked *allegretto grazioso* (moderately fast with grace and elegance), might seem almost anticlimactic after the drama and emotional depth of the previous forty minutes. The towering thick chords are mostly absent as Brahms uses a lighter, more transparent texture. Trumpets and timpani are gone entirely. (They were absent in the third movement, too). One light-hearted melody, some with hints of Brahms’ favored Hungarian tunes, follows another. The music reminds us that while life has its share of difficulties and drama, we should never take ourselves too seriously.

Brahms orchestrates his Second Piano Concerto for solo piano, two each of flutes (with the second doubling on piccolo), oboes, clarinets, bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. The absence of trombones and tuba contributes to a lighter, more transparent sound. Brahms dedicated the concerto to his childhood teacher and friend, Eduard Marxsen.

There are several great performances of the Brahms Concerto on YouTube. Try several of them and see which one you prefer. But here’s one from a great Brahms interpreter, Emanuel Ax with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe conducted by Bernard Haitink: <https://youtu.be/40NsFKuskH0?si=Hlsi2ZE46795B1R2>

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born December 16, 1770 in Bonn, Germany

Died March 26, 1827 in Vienna, Austria

Symphony No. 7 in A Major, Op. 92

1. Poco sostenuto; Vivace (13')
2. Allegretto (7')
3. Presto (8')
4. Allegro con brio (8')

Last performed by the Wichita Symphony on November 14 and 15, 2015 with Daniel Hege conducting.

By the end of 1808, at age 38, Beethoven was the preeminent composer in Vienna, with his reputation and fame spreading throughout Europe. He could rightfully claim to be one of the day's great keyboard artists despite his encroaching hearing disability. His catalog of original music composed during the previous decade included six ground-breaking symphonies, four piano concertos, a violin concerto, twenty-three piano sonatas, nine string quartets, an opera (*Leonore* that he wasn't entirely satisfied with and would eventually revise as *Fidelio*), and many other works. Beethoven could even play the opportunities offered by other cities against his roots in Vienna, turning down one offer of employment from Napoleon's brother, Jerome, to become Music Director for the City of Kassel. In 1809, three of Beethoven's royal patrons agreed to pay Beethoven an annual annuity to keep him in Vienna.

Over the next few years, Beethoven's good fortunes could not avert challenges. Napoleon's armies continued to wreak havoc across Europe, including the siege of Vienna in May 1809 that forced many of Beethoven's patrons and wealthy supporters to flee. Vienna turned into a garrison town, and Beethoven took refuge at his brother's home during the bombardment. The wartime clamor on his ears was a source of misery. When it became clear that his hearing was only going to get worse, thoughts of suicide returned once again.

By the time Napoleon's armies were in full retreat from the disastrous foray into Russia, Austria's economy was on the verge of collapse. Beethoven's annuity was in jeopardy. Prince Lobkowitz filed for bankruptcy in 1811; in 1812, another sponsor, Prince Kinsky, died in a riding accident.

It was not a lucrative time to be a composer of symphonies. Still, from 1809 through 1811, Beethoven produced significant works for smaller ensembles, including the Archduke Trio dedicated to Archduke Rudolph, the third sponsor upon whom Beethoven leaned heavily. Beethoven also composed a couple of string quartets, piano sonatas, and even some incidental music for theater productions, like *Egmont*, *The Ruins of Athens*, and *King Stephen*. Always an entrepreneur, Beethoven accepted a commission from a publisher in Scotland, George Thompson, who asked Beethoven to compose accompaniments to Scottish and Welsh folksongs. This piecemeal provided some steady income for several years and likely became the source of new inspiration.

Finally, sketches for a new Symphony began to appear late in 1811. For Beethoven, it had been an unusually long period between symphonies since the Fifth and Sixth premiered in 1808. We know from the notebooks that Beethoven worked on music simultaneously that ended up as the Seventh and Eighth Symphonies. The Seventh came together quickly and was finished by May 1812 and the Eighth the following fall.

