

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)
SYMPHONY NO. 9 IN D MINOR, Opus 125

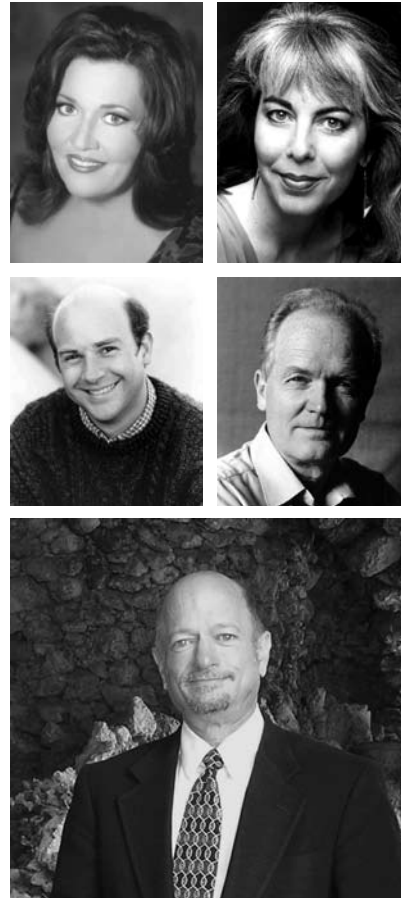
Tamara Matthews *soprano*
Judith Malafrente *alto*
Benjamin Butterfield *tenor*
David Thomas *bass*

American Bach Choir

Pacific Mozart Ensemble
Richard Grant *director*

UC Berkeley Chamber Chorus
John Butt *director*

AMERICAN BACH SOLOISTS
performing on period instruments
JEFFREY THOMAS



Revisiting the Ninth
JEFFREY THOMAS

To a large degree, most of us have accepted the conventional historical divisions of time that are customarily superimposed on Western musical literature. Our concepts of the Baroque, Classical and Romantic periods are nearly as well-defined and generally understood as the solutions would be to fitting round, square, and triangular blocks into same-shaped holes. And when the delineations of such broad ranges of compositional style are blurred, the first and logical reaction is to add an appropriate time-relevant modifier (e.g. early Classical; late Romantic) in an attempt to stave off a less segmented view of the continuum, despite the fact that a gradually blended perspective would probably offer a more honest viewpoint and be more true to the processes of artistic and aesthetic evolution.

Throughout history, the nature of composition has been to “push the envelope” of instruments’ capabilities, and the nature of performance is to seek intelligible and overtly heightened languages of expression in order to communicate the “larger than life” aspects of a musical work. The urgency of the need for more compelling and effective tools of musical rhetoric has inspired and manifested various forms of expressive innovations throughout the ages. In late 16th-century Florence, instruments’ ranges were extended, followed by similar technical extensions by the *virtuosi* singers. Later, in Italy, France, and Germany, ornamentation became a cadential tool to be used not as a required and everyday device but as a means to assert the text. Still later, ornamentation was recognized as a very efficient means toward the goal of effusively overt musicality. These and other constant explorations into the realm of expressivity fall into place along the continuum of

musical genuineness and authenticity, belying the standard and typically century-long divisions of musical ‘periods’. Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* has always been a masterwork that simultaneously creates a chasm—through the nature of its wide range of summative styles and form—and bridges its own gap. It pushed the instruments of its generation to the limit, and has, for nearly two centuries, elicited highly personalized readings and interpretations.

Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* is often described as a work which broke free of “Classical” style. Just as one can cite the music of Richard Strauss as having taken the Romantic style—even diatonic harmony—to its very outer limits, in the *Ninth* Beethoven wrote three of the most complete and perfect examples of his (and his contemporaries’) symphonic ideal. Each of the first three movements is a consummate paragon. Improvement upon Beethoven’s masterful architectural and sonic scheme of the symphony’s first movement, his skillful execution of a Classical scherzo in the second, or the superb rendering of a set of variations in the *Adagio molto e cantabile* would be impossible. It is true that the critical reaction to such perfection has been often enough negative. Although it is well known that there were loudly voiced objections to the choral finale, even the exquisite third movement prompted dissension in an article written by Ralph Vaughan Williams in 1940, in which he likened it to music appropriate for a Viennese drawing room: He called it a “*morceau de salon*”. Nevertheless, from these three culminations of Beethoven’s genius there was nowhere to go, except to push on to a new style, and a new world. There was indeed a need for something more.

