

Program Notes



Friday, October 9-10, 8 pm, 2009
Sunday, October 11, 3 pm, 2009
Ohio Theatre

BEETHOVEN'S NINTH

Beethoven - Symphony No. 9, "Choral"

Günther Herbig, conductor
Kelley Nassief, soprano
Marietta Simpson, mezzo-soprano
John Bellemer, tenor
Andrew Gangestad, bass
Columbus Symphony Chorus

Symphony No.9 ("Choral") in D minor, Op.125
By Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1825)

Ludwig van Beethoven was baptized in Bonn on December 17, 1770; he died in Vienna on March 26, 1827. He first became interested in writing music to Schiller's "Ode to Joy" (a poem first published in 1785) during the early 1790s; however, if he ever actually wrote an early setting, it has not survived. The first musical theme to find its way into the symphony was written down in 1815; the earliest extended sketches for the first movement date from 1818. Beethoven began concentrated work on the symphony in 1822, and finished the score in February 1824. The first performance took place on May 7, 1824, at the Kärntnertortheater in Vienna, conducted (for the most part) by Michael Umlauf. (The deaf composer was also onstage beating time, but the musicians had been instructed to ignore him and follow Umlauf only.) The symphony was introduced to the United States on May 20, 1846, by the New York Philharmonic under George Loder.

The Ninth Symphony runs about an hour in performance. Beethoven scored it for 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, percussion (triangle, cymbals, bass drum) and strings, in addition to vocal quartet and mixed chorus. The trombones are used only in the second and fourth movements and the percussion only in the last movement.

With the Ninth, Beethoven created more than a symphony. Almost as soon as it was written, the Ninth became an icon of Western culture for at least two important reasons. Its message affirms the triumph of joy over adversity like no other piece of music has ever done. And its revolutionary form—its unprecedented size and complexity and, above all, the introduction of the human voice in a symphony—changed the history of music forever. The work's message and the means by which that message is expressed are both unique: each explains and justifies the other.

Everything in Beethoven's career seems to have prepared the way for this exceptional composition. It is the culmination of the so-called "heroic style," known from Symphonies No. 3 and 5, among others. But it is also the last in a series of choral works with all-embracing, cathartic and solemn endings. The series began in 1790 with two cantatas on the death of Emperor Joseph II and the inauguration of Leopold II, respectively; the concluding chorus of the latter begins with the words *Stürzt nieder, Millionen* ("Fall to your knees, ye millions")—a close paraphrase of Schiller's "Ode to Joy," the text Beethoven used in the final movement of the Ninth. The *Choral Fantasy* is certainly the most direct precursor of the "Choral" Symphony, but let it also be remembered that Beethoven's only opera, *Fidelio*, contains another quote from Schiller's poem in its final scene: *Wer ein holdes Weib errungen...* ("A man who has found a gracious wife...")

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The poem had preoccupied Beethoven since at least 1792: in that year, an acquaintance of the composer's informed Schiller's sister that:

A young man...whose talents are universally praised...proposes...to compose Schiller's *Freude*, and indeed strophe by strophe. I expect something perfect for as far as I know him he is wholly devoted to the great and the sublime.

Thus, all musical and literary roads converge in the Ninth Symphony. In a way, Beethoven was getting ready to write this work all his life. The actual compositional work took about a year and a half, from the summer of 1822 through February 1824.

Beethoven's plans to set Schiller's "Ode to Joy" began to take a new shape in 1816-17, around the time he received a commission for a symphony from the Philharmonic Society of London. At this point, he had two distinct compositions in mind—a new pair of symphonies similar to Nos. 5-6 (1807-08) or 7-8 (1811-12), which had also been conceived in pairs. But the Tenth Symphony never progressed beyond a few sketches. The Ninth remained Beethoven's last work for orchestra.

Even though Beethoven had long planned to set the "Ode to Joy" to music, he long hesitated over whether or not the last movement of a symphony was the proper place for such a setting. After sketching the choral finale, he appears to have had second thoughts and jotted down ideas for a purely instrumental last movement, ideas he later used in his string quartet in A minor, Op. 132. He felt that the introduction of voices needed special justification; the difficulties he experienced in crossing this particular bridge can be seen from the many stages the introduction went through in the sketches. At one point, for instance, the rejection of the themes from the first three movements was entrusted to a singer (not the cellos and basses as in the final version). The singer, after dismissing the scherzo as *Possen* ("farce") and the Adagio as "too tender," exclaimed: "Let us sing the song of the immortal Schiller!"

In the end, the "song of the immortal Schiller" was set in a form far removed from the original "strophe by strophe" notion Beethoven is supposed to have had back in 1792. He adopted only four of Schiller's eight strophes, freely repeating and rearranging the lines. (Schiller himself had published a revised version of his poem in 1803, and it is that version that Beethoven used.)

