Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Piano Concerto No. 4 in G, Opus 58
First performance: March 1807, home of Prince Lobkowitz (private performance); December 22, 1808, Vienna, with Beethoven as soloist (public premiere).

First BSO performance: December 1881, Georg Henschel cond., George W. Sumner, soloist.

During the years immediately following the composition and private first performance of the *Eroica* Symphony, that overwhelming breakthrough in Beethoven’s output, ideas for new compositions crowded the composer’s sketchbooks, and one imposing piece after another was completed in rapid succession. Normally he worked on several pieces at a time during this fruitful period and assigned opus numbers as they were completed. The *Eroica* (Opus 55) was composed in 1803, though final touches were probably added early in the following year. From 1804 to early 1806 Beethoven was deeply engrossed in the composition and first revision of his opera *Leonore* (ultimately to be known as *Fidelio*), but this did not prevent him from completing as well three piano sonatas (including two of the biggest and most famous, the *Waldstein*, Opus 53, and the *Appassionata*, Opus 57), the Triple Concerto (Opus 56), the Fourth Piano Concerto (Opus 58), and the Razumovsky String quartets (Opus 59).

By the end of 1806 he had added the Fourth Symphony (Opus 60) and the Violin Concerto (Opus 61), and he had undertaken a good deal of work already on the piece that became the Fifth Symphony. Truly a heady outpouring of extraordinary music!

The opening of the Fourth Concerto’s first movement went through some development before achieving its very striking final form, one of the most memorable beginnings of any concerto. Rather than allowing the orchestra to have its extended say unimpeded during a lengthy ritornello, Beethoven chose to establish the presence of the soloist at once—not with brilliant self-assertion (he was to do that in his next piano concerto), but rather with gentle insinuation, singing a quiet phrase ending on a half-cadence, which requires some sort of response from the orchestra. This response—quiet, but startling in the choice of harmony—produces a moment of rich poetry that echoes in the mind through the rest of the movement.

The brief slow movement, with its strict segregation of soloist and orchestral strings (the remainder of the orchestra is silent), is so striking that it seems to demand explanation. Professor Owen Jander of Wellesley College has suggested that the movement as a whole is Beethoven’s translation into sound of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. (Vienna at that time was enjoying a sudden spurt of interest in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, one of the principal classical sources of the Orpheus legend, which had long been popular with composers given its demonstration of the power of music over even the forces of death.)

The second movement ends in E minor. Beethoven establishes a direct link to the third movement—and a wonderful musical surprise—by retaining two of the notes of the E minor triad (E and G) and reharmonizing them as part of a chord of C major. Thus the rondo theme of the last movement always seems to begin in the “wrong” key, since by the end of the phrase it has worked its way around to the home key of G. This gives Beethoven special opportunities for witty musical sleight-of-hand, since his reversals to the rondo theme throughout the movement will come through harmonic preparation not of the home G, but of the “off-key” beginning of C. This movement, too, is spacious and rich in ideas, many of them developed from four tiny melodic and rhythmic figures contained in the rondo theme itself. Most of the movement rushes along at a great pace, though there is a smooth and relaxed second theme by way of contrast. Soon after this has been recapitulated, Beethoven offers a rich and rare moment of unusual (for him) orchestral color: under a continuing delicate spray of notes high up in the piano, the divided violas play a smoothed-out, almost rhythmless version of the main theme; it comes as such a surprise that they are almost through before we recognize what is happening. But this same smooth version of the crisp rondo theme recurs in the enormous coda, first in bassoon and clarinets, then—most wonderfully—in a canon between the piano’s left hand and the bassoons and clarinets, before the final full orchestral statement of the theme brings the concerto to its brilliant close with some last prankish echoes.

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Steven Ledbetter was program annotator of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1979 to 1998.