

ODE TO JOY

MARCH 30, 2019

Darko Butorac, Conductor
Christina Pier, soprano
Krysty Swann, mezzo-soprano
Norman Shankle, tenor
Corey McKern, bass
Morehouse College Glee Club
Florida A&M Concert Choir

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)

Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125, “Choral”

Allegro ma non troppo, un poco maestoso
Molto vivace–Presto
Adagio molto e cantabile–Andante moderato
Finale

Born in Bonn, Germany, **Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)** moved at age twenty-two to Vienna where he studied with Haydn and remained until his death. He was a virtuoso pianist before increasing deafness around the age of thirty made it difficult for him to perform.

Material used in Symphony No. 9 is found in his sketches from many years prior to its primary composition in 1823-4. The “Choral” Symphony premiered on 7 May 1824 in Vienna with Michael Umlauf as well as Beethoven conducting; legend has it that Umlauf told the musicians to avoid looking at the, by then, completely deaf composer because his beat had been off when he conducted previously. Another anecdote about the premiere is that, since he couldn’t hear the applause, Beethoven had to be turned around to acknowledge the standing ovations.

The Ninth is scored for pairs of woodwinds (flute/oboe/clarinet/bassoon), piccolo, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, triangle, cymbals, bass drum and strings. Beethoven used his resources well by limiting trombones to the second and fourth movements and the percussion to the fourth, which also introduces the human voice. The piercing, high-pitched piccolo and the deep sound of the contrabassoon also appear only in the last movement. This mammoth (one-hour long) symphony opens in a mysterious but expectant manner. Amidst quiet string rustlings, falling fifths and fourths that give no hint of major vs. minor tonality seem to suggest the symphony’s gradual emergence from a void. Numerous dramatic themes are presented and treated to rhythmic manipulation. Listen for hints of the “Ode to Joy” theme that is to come in the final movement. There are also foreshadowings of other themes from the succeeding movements. In loose sonata form, the first movement involves extensive development of themes, unresolved tension, and a lengthy coda. The mood changes immediately with the second movement, which substitutes a lively “Molto vivace” for the traditional, expected slow movement. Although not labeled a “scherzo,” this movement embraces much of the spirit of that form (usually found in a symphony’s third movement). Note the importance of silence in Beethoven’s writing. The chortling of winds interrupted by timpani is delicious. After a contrasting, thinner-textured trio section, there is a lovely passage of crescendos/decrescendos before the subsequent return of the “scherzo.” Beethoven again surprises by momentarily revisiting the trio before the abrupt conclusion. Many of you may remember this music as the sign-off for Huntley/Brinkley’s nightly news.

The third movement, primarily for winds, is a lovely, contemplative example of Beethoven’s third style period. There are several alternations between the slow-moving, reflective opening theme and a slightly

livelier, stepwise, folk-like theme. Each time the first motive recurs it is varied by means of embellishment. After two brief brass fanfares and a typical, extended Beethoven coda, the stage is set for the biggest surprise of all. One can only imagine how totally unexpected it would have been for that 1824 audience to see a full chorus and four soloists stand for the fourth movement. Ever the maverick, Beethoven was the first to include a vocal movement in the symphonic genre. His sketches reveal that he had been considering using Schiller's 1785 *An die Freude* ("To Joy") for various projects over the years and that he struggled with how to introduce the voice in this symphony after three solely instrumental movements. First there is an angry outburst of orchestral sound, what Wagner called a *Schreckensfanfare*, or fanfare of horror. Cellos and basses play a vocal-like recitative (declamatory singing associated with opera). Then the primary themes of the previous three movements are re-introduced and dismissed by the low string recitative. To quote Wagner, "It is wonderful how the master makes the arrival of Man's voice and tongue a positive necessity, by this awe-inspiring recitative in the bass-strings." This instrumental recitative dialogues with a new lyrical theme presented by cellos and basses and is soon accompanied by an exquisite countermelody in the bassoon. The new "Joy" theme receives majestic, fanfare treatment with full orchestra before the return of the *Schreckensfanfare* ushers in a baritone recitative and subsequent variations of the Ode to Joy for soloist, quartet, and chorus. At one point the percussion has an opportunity to shine as Beethoven nods to the Turkish janissary (military band) music that was popular in Vienna in this era. (Consider Mozart's earlier *Rondo alla Turca* for piano and *The Abduction from the Seraglio*.) The final movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 is an amazing fusion of vocal and instrumental forces, and of variation and fugal (imitative) techniques, as the composer focuses on the subjects of the universal brotherhood of man and the love of a heavenly father.

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