

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
“Scherzo” from Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125

Written: 1817-1823

Movements: One

Style: Both Classical and Romantic.

Duration: 7 minutes

Thirty years ago, a new building opened in Grand Rapids that really changed the character of the city and the symphony that represents it. The opening of DeVos Hall was the beginning of a tremendous revitalization of Grand Rapids, and it was a much needed new performance venue for the Grand Rapids Symphony. The tremendous growth of the symphony over the last thirty years has many causes, but certainly an important one was a performance hall that could adequately present the wonderful music that the constantly improving orchestra was making. On the program for the opening concert in DeVos Hall was a performance of one of the greatest pieces of orchestra music ever written: Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9. Tonight, as a thirtieth anniversary celebration the Grand Rapids Symphony will perform the second movement of that great work.

The second movement is a light-hearted dance called a scherzo. The main tune appears as a fugue – a complex sort of round – played very softly by the strings. Suddenly, the whole orchestra is hammering this tune out, leading to a second melody that is more lilting and lyrical. The original tune comes back, but in a confusion of new keys. The timpani hammers its way into the scene, trying to restore order, but rhythmically it is in the wrong place. All of this disarray leads to a lighter section – called a trio. It is not in the triple rhythm of the scherzo, but in four beats! The scherzo comes back, but not in exact repetition. Beethoven winks at us at the end by bringing back the trio again. He ends the movement with a different rhythm than he began it! It is a joyful and humorous way to celebrate the anniversary of a great renaissance in Grand Rapids.

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