

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born December 16, 1770, Bonn, Germany.

Died March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria.

Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, Op. 125

Beethoven began concentrated work on this symphony in 1822 and completed it in February 1824. The first performance was given on May 7, 1824, at the Kärntnertor Theater in Vienna. The score calls for soprano, alto, tenor, and bass soloists and mixed chorus (in the finale only); and an orchestra consisting of two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, and strings. Performance time is approximately seventy-two minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony were given at the Auditorium Theatre on December 16 and 17, 1892, with Minnie Fish, Minna Brentano, Charles A. Knorr, and George Ellsworth Holmes as soloists; the Apollo Musical Club Chorus (William L. Tomlins, director); and Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on June 21, 22, 23, and 24, 2007, with Annalena Persson, Ingeborg Danz, Robert Künzli, and Matthias Goerne as soloists; the Chicago Symphony Chorus (Duain Wolfe, director); and Herbert Blomstedt conducting. The Orchestra first performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival on July 29, 1952, with Eileen Farrell, Jane Hobson, Andrew McKinley, and Mack Harrell as soloists; the Northwestern University Summer Chorus (George Howerton, director); and Otto Klemperer conducting. Our most recent Ravinia Festival performance was given on July 18, 2009, with Erin Wall, Kelley O'Connor, Anthony Dean Griffey, and Morris Robinson as soloists; the Chicago Symphony Chorus (Duain Wolfe, director); and James Conlon conducting.

There's something astonishing about a deaf composer choosing to open a symphony with music that reveals, like no other music before it, the very essence of sound emerging from silence. It is a masterstroke, to be sure, but for Beethoven it must also have been both painful and cathartic. The famous pianissimo opening—sixteen measures with no secure sense of key or rhythm—does not so much depict the journey from darkness to light, or from chaos to order, as the birth of sound itself or the creation of a musical idea. It is as if the challenges of Beethoven's daily existence—the struggle to compose music, his difficulty in communicating, the frustration of remembering what it was like to hear—have been made real in a single page of music.

This symphony shows Beethoven using all the subtlety and mastery of his craft to reach an even wider audience and to touch the common man as never before. He meant for it to be a breakthrough work—music's first crossover composition. It's also likely that in the text he picked for the symphony's finale—Schiller's hymn to universal brotherhood—Beethoven found the sense of community he craved as a comfort against personal loss, loneliness, and the terrifying sense of always feeling somehow apart, even though he was at the peak of his career. The struggle to communicate is the narrative that runs throughout this symphony, as Beethoven finally makes clear in his choral finale, when sound is literally given voice. The Ninth Symphony pushes the boundaries of art as Beethoven understood them. His own search for new compositional procedures—and there are many wildly original ideas in this symphony—underlies the whole work: the striving toward what Goethe called “the fulfillment of beautiful possibilities.”

Beethoven's grandest symphony and most influential composition was not recognized at first as a landmark—as a genuinely pivotal work in the history of music. The night of the premiere, Beethoven went home in a funk over the meager profits, and he was keenly disappointed because the entire evening had

been staged to prove that he still had box office appeal in Vienna. Thirty of Vienna's leading music lovers had recently written to him—"Need we tell you with what regret your retirement from public life has filled us?"—as a way of goading him into playing his new works, and the concert of May 7, 1824, at which the Ninth Symphony was first performed, was his response.

By 1824, Beethoven was almost completely deaf. He had long ago given up playing the piano in public, and, although he was billed as the conductor of the new symphony for the May 7 concert, and did indeed appear to beat time and turn the pages of his score (and, according to some accounts, even engage in some over-the-top theatrical gesturing), the players and the singers had been cautioned beforehand to pay no attention to him. Instead, they all followed the discreet, utterly reliable beat provided by Michael Umlauf, the concertmaster.

When, in one of the most famous accounts in all music, the audience burst into applause—some say it was at the end of the scherzo, others at the end of the symphony—Beethoven couldn't hear the ovation; he stood, his back to the crowd, leafing through his score. Only when the contralto soloist, Carolyn Unger, tapped him on the shoulder and turned him around did he see his public applauding wildly.