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continued

The premieres of both symphonies waited until December 8, 1813. The occasion was a benefit concert for injured Austrian and Bavarian troops from the battle with Napoleon's retreating troops at Hanau on October 30 and 31, 1813. The concert was organized by Beethoven's friend, Johann Nepomuk Maelzel, who history remembers as the inventor of the metronome. The "star" of the evening was not Beethoven's new symphonies but an invention by Maelzel called the Panharmonicon, a mechanical organ-like instrument operated by bellows and capable of imitating orchestral instruments as well as cannon and rifle shots. For this unusual device, Beethoven composed a "Victory Symphony" known as "Wellington's Victory" to celebrate the Duke of Wellington's victory over a French army led by Napoleon's brother Joseph in Spain.

With Napoleon's armies in retreat, the Viennese attending the concert could see the light at the end of the tunnel following years of war and were feeling buoyantly optimistic.¹ Louis Spohr, a composer who served as the Assistant Concertmaster for the concert, reported that the performance gave "extraordinary pleasure... despite the often ridiculous conducting of Beethoven," who exaggerated his conducting motions, had difficulty hearing the softer moments of the music, and was often out of sync with the musicians who had to rely on the Concertmaster for leadership and timely cues. Still, the concert was a big success, brought in a lot of money, and was repeated three times during the winter of 1813 – 1814.

How did audiences react to the Seventh? Viennese audiences would have heard the Symphony as an ebullient expression of joy and elation related to the turn of military events. Later, in the 19th century, listeners would hear other things. Richard Wagner, focusing on the rhythmic elements of the music, called the Seventh "the apotheosis of the dance." French composers Hector Berlioz and Vincent D'Indy detected pastoral elements and heard connections to folk music in the first movement. Berlioz cited it for "rustic simplicity." In the 20th century, Beethoven biographer Maynard Solomon equated the Seventh with a carnival or festival. As usual, music means different things to people.

There is endless fascination and understanding to be gained by a deeper probe of the music if we go beyond the "meaning" of the work. For Beethoven, composing a work as large as a symphony was like going into a laboratory, sketching out details, trying different options and possibilities. Unlike Haydn or even Mozart, who cranked out symphonies seemingly effortlessly, Beethoven's work on a symphony took up two or three years of experimenting. His sketchbooks detail the evolution of these works. Each Symphony took previous efforts as a starting point and sought to expand or discover new solutions. The Third Symphony, *Eroica*, greatly expanded upon the structures expected of a Symphony. The Fifth explored the possibilities of a multi-movement work unified by a single motive – the famous "ta-ta-ta-dum." The "Pastoral" Sixth Symphony introduced programmatic elements to evoke imagery and feelings of a countryside setting.

Music is essentially architecture in sound controlled within the boundaries of time. Beethoven's genius was creating musical structures in which the details become like bricks that unify and hold the work together, allowing us to react emotionally to the composer's creation.

1. Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo marking the end of the Napoleonic wars was still a year and a half away.

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continued

Beethoven's challenge in the Seventh Symphony was to create unity through rhythm, specifically short rhythmic motives easily identified and followed. He would go beyond the Fifth Symphony's singular motive to explore solutions for each movement that unify the work and propel us forward over thirty-five to forty minutes, generating power and excitement unlike any Symphony before the Seventh.

For Beethoven, an avid reader of ancient Greek literature and influenced by his work on folksongs, the solutions he found for the Seventh were the rhythmic structures of poetry. A dactylic pattern, a three-note figure where the first note is stressed, followed by two unstressed notes, dominates the first movement's *allegro*. [For example, speak "basketball" repeatedly and quickly.] The cumulative effect of this movement evokes joy, freedom, or pastoral elements that would have registered with a Viennese public seeking escape from troubling times (and does the same for us, too).

The second movement continues the dactylic pattern but elongates it, adding a spondee of two stressed notes to the end of the dactyl. [The effect is "Tah-ta-ta-Tah-Tah."] The rhythm suggests a solemn procession, possibly a funeral cortège, that wartime Vienna would recognize. Interestingly, this movement, often played as a funeral march, has a tempo marking of *allegretto*, which indicates a speed slightly faster than something too solemn. The conductor's choice of tempo suggests how we might interpret the music.

The **first movement** begins with a lengthy introduction of nearly four minutes, the most extended symphonic intro until then. Beethoven looks back in adapting an opening typical of Haydn's symphonies and his own First and Second. By extending the introduction, he utilizes two contrasting elements. The first is a series of accented harmonic chords (cannon blasts?) outlined in the winds and underpinned by scales in the strings; the second is a lyrical theme with a dotted rhythm accompaniment and a foreshadowing of an important rhythmic element.

