

Program Notes

O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!

The Ninth Symphony is arguably the most universally loved work of one of the greatest composers ever known. How can one fully describe Beethoven's architectural and emotive genius without descending into sycophantic praise and vapid hyperbole? Is the piece an epic glorification of all that is good within us, or rather bombastic overkill?

Quite simply, the Ninth Symphony is one of the finest symphonies ever written, and represents the crowning achievement of a master craftsman at the apex of his career. Certainly one can argue on behalf of the late string quartets; the op. 109, 110, and 111 piano sonatas; or the 'Emperor' piano concerto as typifying Beethoven. The Third (*Eroica*) Symphony displayed the evolving craft of a composer who would not be fully understood within his lifetime. Yet with the Ninth, Beethoven boldly claims his place as a master composer whose innovative genius would inspire and influence countless generations of ensuing musicians.

In all of what is colloquially referred to as 'classical' music—which actually encompasses several different genres composed over a span of many centuries—three composers are commonly upheld as without equal: Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven. One can admire the different traits of each: Bach, who stood squarely in the Baroque era (ca 1675 – 1750), a time best known for formal structures and counterpoint, had the special ability to weave a Gordian tapestry of themes and counter-melodies with uncanny mathematical precision. Mozart, a child prodigy who lived only 35 years, would add lightness and melodic freedom in areas from piano and symphonic repertoire to opera, particularly comic opera. His inspired, soaring melodic lines were imbued with boundless joy and pure, simple harmonies. Beethoven brought a new structural and rhythmic complexity to music, with raw emotional power and *sturm und drang* ('storm and stress').

The actual Classical period spanned an era of some 75 years, from around 1750, shortly before Mozart's birth, to 1825—at which point the start of the Romantic era is commonly designated. Beethoven (1770 – 1827) singlehandedly stands as a bridge between the two eras, acting as the apex of evolution for one and the seed of a new direction in expression and pathos for the other. His music alone defies description: he manipulated the conventional forms of the classical era into pieces unique in structure and design, with advanced harmonies and new concepts in dynamics and rhythm. For example the opening movement of the *Eroica* is twice as long as usual with three full themes, including a coda that is almost as long as a movement in itself. Beethoven's music is also characterized by unexpected dynamic shifts—sweeping crescendos that precede sudden piano passages, as well as dynamic changes that come without warning. Again using the *Eroica* as an example, Beethoven experimented with the technique known as hemiola—a grouping of accents occurring across barlines and disrupting the metric pulse. He was also one of the first composers to work with melodic fragments as thematic material—any child can sing the opening four notes of his Fifth Symphony, which provided the thematic basis for an entire movement. All of these ideas would have a profound and lasting influence on the Romantic era composers who followed, including Johannes Brahms and Gustav Mahler.

Classical symphony instrumentation consisted of pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns and sometimes trumpets—complemented by strings and timpani. One

Classical period innovation was the increasing use of so-called ‘Turkish music,’ influenced by Turkish military bands. Mozart, Beethoven, and Haydn all made use of this technique, adding trombones, triangle, cymbals, and bass drum for more expressive power. The Ninth Symphony calls for two flutes plus piccolo and pairs of oboes, clarinets, and bassoons as well as contrabassoon. The increased brass section features two trumpets, four horns, and three trombones—as well as a full percussion section, timpani, and strings. To balance the greater numbers of winds and brasses larger string sections were called for—and we see the beginning of the larger orchestras that would characterize the Romantic era. The final movement calls for four vocal soloists as well as a full chorus.

By the time the symphony premiered in May of 1824, Beethoven was almost completely deaf. In 1802 he had written of his oncoming impairment in a letter to his brothers that became known as the Heiligenstadt Testament. “But, think that for six years now I have been hopelessly afflicted, made worse by senseless physicians, from year to year deceived with hopes of improvement, finally compelled to face the prospect of a lasting malady (whose cure will take years or, perhaps, be impossible) . . . My misfortune is doubly painful to me because I am bound to be misunderstood . . . and I fear being exposed to the danger that my condition might be noticed.” Yet for all his inner darkness Beethoven would later set to music a poem celebrating life, using a melody that would resonate with people worldwide. Beethoven had intended to set Schiller’s text to music for over twenty years, but did not begin on the Ninth until 1818. It would be the first symphony to involve a chorus, although Beethoven had composed the Choral Fantasy, essentially a piano concerto with chorus, some ten years before.

The Ninth’s opening movement is dark and powerful, typically characteristic of Beethoven. The second violins, celli, and horns hold an A pedal point as the other strings enter, first tentatively and then more powerfully as they approach the orchestra *tutti*. The movement develops through manipulation of short motives, moving through multiple keys as it does so. The swift changes of dynamics and mood are typical of late Beethoven, and the movement ends decisively with the opening theme.

Beethoven changes the normal order of movements by following this opening with the Scherzo—perhaps desiring the contrast between the Adagio and the choral finale. The music proceeds at a break-neck pace, where the score directs musicians to play the measures themselves in groupings of three and four. The timpani part is especially notable, providing a percussive motive that drives the music throughout—much different from the conventional *do-sol* supporting role the instrument had had heretofore. The sublime third movement holds some of Beethoven’s finest melodic writing, as the theme winds its way through several different variations.

The finale is almost a symphony unto itself, with four distinct sections. The movement opens with a dark Presto, and within the introduction we hear quotes of the prior three movements. The celli and basses have interspersed recitatives, foreshadowing the bass soloist’s entrance to follow. Finally, the familiar melody enters in the low strings, moving up through the orchestra before the opening returns to introduce the bass soloist.

Some of Schiller’s text was modified by Beethoven, and went through many revisions before the final version. Beethoven particularly deliberated on the opening bass line, “O Freunde, nicht diesen Töne!” (“O Friends, not these sounds!”) before finally settling on what is commonly heard today. The movement features tenor and bass solos, as well as the entire vocal quartet. Often the themes are stated by the quartet and answered by the

chorus. Many of the musical parts are interwoven between vocalists and orchestra, and each group is featured in different sections, perhaps the best example being the orchestral fugue, followed by a choral fugue, as well as the vocal quartet's final part that ushers in the closing Presto.

The premiere of the symphony was a rousing success, with Beethoven being given numerous ovations—quite unheard of for a lowly musician. Yet perhaps this was due in part to the audience's desire to communicate visually with a director who could no longer hear. The performance was actually conducted by Kapellmeister Michael Umlauf, who instructed the performers to pay no mind to the composer while he directed! As a result, reports say that Beethoven was off by several measures and had to be turned to face the tumultuous applause that greeted his masterpiece's premiere.

To this day the Ninth remains a totemic masterwork of the repertoire, and provides an easy reference to classical music for people who have little other exposure to it. The music to the "Ode to Joy" was adopted as the anthem of the European Union in 1985, and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 led to a Christmas performance onsite directed by Leonard Bernstein with the word 'Freiheit' (Freedom) substituted for 'Freude' (Joy). We can think of no better way to ring in the New Year than with Beethoven's joyous celebration of the human spirit.

Daniel Bruce