In truth, it must have been a miserable performance, hastily prepared under the composer's sadly compromised direction, for a public which can't reasonably have been expected to fully grasp what they were hearing. The reviews were mixed. "The necessary differentiation of light and dark, security of intonation, fine shading, and nuanced execution were all lacking," wrote one critic. "Weak players," another reported, "set down their bows and sat out so many measures." And, in the finale, when the sopranos couldn't reach the high notes, they simply didn't sing. It is surprising that the piece made an impression at all, but, for at least one critic, "the effect was indescribably great and magnificent."

But a second performance, given on a beautiful Sunday afternoon sixteen days later, was even less successful; the house was barely half full (possibly due to the lovely weather) and ticket sales did not begin to cover expenses. The work that Beethoven had written to surpass everything he already had accomplished in the field of the symphony—the work with which he was determined to move mankind as never before—had failed him. For several years after Beethoven's death, his Ninth Symphony was considered too difficult to perform (and too long to program easily). Although it won champions right from the start, it was not established in the repertory until the middle of the nineteenth century. (Wagner was a particularly staunch advocate—he even conducted it at the dedicatory concert for his Wagner-only Bayreuth Festspielhaus in 1872.) From then on, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony has maintained its singular status as a cultural symbol of unsurpassed importance.

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Since his early twenties, Beethoven had wanted to write music for Schiller's *An die Freude* (Ode to joy), a glorified drinking song with a strong humanistic message. He toyed with it several times, sketched a number of musical ideas, and even included two lines from Schiller in his opera *Fidelio*. When he finally settled down to work on a new symphony—his first in a decade—in 1822, he was impatient to pull together all the ideas that had been germinating in his imagination for thirty years. (And, according to Anton Schindler, only after he finished it nearly two years later "could he again be seen strolling through the streets, . . . greeting many acquaintances or friends after his long seclusion.")

It was probably inevitable that this would be his grandest symphony, and, in fact, it is the last in a series of scores that are Beethoven's most monumental achievements in several forms: the *Hammerklavier* Piano Sonata, the *Diabelli* Variations, and the *Missa solemnis*. They are all crowning works, summarizing everything Beethoven knew (although he did begin to sketch a tenth symphony). The Ninth Symphony stands apart from Beethoven's other symphonies—and from nearly all that follow it, as well—by virtue of its humanistic message, enormous scale, and organic unity of design.

At first glance, the Ninth appears to be a conventional, if unusually large, symphony in four movements, with the slow movement placed not second, but third, just before the finale (as in the *Hammerklavier*

Sonata). But the finale is like nothing else in symphonic music: scored for four soloists, full chorus, and orchestra, it is extremely long (longer than any of the other movements) and highly complex—almost a symphony in miniature, with its own introduction, scherzo-like section, slow music, and grand wrap-up. Mozart had shifted the weight of the classical symphony to the finale with his *Jupiter* Symphony, but Beethoven has now pushed it to the limit.

The symphony begins audaciously with those celebrated first measures, which struggle mightily, as the composer himself so often did, to arrive at a perfect symphonic theme. (And then listen, at the outset of the scherzo that follows, to how Beethoven seems to mimic the falling fourths and fifths that define the symphony's opening, as if he were making light of his own troubles.) The entire movement—rooted in D minor, but ranging widely—is conceived on the greatest scale (even though it is the only first movement in a Beethoven symphony which does not include a repeat of the exposition). The beginning of the recapitulation—the moment that's supposed to reprise the symphony's opening—is, almost by necessity here, startlingly new—a complete reinterpretation of the first measures, now defiant, fortissimo, and in D major.

Both the scherzo and the Adagio are spaciously designed, although Beethoven ultimately decided not to repeat the entire scherzo (and its trio) as was customary, but instead to tease us into thinking that he was going to. (The result, with its midsentence change of heart, is hair-raising.) The Adagio, placed before the finale for maximum dramatic effect, is a magnificent set of variations, a form Beethoven often used to express his deepest emotions (particularly in his late works, such as the opp. 109 and 110 piano sonatas, or the Adagio of the op. 127 string quartet). During this serene and noble music, Beethoven sets the stage for the finale, first with the hymnlike, stepwise melody of the main theme, which bears an uncanny resemblance to the big “Ode to Joy” tune, and then, in the final measures of the movement, with two disruptive fanfares for trumpets and drums, which warn of something momentous just over the horizon. The music dies quietly, but somehow inconclusively, even expectantly.

