

Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, op. 125—Ludwig van Beethoven

In the decade leading up to about 1812 Beethoven had enjoyed the most productive period of his life. He not only had composed well over two dozen major works—works that stand in the highest ranks of Western music—and many more other compositions in various genres, but he had changed the game of musical composition in lasting ways. Building upon the work of Haydn and Mozart, he crafted a musical language that would forever set the mark for those who aspire to a musical style that is founded in an unprecedented internal coherence, logical extension and exploration of tonality, and a remarkable economy of means. Moreover, he did so within a relentless exploration of formal, architectural structure, as well as developing a deep, expressive, lyrical and dramatic content. In essence—he had become the Beethoven who has hence stood in the exalted ranks of classical composers.

It was not without its personal price, however. In addition to the intensity of his busy life as a composer of works that constantly evolved in content and complexity, he faced constant pressures in coping with his loss of hearing, his wrangles with his family, his disappointments in personal relationships, and the never-ending hassles with publishers and impresarios. In short, by about 1812 there began a period of less productivity, of reconsiderations of the path forward in musical style—and just plain mental and physical fatigue. It was the beginning of a time that eventually led to what musical scholars have commonly referred to as his last, and third, stylistic period. While the works from this period are universally hailed by musicians as works of genius and unparalleled in their advanced style, it must be admitted that much of the concert-going public still has difficulty with appreciating the spare, often obscure, and abstract nature of many of these compositions. And yet, there is the Ninth Symphony, standing apparently forevermore in the smallest circle of almost everyone's most beloved works of Beethoven. How is this possible? Is the Ninth Symphony not characteristic of the other works from this late, difficult period? Wherein lies the almost universal appeal?

Development of the symphony as a genre, from the models left by the mature Haydn and Mozart to its position of central importance in the musical world, was one of Beethoven's greatest achievements. Discounting the derivative first two symphonies—as good as they are—the core of his symphonic achievements lies in the six symphonies of the aforementioned decade. He finished the eighth symphony in 1812 and about that time began a few sketches for the ninth. It is clear that at that juncture he did not envision the special place that the ninth would take in his *oeuvre*, but rather, it was just the next one, number nine. Work went more slowly, however, and even after the Philharmonic Society of London formally commissioned the Ninth Symphony in 1817, serious efforts did not begin until around 1822, with completion only in 1824, about three years before his death. A major element in the work, the novel and unprecedented incorporation of a choral setting of Schiller's *Ode to Joy* poem, had actually been in the back of his mind since way back in 1793, but had not yet found its ultimate musical rôle for Beethoven. And, of course, he had composed the *Fantasy in C Minor for Piano, Chorus, and Orchestra*, op. 80 later, in 1808, as a “brilliant finale” for the concert which

saw the premières of the fifth and sixth symphonies. There are many similarities between the Choral Fantasy and his setting of Schiller's poem in the Ninth Symphony. They have always been clear to all, and the composer himself acknowledged the kinship. They include strong melodic and harmonic similarities between their respective main tunes, and a like idealism in universal human and artistic values expressed in the texts. So, all in all, there were lots of elements stewing in the pot during the long gestation period of this major work of his last years.

All of these elements came together in a work that was significantly different from the great six symphonies that preceded it. To be sure, the novelty of the choral finale, with four vocal soloists, was sufficiently path breaking. There was also a logical extension and development of technical elements in form and texture, as well. But even lay audiences immediately sensed a more abstract, elevated, and deeper sense of spiritual "mission" from the outset.

The central idea of the symphony obviously stems from Schiller's poem celebrating the universal brotherhood of mankind. But that celebration is not easily, nor quickly arrived at. Before the stirring words of the fourth movement, there is much psychological ground to be explored—and so the first three movements delve into darker reflections of the realities of existence. The first movement opens with a floating, ominous "cloud" of suspense whose exact tonality is fittingly indeterminate. But after sixteen bars, the main theme—a jagged and dynamic affair—appears in the central key of D minor. Other motives appear in constant parade—quite unlike many of his other works in which he literally works to death a single idea. This movement is rife with aphoristic, and eminently useful ideas, all contributing to a sense of unity, despite their multiplicity. The careful listener will find that, as the movement constantly explores the stress, uncertainty, and challenge of making sense of existence, these motives pervade the musical fabric and carry the whole along. A further sense of unrest is generated by Beethoven's tendency—a common one in his late works—to avoid the structurally reassuring contrast of tonic and dominant keys. Here, the tonal polarity is between D minor and Bb major—one of the composer's favorite juxtapositions of keys. While there are many quiet moments (even in "happy" keys), the dark uncertainty pounds along all the way to a forceful conclusion—in which it might be said that nothing is actually "concluded" with regard to higher matters.

Conventionally, the fast, dance-like (or in this case, *scherzo*) movement is the third one, but in this case Beethoven chose to put it second. Like the beloved last movement, it has garnered a secure place in popular culture, even serving some years ago as the theme for the evening television news. And like the first movement, there is no joy in this one, either. It is a serious, hammering thing, driven by the timpani, which opens the movement with its signature rhythm. Usually, the formal structure of a *scherzo* is somewhat straight forward, but the composer chose here to employ the full sonata form, with its first and second theme groups, development section, and recapitulation—yet more evidence of the scale and importance that Beethoven imbued in the work. It is relatively easy to keep track of the main section and its repeats, for the composer has thoughtfully provided us with three bars of complete silence to mark them. The traditional middle section of a *scherzo*, the trio, here is unusual in that it is not only in duple meter (two to the bar), but is in the cheerful parallel major key—really, one of the first extended sections in the symphony thus far not in a minor key. After this diversion,

the expected return to the first section occurs, but severely abbreviated, and following a quick allusion to the trio, a sudden ending surprises us.