Beethoven had first contemplated setting Friedrich von Schiller’s “*An die Freude*” for voices and orchestra as early as 1793. Schiller’s wife had received a letter in January of that year from the Bonn professor, Bartholomäus Fischenich. He wrote, “He proposes to compose Schiller’s *Freude*, strophe by strophe. I expect something perfect since he is wholly devoted to the great and sublime.” Although several musical sketches relevant to the *Ninth* exist from the following twenty-nine years, it was not until the period between October 1822 and February 1824 that Beethoven completed the *Ninth Symphony*, contemporaneously alongside the *Diabelli*

Variations and the *Missa solemnis* (Mass in D). Alan Tyson and Joseph Kerman chronicled this period as one of introspection and resolve:

“One may detect some elements of a desire in Beethoven around this time to gather up the unfinished business of the past and attend to ideas that had waited long for definitive expression. He was beginning to suspect that not much time was left to him.” (Alan Tyson)

“Beethoven’s slowness in composing the mass [*Missa solemnis*] can be explained in part by his inevitable resolve to approach the text in the highest seriousness and treat the setting as a personal testament. Indeed, the religious impetus spilled over into his next composition, the *Ninth Symphony* with its setting of stanzas from Schiller’s half-bacchanalian, half-religious Ode to Joy. Mass and symphony stand together as the crowning statement about non-musical ideas in Beethoven’s later life.” (Joseph Kerman)

What were these ideas, so personal and in need of expression? What about Fischenich’s reference to Beethoven’s devotion to the “great and sublime?” Beethoven’s love of nature is a well-known character trait that has unquestionably contributed as much to the artist-hero “myth” as his unconventional style of living, total commitment to his art, and legendary tragic suffering. In a letter written to Therese Malfatti in 1810, he wrote, “No-one can love the country as much as I do. For surely woods, trees and rocks produce the echo which man desires to hear.” He had been deeply inspired and affected by Christian Sturm’s *Betrachtungen der Werke Gottes in der Natur*. And he longingly sought the presence of God in his beloved countryside. The Scherzo’s trio, an idyllic (Elysian?) vision, the melody of which Sir Donald Francis Tovey called “as old as the art of music,” seems to echo the imagined sounds of rural, pastoral pipes. And is not the third movement utterly great and sublime, almost sensually overwhelming in its scale and indulgence in the riches of musical craft?

Several years before most of his work on the *Ninth*, Beethoven had set the words of Alois (Isidor) Jeitteles in *An die ferne Geliebte*: “*ohne Kunstgepräng’ erklungen*” (‘resounding without the adornments of Art’). These words reflect another personal agenda important to the composer at that time. His yearning to combine his personal theology with a composer’s understandable compulsion to develop

the science, even the philosophy, of composition was foremost in his mind. Ultimately, Schiller's text, with its obvious opportunities, seems almost as if it had been written *for* Beethoven. He composed a symphony which shows to us the sublime—its first three movements perfectly complete *with* (or, rather, *because of*) the adornments of Art—then answered his own call to push beyond it all, demonstrating in sound the frustration of expression through one great *Schreckensfanfare* (clearly and brashly *without* the adornments of Art), only to be resolved by his vision of the harmony of God and Nature expressed through Schiller's text. The very addition of words to text-less music is required when music alone cannot articulate clearly enough specific meanings. It is indeed the vocal intervention which, as Wagner believed, was the necessary ingredient to articulate the new order. Is this not the outline for the *Ninth's* finale: wordless music first that directly quotes excerpts from what has come before; the introduction of an exquisitely *menschlich* melody that cries out for words; a programmatically and contextually frustrated return to cacophony; and ultimately the unquestionably *necessary* introduction a text that expresses universal and uncontainable joy, from which even the eventual florid ornamentation of the soloists' final utterance in B major is drawn?

The first performance of the *Ninth* took place on May 7, 1824, at Vienna's Kärntnertor Theatre. The program began with the Overture to *Die Weihe des Hauses* (composed for the opening of the Josephstadt theatre on October 3, 1822; the title is that of the first drama presented there), and included three movements from the *Mass in D* (Kyrie, Credo, and Agnus Dei). The symphony was received with much enthusiasm, but, although audiences in the next decades—less highborn than the early 19th-century patrons of concert halls—were irresistibly attracted to Beethoven's music, critics almost always decried its very essence, calling it “monstrous,” “tasteless,” and “falling into burlesque.” Yet a good many composers have built upon Beethoven's concept and ideas, even to the point of direct quotes which can be found in works of Bellini, Brahms, Bruckner, Mahler, and Richard Strauss.

The history of performance of the *Ninth* is decidedly a rich one, varied in its colors, but consistently on a single track of committed expression.

We have experienced an evolution of the work's tempi, ‘meaning’, reception, and performance aesthetics. It is no secret that the *Ninth* cries out at every opportunity for all of the varied interpretations which it has received. It embodies the very spirit of the nature of performance. Ironically, we are in the midst of a phase of performance style which looks backwards, seeking a sort of backwards compatibility. Our wonderful period-instrument movement has given us the chance to hear at least the sounds which were heard by the composers of centuries past. But Richard Taruskin in his brilliant article, “Resisting the Ninth*,” makes an entreaty of compelling importance: “So please, let there be no more uninformed, deterministic talk about period instruments and their magical power to make a performance all by themselves. Such talk is evasive and simplistic at best, destructive of all judgment and values at worst.” Sadly, his remark is well-founded. The ‘period instrument’ revival gave birth to far too many spiritless performances by leagues of musicians who misinterpreted a focus on hardware, so to speak, as a *raison d'être* for music-making, the irony of which might have amused Jetteles...“*ohne Kunstgepräg' erklungen.*”