Peace is shattered with what Wagner admiringly called the *Schreckensfanfare*—a fanfare of terror: a wrenching eruption that is actually the dissonant combination of two triads—B-flat major (the key of the preceding slow movement) and D minor (the key of the symphony as a whole). And with that noise, Beethoven opens a new chapter in the history of music. What follows is a carefully staged drama in which cellos and basses imitate operatic recitative; the music of the three previous movements is quickly reviewed and dismissed; and a new theme is suggested, which, when it finally takes shape, is a song so perfect and so simple it sounds like a hymn or a folk song. (Beethoven, in fact, labored painstakingly over this theme.)

And then—in a move that must have stunned his first audience and has left virtually every composer since dumbfounded, wondering how he or she might top it—Beethoven welcomes the sound of the human voice into the symphony. The earlier recitative returns and now is actually sung (Beethoven wrote the text, as a kind of preface to Schiller's ode, himself); Beethoven's wonderful melody is finally given words. (In the end, Beethoven used only half of Schiller's poem, deleting in the process any obvious drinking-song references.) And from there Beethoven creates, before our eyes and ears, a new kind of movement, combining elements of symphony and concerto (there's a big, virtuosic cadenza for the four soloists), classical variations, Turkish marches (complete with cymbals, triangle, and bass drum), majestic slow meditations, and, finally, a gigantic double fugue.

In its Shakespearean juxtaposition of the comic and the solemn, its mixture of popular and esoteric elements, its union of symphonic and vocal styles, and its symphony-within-a-symphony conceit, Beethoven's finale pointed the way for the music of the future. Wagner's music dramas, Liszt's symphonic poems, Bruckner's grand finales, Mahler's sprawling symphonies, and countless other works are all unthinkable without these twenty-some minutes of music. Beethoven wrote nothing more influential in his whole life, even though, relatively late in the composition process, he was still uncomfortable with the idea of a choral finale, and began to sketch an alternate instrumental movement. But the idea of instrumental music striving toward song was too deeply ingrained in his thoughts at this point, and the dream of a

utopian existence too dear to him, and so he went ahead and turned Schiller's little drinking song into one of the towering achievements of nineteenth-century art.

The humanistic message of Beethoven's Ninth has been welcomed far and wide—from Japan, where New Year's sing-along performances are as popular as our *Messiahs* (the German *Freude* is often learned phonetically, to sounds that mean roughly "getting out of the bathtub"), to Berlin, where, to celebrate the destruction of the Wall in 1989, Leonard Bernstein changed *Freude* (joy) to *Freiheit* (freedom), claiming that "Beethoven would have given us his blessing in this heaven-sent moment." (He made no mention of Schiller.)

Beethoven's Ninth also has been raided for the disco and for television commercials, and it has survived its terrifying misappropriation during one of our darkest hours, when it became a staple of the Third Reich during the 1930s and '40s and was performed to honor Hitler's birthday. The Ninth has the power to transcend the here and now, as well as the remarkable potential to endure horrors we cannot yet imagine. For, as Maynard Solomon, our finest Beethoven biographer, has written: "If we lose the dream of the Ninth Symphony, there remains no counterpoise against the engulfing terrors of civilization, nothing to set against Auschwitz and Vietnam as a paradigm of humanity's potentialities."

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For the Record

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in 1961 with Phyllis Curtin, Florence Kopleff, John McCollum, Donald Gramm, the Chicago Symphony Chorus (Margaret Hillis, director), and Fritz Reiner conducting for RCA; in 1972 with Pilar Lorengar, Yvonne Minton, Stuart Burrows, Martti Talvela, the Chicago Symphony Chorus (Margaret Hillis, director), and Sir Georg Solti conducting for London; and in 1986 with Jessye Norman, Reinhild Runkel, Robert Schunk, Hans Sotin, the Chicago Symphony Chorus (Margaret Hillis, director), and Sir Georg Solti conducting for London (1987 Grammy Award winner for best orchestral recording).

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