The *Adagio* is a glorious example of Beethoven's unequalled skill in evoking the transcendent. A leisurely exploration in anticipation of the "joy" of the last movement—and which has hitherto eluded us—it continues the delicious juxtaposition of the keys of Bb and D major/minor. After a brief introduction, the violins play the familiar theme in Bb, followed shortly by the other half of the main theme, but now in the other key. Two variations on these themes in various remote and refreshing keys constitute the body of the movement. A little fanfare-like figure introduces the coda, and after a bit more variation (Beethoven can never resist the procedure) this meditative episode is over.

The incorporation of a chorus in the last movement was simply unprecedented at the time, and still is remarkable. But then, a choral setting of Schiller's poem is, of course, the *raison d'être* of the whole symphony. But how to transit into it after such serious, long, and imposing three movements? That it gave Beethoven fits is well documented. He labored at many solutions before finding the way that seemed to make the whole affair a logical procession to the inevitable. And so the unique form of the last movement effects that end. The "roadmap" of the movement is varied and somewhat complex, but in the end it all makes sense and informs the sense of inevitability as it proceeds.

The movement begins with a fiery storm of agitation, quickly followed by the solo cellos and basses literally singing like an operatic bass, in the best of vocal recitative style, obviously taking over the show. The orchestra presents a short review of snatches of the first three movements—with the cellos and basses seeming to "reject" them. The cellos and basses, which obviously have found the solution, present their idea, an intimation of the famous last movement's tune. The real theme then appears several times, each with fuller harmony and orchestration. But, apparently, that's not sufficient, and a human voice finally enters—to the tune of the original recitative by the cellos and basses and entreats all: "Oh, friends, not these tones!" More variations follow, this time in various combinations of vocal soloists and chorus, each one raising the emotional and musical stakes. At the climax it is all dramatically broken off at the words: ". . . before God!" What ensues is a kind of Turkish march that starts softly in the lower instruments (including the distinctive contra-bassoon). This last variation gradually builds, helped by the interjections from the excited tenor soloist and the men in the chorus. When the climax is reached, the voices drop out, and the orchestra zips into double fugue in the same bustling march rhythm. After a short, quiet transition the full orchestra and chorus blaze out with the main theme.

But, soon thereafter all slows down and the chorus and trombones dramatically intone the directive for the "millions" to embrace the earth below of the "common Father." A short hymn-like passage then earnestly and reverently changes its mind, and suggests that all should "look upward" to the Maker's mansion in the starry pavilions. In joy at this new understanding of mankind's salvation, soloists, chorus, and orchestra plunge into the general celebration of that fact. Dramatic variants of tempo, texture, and familiar themes drive us to a conclusion that has few equals in all of music—and we are reminded, yet again, of why Beethoven, notwithstanding the human faults that he shares with us all, had the inimitable gift to point the way to human transcendence.

O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!

Oh friends, not these sounds!

*Sondern lasst uns angenehmere anstimmen,
und freudenvollere.*

Freude!

Freude, schöner Götterfunken
Tochter aus Elysium,
Wir betreten feuertrunken,
Himmlische, dein Heiligtum!
Deine Zauber binden wieder
Was die Mode streng geteilt;
Alle Menschen werden Brüder,
Wo dein sanfter Flügel weilt.
Wem der große Wurf gelungen,
Eines Freundes Freund zu sein;
Wer ein holdes Weib errungen,
Mische seinen Jubel ein!
Ja, wer auch nur eine Seele
Sein nennt auf dem Erdenrund!
Und wer's nie gekonnt, der stehle
Weinend sich aus diesem Bund!
Freude trinken alle Wesen
An den Brüsten der Natur;
Alle Guten, alle Bösen
Folgen ihrer Rosenspur.
Küsse gab sie uns und Reben,
Einen Freund, geprüft im Tod;
Wollust ward dem Wurm gegeben,
Und der Cherub steht vor Gott.
Froh, wie seine Sonnen fliegen
Durch des Himmels prächt'gen Plan,
Laufet, Brüder, eure Bahn,
Freudig, wie ein Held zum Siegen.
Seid umschlungen, Millionen!
Diesen Kuss der ganzen Welt!
Brüder, über'm Sternenzelt
Muss ein lieber Vater wohnen.
Ihr stürzt nieder, Millionen?
Ahnest du den Schöpfer, Welt?
Such' ihn über'm Sternenzelt!
Über Sternen muss er wohnen.

*Let us instead strike up more pleasing
and more joyful ones!*

Joy!

Joy, beautiful spark of divinity,
Daughter from Elysium,
We enter, burning with fervour,
heavenly being, your sanctuary!
Your magic brings together
what custom has sternly divided.
All men shall become brothers,
wherever your gentle wings hover.
Whoever has been lucky enough
to become a friend to a friend,
Whoever has found a beloved wife,
let him join our songs of praise!
Yes, and anyone who can call one soul
his own on this earth!
Any who cannot, let them slink away
from this gathering in tears!
Every creature drinks in joy
at nature's breast;
Good and Bad alike
follow her trail of roses.
She gives us kisses and wine,
a true friend, even in death;
Even the worm was given desire,
and the cherub stands before God.
Gladly, just as His suns hurtle
through the glorious universe,
So you, brothers, should run your course,
joyfully, like a conquering hero.
Be embraced, you millions!
This kiss is for the whole world!
Brothers, above the canopy of stars
must dwell a loving father.
Do you bow down before Him, you millions?
Do you sense your Creator, o world?
Seek Him above the canopy of stars!
He must dwell beyond the stars.