The opening of the symphony, with its open fifths played in mysterious string tremolos (rapid repeated notes), has been described as representing the creation of the world, as the theme emerges from what seems an amorphous, primordial state. There is an atmosphere of intense expectancy; the tension continually grows until the main theme is presented, *fortissimo*, by the entire orchestra. It is significant that the mysterious opening is immediately repeated, as it will be two more times in the course of the movement, significantly prolonging the sensation of suspense. The main theme is moved into a new key the second time, and into an unexpected one at that. The first movement of a D-minor symphony normally gravitates *upward* toward F-major. Beethoven chose a *descent* to B-flat instead (incidentally, B-flat will also be the key of the symphony's slow movement). The Allegro follows the outlines of sonata form, but the individual stages of that form do not quite function the usual way. In traditional sonata form (Mozart, for instance), the tensions that build up in the development section are resolved in the recapitulation. In the Ninth Symphony, a tendency present in several works from Beethoven's middle period becomes stronger than ever: the tensions keep increasing to the end. The movement's lengthy coda contains some material of a highly dramatic character; it ends on a climactic point, without a feeling of resolution.

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The first movement is followed by a scherzo; this order is unusual in symphonies, though not uncommon in chamber music. Beethoven refrained from using the word “Scherzo” here, however, because the mood is dramatic rather than playful. It is based on a motif of only three notes, played in turn by the strings, the timpani (specially tuned at an octave instead of the usual fourth), and the winds. The motif is developed in a fugal fashion, with subsequent imitative entrances—this fugal theme appeared in Beethoven’s sketchbook as early as 1815. Through the addition of a second theme, contrasting with the first, the scherzo is expanded into a sonata-like structure of considerable proportions. The Trio, or middle section, switches from triple to duple meter, and from D-minor to D-major, anticipating not only the key of the finale but the outline of the “Ode to Joy” theme as well. For the first time, we reach a haven of peace and happiness that foreshadows the finale. But for the moment, the Trio is brushed aside by the repeat of the dramatic “Molto Vivace.” At the end, Beethoven leads into the trio a second time, but breaks it off abruptly, to end the movement with two measures of octave leaps in unison. According to one commentator, this ending suggests an “open-ended” form that could “move back and forth between scherzo and trio endlessly.” In other words, we cannot at this point tell for sure whether the final outcome will be tragic or joyful.

First, there is one more stage to complete: the sublime third-movement Adagio, one of Beethoven’s most transcendent utterances. It has two alternating melodies: one majestic, the other tender. Each recurrence of the first theme is more ornate than the preceding one while the second theme does not change. The movement culminates in a powerful brass fanfare, followed by a wistful epilog.

We are jolted out of this idyll by what, in 1824, must have counted as the most jarring dissonance ever written. Wagner referred to this sonority as the *Schreckensfanfare* (“fanfare of horror”), and, at the opening of the finale, it forcefully suggests that we have arrived at a point where all previous rules break down. We can no longer predict the future on the basis of the past; what follows has absolutely no precedent in the history of music.

The finale may be seen as a four-movement symphony in its own right that mirrors the four movements of the Ninth Symphony itself (opening, scherzo, slow movement, finale).

After the fanfare, Beethoven begins the first of these sections by evoking the past: the themes of the first three movements appear, only to be emphatically rejected by the dramatic recitative of the cellos and basses. The first two-measure fragment of the “Ode to Joy” theme, however, is greeted by a recitative in a completely different tone as the tonality changes to a bright D-major.

The “Ode to Joy” theme is first played by the cellos and basses without any accompaniment. It is subsequently joined by several countermelodies (including a particularly striking one in the bassoon) and finally repeated triumphantly by the entire orchestra. Then the music suddenly stops and the *Schreckensfanfare* unexpectedly returns, followed by the entrance of the baritone soloist who takes up the last phrase of the earlier instrumental recitative to lead into the vocal presentation of the “Ode to Joy.” As before, during the instrumental variations, the melody grows and grows in volume and excitement until (at the words *Und der Cherub steht vor Gott*) there is a new interruption.

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The second major section of the movement starts here, with the scherzo-like “Turkish march” for tenor solo and a battery of percussion instruments. It has been dubbed the “Turkish march” because of a musical style influenced by the Turkish janissary bands popular in Vienna at the time (the same influence can be found in several works by Mozart, including the opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio*). The theme of the “Turkish march” is, of course, a variation on the “Ode to Joy” melody. This episode is followed by an orchestral interlude in the form of a fugue, also based on the “Ode to Joy.” The melody is recapitulated in its original form by the orchestra and chorus, and then the music stops again.

In the third section (the “slow movement”), the men from the chorus introduce a new theme (*Seid umschlungen, Millionen*). If the “Ode” celebrated the divine nature of Joy, this melody represents the Deity in its awe-inspiring, cosmic aspect. Whereas the first theme proceeded entirely in small steps, the second one is characterized by wide leaps; this sudden expansion in the dimensions of the melody conjures up a sense of the infinite and God’s throne above the starry skies.

The last section begins with the two themes heard simultaneously in what David Levy calls a “symbolic contrapuntal union of the sacred and the profane.” The solo quartet returns to the first strophe of Schiller’s poem; once more, the music starts anew to rise to new heights of joyful energy. Three slow sections intervene to delay this final ascent; the second of these (an Adagio cadenza for the four solo singers) momentarily brings back memories of the symphony’s slow movement. But finally, nothing can stop the music from reaching a state of ecstasy. After the last unison D in measure 940, the journey is completed and there is nothing left to say.