

**Ludwig van Beethoven, (1770-1827)**  
**Symphony No. 1 in C major**

*Adagio molto – Allegro con brio*  
*Andante cantabile*  
*Menuetto: Allegro molto e vivace*  
*Adagio – Allegro molto e vivace*

A solid way to begin any commentary on Beethoven's First symphony might be to consider two glorious quotations by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe:

*"Daring ideas are like chessmen moved forward. They may be beaten, but they may start a winning game".*

*"Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it."*

If Beethoven never heard these quotes, it wouldn't have made any difference. He already had the same boiling blood for the revolutionary, the bold, the new and the downright iconoclastic. Though there are many other instances, the opening bars of the first symphony do more than any other to endorse Goethe's sentiments, of 'starting a winning game' and being invested through and through with 'genius, power and magic'.

To examine exactly how bold and new his approach was, we must go back a short period to examine some late 18<sup>th</sup> century compositional trends. On September 11<sup>th</sup>, 1778 Mozart wrote to his father, unusually worried about how the audiences would react to his symphony for Paris. There were traditions to be considered. Everyone knew them, everyone expected them, and how ingeniously a composer could push the envelope and still be accepted was the trick. The fact that it worried Mozart, with all his accomplishments aged twenty two, how much more must it have worried Beethoven, nearly thirty, offering his very first symphony. The small elite audiences were not only intelligent and opinionated about music, but vociferous in condemnations if they didn't get what they wanted. Here's what they expected. A symphony had to start with large strokes of sound. Not just the symphony, every movement except the slow dance. After all, people milling about at champagne parties had to know when the music had started. The large strokes had to establish the key of the piece, right way. Those large strokes had to be long bowed sounds from the combined strings of the orchestra. This was known as the 'Grand Coup d'Archet' and it was an absolute rule for generations. Themes and melodies had to be presented quickly and clearly, and if possible repeated immediately, - what Dr. Tovey described as 'rather like the parallelism of Hebrew Poetry but in the same words' - so that listeners could enjoy their recognition. The audiences were going for something pithy as well, as tastes were turning. As Mozart pointed out in the same letter of 1778, "our taste in Germany is for length, but really it is better to be short and sweet."

Can we consider that Beethoven didn't know these traditions? – Clearly, No! From the time of his grandfather and his father, Beethoven was steeped in court music, and as assistant organist aged 14 knew everything there was to know about traditional forms and what was expected.

The court at Bonn was something of a cultural jewel. Can we consider that Beethoven didn't care about breaking the rules? This is a little more complicated. I think his revolutionary musical spirit coincides with the revolutionary spirit of the Napoleonic Empire. Eight of his nine symphonies fit neatly into the 16 short years of Napoleon's power the first symphony coming shortly after Napoleon's ascent as First Consul of France. The revolutionary spirit is at odds with itself. Brotherhood, equality, freedom, and all the noble sentiments that led to the American revolution were dinner party conversation in the homes of the very elite. The classes were to remain separated by the feudal chasm for a while longer, at least until the end of the Great War in 1918. The revolutionary spirit is also somewhat at odds within Beethoven's work as well. A new, revolutionary and daring spirit that would forever be recognized as genius was premiered in the homes of the wealthy aristocracy. They too appreciated its sentiments through the lens of privilege. This new revolution was not illusory but can be easily heard.

So the First Symphony begins not with bold strokes, but very gentle and precise tones. Not with establishing a key, but alluding to several. Not with a great unison of strings, but with unusual emphasis on the woodwinds. Not with noticeable melody or declaimed theme, but with structural harmony. Not with an established key, but with the first loudly discernable chord striking the note of G, not the key of C. This all may seem academic in today's musicology, but at the time, it was a huge leap forward in defiance and daring. Furthermore, the third movement dispenses with the Minuet, the stately dance so traditional and established for generations. Instead, we have the rhythm of the dance, but so brisk and lively that it is more reminiscent of hunting than dancing. This format proved extremely successful, and returns complete with hunting horns in the third movement of the Second Symphony. The last movement is a masterly stroke of heightening anticipation. Once again, the notes are expressed phrase by phrase, like a stealthy cat stalking a mouse, and by the time C major is revealed the chase is on. No work has turned tradition on its head quite so roundly, or quite so expertly.

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