It is not possible to perform music, even to study a score, without instilling some amount of one's own personal interpretation on the process. Even the manifestation of Joshua Rifkin's total reverence for Bach's scores—as evidenced in his clear performances, completely unsmudged by even intelligent musicians' personal contributions—is a set of personal choices, and therefore an interpretation. One of the most notable recent developments in the ongoing heritage of the *Ninth Symphony* is Roger Norrington's notoriously tempo-centric 1987 recording, through which he pioneered, in the wake of 150 years of tradition to the contrary, an adherence to many of the work's original tempo indications. Taruskin cites that heritage of the evolution of tempos *away* from Beethoven's markings as “having arisen precisely out of the inadequacy of [the tradition in which it was composed] to account fully for the work”. These *are modern* interpretations, brand new in the course of

* I have deliberately and gratefully played upon Taruskin's title in naming this article.

music history and in the light of the recent past. A question arises: What are we to interpret? History or music?

Musicology and performance have learned to enjoy a most productive relationship. We have all benefited immensely through the partnership, as these two related but very different disciplines have, in recent times, walked hand-in-hand down a most promising road. But there is a point at which the alliance must end and each must take its own path, as performance must give way to another of music's traditions, that of ever-evolving expression. To make a performance about a work's compositional or stylistic aspects is to trivialize it. Music seeks and needs performance and expression. Performance and expression require artistry, not documentation. Although it should always be a goal of a great artist to present every aspect of a work—perhaps striving to enable a listener with only basic music skills to comprehend all of its facets including harmonic and rhythmic colors—the artist must translate the source material into a language that gives it sensory life. Vaughan Williams wrote (more insightfully than his opinion of the *Adagio*): “The great artist uses the conventions as his tools and bends them to his will, so that they are no longer conventions but a vital means of expression.”

It is true that the great and sublime works might very well have specific “meanings” intended by their composers. But which ones are performers meant to convey: programmatic meanings or historical meanings? Certainly historical perspectives are developed quite some time after a work's composition. They are not part of the original document. It has been a

very favorite obsession of some great historians and writers to ascribe meanings, after the fact, to various works. But would we give extraordinary “meaning” to a work with a mass text, or to a Mahler setting of Rückert, or even to other text-based works of Beethoven? Why, then, have we been compelled to do this to the *Ninth*? Wagner tried to superimpose daunting complexities upon it, and perhaps succeeded for a while. But isn't there enough in the music and the text? Isn't it really our obligation as performers to elucidate *those* first-tier elements, rather than missing the forest for the trees? This is not to suggest that the symphony exists on a pedestal, not to be interpreted. A performance of the *Ninth*, or any other piece of music, would be vapid without personal interpretation. But, luckily, the actuality of performance without personal interpretation is an impossibility.

Surely, the *Ninth* is a difficult piece, mammoth in its dimensions and demands. And perhaps attempts throughout history to further complicate the work helped provide a smokescreen, protecting us from the raw power and depth—and challenge—of Beethoven's last symphony. As our predecessors have done, we must look forward *and* backward as we choose our interpretations and recognize a work's traditions. Perhaps we should always strive to “bridge the gaps” between so many conflicting and equally viable philosophies and opinions so that *our* performances are accessible and useful to our present society. But above all else, we are here to bring a printed score to life, to convey its universality, and to perform it as a testimony of our times and ourselves.

“AN DIE FREUDE”

O Freunde, nicht diese Töne,
Sondern laßt uns angenehmere
anstimmen, und freudenvollere.

(Ludwig van Beethoven)

Freude, schöner Götterfunken,
Tochter aus Elysium,
Wir betreten, feuertrunken,
Himmlische, dein Heiligtum!
Deine Zauber binden wieder,
Was die Mode streng getheilt,
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.

(Friedrich Schiller)

“TO JOY”

Oh friends, not these sounds,
rather let us strike up more
pleasing and joyful ones!

Joy, o wondrous spark divine,
Daughter of Elysium,
Drunk with fire now we enter,
Heavenly one, your holy shrine.
Your magic powers join again
What fashion strictly did divide;
Brotherhood unites all men
Where your gentle wings spread wide.

The man who's been so fortunate
To become the friend of a friend,
The man who has won a fair woman -
To the rejoicing let him add his voice.
The man who calls but a single soul
Somewhere in the world his own!
And he who never managed this -
Let him steal forth from our throng!

Joy is drunk by every creature
From Nature's fair and charming breast;
Every being, good or evil,
Follows in her rosy steps.
Kisses she gave to us, and vines,
And one good friend, tried in death;
The serpent she endowed with base desire
And the cherub stands before God.

Gladly as His suns do fly
Through the heavens' splendid plan,
Run now, brothers, your own course,
Joyful like a conquering hero.

Embrace each other now, you millions!
The kiss is for the whole wide world!
Brothers - over the starry firmament
A beloved Father must surely dwell.
Do you come crashing down, you millions?
Do you sense the Creator's presence, world?
Seek Him above the starry firmament,
For above the stars he surely dwells.