

Symphony No. 8 in F Major, Op. 93 (1812)
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 – 1827)

- I. *Allegro vivace e con brio*
- II. *Allegretto scherzando*
- III. *Tempo di menuetto*
- IV. *Allegro vivace*

Beethoven was very fond of this work; he called it “My little Symphony.” It occupies an awkward place in the Beethoven symphony chronology because it is flanked on either side, and therefore to some extent crowded out by, the majestic Seventh and the monumental Ninth. Some dismiss it as lightweight, but a more appropriate term is “aufgeknopft,” which may here be interpreted as “relaxed.” Certainly the Master is relaxed, and full of joie de vivre, but this Symphony is as complex and rhythmically powerful as the Seventh, and it shows moments of vehement defiance in the outer movements. The Symphony premièred in Frankfort am Main in 1814 when it was performed after the Seventh, which was an unfortunate juxtaposition. It is hardly surprising that the work was received coolly.

Throughout the work there is an air of gaiety and high spirits. The vigorous principal theme of the first movement is heard immediately in the full orchestra – there is no introduction – and clarinets and other woodwinds offer a gentle response. After a short pause, first and second violins play the lilting, D-minor second subject. The development section is based upon the first five notes of the main theme and an octave figure that ends the first division of the movement. This main idea, now presented by basses and bassoons, heralds the recapitulation. After the second subject has been recalled the coda is heard, and the movement ends peacefully with the first five notes of the principal melody.

Beethoven replaced the traditional slow movement with a charming Allegretto scherzando in which delicate, staccato wind chords lead to a delightful melody in first violins and basses. Relaxation is provided by the humor of a “ticking clock,” an idea inspired perhaps by the metronome invented by Beethoven’s friend Johann Maelzel. The “ticking clock” is created by violins and cellos, who play a lively subject that is set against soft, brisk woodwind chords to create a metronome-like effect.

The third movement has a stately first theme and a graceful, lyrical line as the basic idea of the central Trio. Beethoven becomes positively impish and

boisterous in the finale, which is in free rondo form. The brisk main theme is presented first by the strings and then emphatically by the full orchestra. A change of mood comes with the second theme, a beautiful violin melody that is passed to the woodwinds. The material is developed and recapitulated with bewilderingly rapid changes of tempo and dynamics and the introduction of unexpected pauses. The lively atmosphere is maintained right through the coda to the end of the work.

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