Listen to how the introduction winds down with soft dynamics and silences before the flute announces the arrival of the vivace with the dactylic rhythm. The theme bounces along, and we encounter a second melody that shares some of the same rhythmic elements until we reach an abrupt silence. At this point, most conductors will repeat the vivace. The second time through, we come to the same silence, and abruptly shift into new harmonic territory and another silence, marking the beginning of the development section. As we would expect, Beethoven offers a development with much melodic fragmentation tossed about among the orchestra's instruments and some surprising harmonic shifts, all accompanied by the pervasive dactyl rhythm that reaches a pounding crescendo transitioning back into the exposition.

Scholars trace sketches for the **second movement** back to 1806 in a notebook predominantly devoted to the Third Razumovsky String Quartet, Opus 59. The movement begins with a solemn chord in the winds. The processional opens in the low strings. The melody is straightforward in the dactylic and spondee rhythm mentioned above. Notice how Beethoven layers his orchestral texture. After the violas finish playing the theme, the second violins take it up, accompanied by a beautiful counter-melody in the violas and cellos. Then, it's the first violin's turn, and the counter-melody moves to the second violins with accompanying figures in the low

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continued

strings. After that, the winds join in, and this layered texture creates a marvelous crescendo. It's as if we watch a processional begin to approach from a distance until it finally reaches its destination in front of us.

A contrasting theme of gentle lyricism appears in the clarinets and bassoons. The flutes, oboes, and horns join in with some overlaid melodies. The strings accompany the winds with rippling violin figures and a hurdy-gurdy-like dactylic rhythm in the cellos and basses. The processional returns in the winds, this time with a busier accompaniment in the strings before reaching another climax and a transition to the lyrical theme again. A brief, fragmented return of the processional as it fades into the distance concludes the movement.

The **third movement** is a quickly-paced scherzo, the longest of Beethoven's scherzi before the Ninth Symphony. It's in five parts, with the rambunctious scherzo (A) alternating with a more sedate Trio (B) to create an A-B-A-B-A form. Of particular note are the jocular descending scales in the winds, fragmented motives passed upwards from the low basses through the strings to the violins, and moments of static repetition of a soft two-note motive interrupted by an explosive, good-humored fortissimo. The trio section beautifully exploits the sounds of the winds with emphasis on the clarinets, bassoons, and high horns. Also, listen for the repeated half-step "groans" that the low horn adds for a rustic feel. At the end of the movement, Beethoven halts matters to begin what seems like a third reiteration of the trio, first in major, then in minor. But it's just misdirection and his idea of a musical joke. He finishes the movement with a fast fortissimo cadence.

The **fourth** movement is a swirling perpetual motion finale announced by two fortissimo chords. Then it's off to the races. This movement is all fun. The swirling sixteenth-note pattern is accompanied and accented by prevailing dotted rhythmic figures and chords, sometimes on the beat, other times syncopated off the beat. As few as there are, the soft dynamic contrasts serve as counterweights to the full orchestra texture that ranges from forte (*f*) to the climax of fortississimo (*fff*), or triple forte, a first for Beethoven in his symphonies.

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Just how popular is Beethoven's Seventh today? At the end of every year, the classical music station WQXR in New York City invites listeners to submit their favorite works in an informal poll of what people enjoy listening to. In the days leading up to New Year's Day, the "Classical Countdown of the Top 100" broadcast reveals occasional surprises and variances from year to year. For consistency, one can count on Beethoven's Seventh occupying the Number Two or Number Three slot in rotation with Dvorak's New World Symphony. The only reason why the Seventh doesn't get a turn at Number One is because Beethoven's Ninth Symphony has a perpetual lock on that position.

Beethoven orchestrates his Seventh Symphony for two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, trumpets, plus timpani and strings.

Before coming to the concert, check out one of the many recordings of Beethoven's Seventh on YouTube. Here's one with Daniel Barenboim conducting the young musicians of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra at the 2012 Proms in London's Royal Albert Hall: <https://youtu.be/ahvrHrPGi1k?si=TUuAKJhy9m0Sn2Lk>