

PROGRAM NOTES

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

Who remembers Haydn’s Ninth? Or Mozart’s? Possibly not even they themselves could have specified which of their many symphonies was Number Nine; in the 18th century composers were heedless of the matter, for few symphonies were published and their distribution was haphazard. The more historically-oriented 19th century established a pantheon of recognized musical masters, inevitably leading to study and enumeration of their works—and consequently Beethoven’s 1824 “Grand Symphony with Solo and Chorus Voices entering in the finale on Schiller’s Ode to Joy” became known as his Ninth, which was easier anyway.

The unprecedented addition of voices to a symphony ignited a controversy that could only be extinguished by a century of pontification. Richard Wagner, seizing on the fact that voices climaxed Beethoven’s final orchestral composition, proclaimed that in the Ninth Symphony Beethoven had renounced mere instruments as inadequate: that the superior expression of words wedded to music spelled the death of the symphony and the birth of the Music Drama. On the other hand, conservatives, less famous than Wagner now but no less vociferous then, repudiated Beethoven’s choral finale as unnatural and eventually claimed Brahms’ purely instrumental First Symphony to be the refutation of both Wagner *and* Beethoven. In the middle were a number of composers—Berlioz, Liszt, Mahler—who continued to write symphonies with added vocal forces. 20th century theorists marshalled ingenious systems of analysis to “prove” that Beethoven had been right after all. But by then, the Ninth Symphony was beyond serious challenge anyway, a cultural icon, its ‘Joy’ melody to be enshrined in the hymn book (Joyful, joyful we adore Thee) and adopted as the Anthem of Europe.

In 1988 Beethoven’s symphony was performed in a satellite link-up simultaneously in Montreal, San Francisco, Moscow and Geneva. The purpose was to stimulate African aid, for which the message contained in Friedrich Schiller’s text was ideal: all men become brothers under the influence of Joy or divine love. Schiller’s original poem, *An die Freude* (“To Joy”), was written in 1785 as membership in the ‘brotherhood’ of Freemasonry peaked in Europe. Revised in 1802, it contains more verses than Beethoven set (some of the omitted stanzas express a more bibulous

Joy, others a political viewpoint). Beethoven's editing and re-ordering of Schiller's semi-pagan poem gave it a non-denominational spirituality which has only increased the symphony's appeal to a shrinking globe. As a measure of how the work's value has appreciated, consider this: in 1822, the Philharmonic Society of London paid Beethoven £50 to write the Ninth Symphony; in 2002, a few of his *sketches* for it were auctioned in the same city for nearly \$2 million U.S.

The Ninth stands apart from Beethoven's previous symphonies not only in its vocal finale, but also in style and scale. Eleven years separated the Choral Symphony from its predecessor, during which the composer's hopes of marriage had evaporated and his deafness become near total. Forced inward, aging, Beethoven began to write in a more abstract and intellectually rigorous manner, seeking the utmost from his material. With greater profundity came length, contrapuntal and harmonic complexity and incidentally, difficulty of execution.

At its premiere on May 7, 1824 the Ninth presented a steep learning curve: a stylistically unfamiliar symphony lasting twenty minutes beyond Beethoven's previous longest (the fifty-minute *Eroica*), ending a program that included an overture and three sections of the equally challenging *Missa Solemnis*. Many of the mostly volunteer performers, having had just two rehearsals for the whole show, were overwhelmed by its demands: back desk players put down their bows while waiting to rejoin the proceedings, and not a few of the choristers simply omitted the stratospheric bits. Nonetheless, the audience—favourably predisposed—applauded heartily. Beethoven, beating time, unable to hear that the symphony had ended, was still turning over pages of his score when the contralto soloist touched his arm to indicate the acclaim, which he acknowledged with a bow.

The Vienna critics were positive (though disapproving of the length), but a second performance of the symphony two weeks later was poorly attended and lost money. In March 1825, when the Ninth was introduced to London by its commissioners, reviews were harsher, one deploring “the obstreperous roarings of modern frenzy”. Not until standards of rehearsal and instrumental technique were raised in the mid-19th century could the Ninth Symphony be accepted into the canon of acknowledged masterpieces.

If the message in Schiller's Ode is evident, what Beethoven was trying to convey in the eighty per cent of the work that is solely instrumental has

provoked endless debate. Some read a record of his personal struggles into the first three movements, certainly possible on a certain level. Others dodge the issue by advising that any answer to the question of meaning can have no more than personal relevance. While this may ultimately be so, it is of no help to the uninitiated. Futility is therefore courted in offering the following personal view.

The section provoking the most comment is undoubtedly the instrumental portion of the **Finale** preceding the vocal entry. It begins with a dissonant fanfare followed by passages of “recitative without words” for the bass strings; then the opening subjects of all three previous movements are interspersed in order, followed by the gradual evolution of the famous “Joy” theme. After three variations of the theme, the fanfare suddenly returns, to be rebuked by the baritone soloist, “O friends, not these tones! Rather let us sing more pleasantly and more joyfully”. The Joy theme obligingly returns. It appears that in seven minutes Beethoven has gotten nowhere.

Beethoven was a man who prized morality, as he was wont to remind people; he was also an artist, who sacrificed much to serve his Art. Expressing both principles, the completed Ninth Symphony acts as an allegory of the search for Schiller’s Joy as seen by Beethoven: the blessed state which must come of Man’s acceptance of “a loving Father...beyond the stars.” In effect, each of the first three movements is a joyless state, or unsuccessful search for true Joy. All three of these are reviewed and rejected in the fourth movement prior to the apparently successful discovery of the long-sought way, through a theme of folk-like character (symbolically the Brotherhood of the Common Man). The unexpected return of strife or despair in the form of the opening fanfare and the rebuke from on high of the baritone voice, followed by Schiller’s ode, demonstrates that through the message of the divinely inspired Artist, Joy may ultimately be attained.

Well, that’s what it says here.

The incongruous tenor solo to Turkish-band music following the stupendous choral climax on the words “Vor Gott” (Before God)—featuring some rather rude noises from the bassoon section—was a frequent target of early critics whose sense of dignity and religious propriety was offended. But indeed, having ventured into the very presence of the Almighty, what more could Beethoven have done? On one level, the episode is reminiscent of the joke

that is cracked to relieve unbearable tension; yet on another, it suggests that the Brotherhood of Man extends beyond the Christian world.

The Ninth Symphony cast a long shadow. After it, few composers dared as many as nine symphonies. Those who did not only felt uncomfortable with potential comparisons with Beethoven's *magnum opus*, but, knowing that the Ninth was Ludwig's last, were superstitious about the implications of matching his output. Dvořák was safe—his first four symphonies hadn't been published, so his Ninth was only officially his Fifth; but Bruckner fulfilled his worst expectations and died while writing his Ninth (even though it was really his eleventh). Mahler knew this, and so called his actual ninth *Song of the Earth*; but it didn't help, as he still died after finishing his numbered Ninth. Schubert even predeceased his Ninth (the number was assigned posthumously). However, Shostakovich's brightly sardonic Ninth confounded Fate: the composer might have anticipated death after defying Stalin's expected glorification in a Beethovenian paean, but he was merely humiliated and ostracized instead.

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