

## **Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, Opus 125**

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born December 16, 1770, Bonn

Died March 26, 1827, Vienna

Since its first performance in 1824, Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* has been regarded as one of the great statements of romantic faith in the nature of man. The grandeur of Beethoven's music and his setting of Schiller's "An die Freude" made the *Ninth* an expression of human dignity and aspiration that symbolized the nineteenth century's conception of man's nature, just as Hamlet's "What a piece of work is a man!" speech had dramatized Renaissance faith in man two centuries earlier. In our own day, when audiences find themselves trapped between the symphony's starry vision of a utopian future and our own awareness of how the events of the last two centuries have given the lie to that hopeful vision, the *Ninth* continues to engage and move (and sometimes frustrate) audiences. A performance of the *Ninth* remains today a special occasion, an experience entirely different from a performance of any of the other eight, and it excites quite different responses. Evidence of that conflicted response is all around us. Some years ago, when one of the national news programs needed a musical signature of sufficient stature, they chose the opening measures of the scherzo of the *Ninth* to introduce their broadcast, oblivious to the irony that the symphony's message of universal brotherhood would be undercut by much of the news that followed. Stanley Kubrick's use of the *Ninth* as background music for his horrific vision of a violent future in *A Clockwork Orange* captured these confusions perfectly. After nearly two centuries, the *Ninth Symphony* continues to challenge audiences even as it moves them.

The first performance of the *Ninth* took place in Vienna on May 7, 1824, when Beethoven was 53. Though he had been totally deaf for years, Beethoven sat on stage with the orchestra and tried to assist in the direction of the music. This occasion produced one of the classic Beethoven anecdotes. Unaware that the piece had ended, Beethoven continued to beat time and had to be turned around to be shown the applause that he could not hear—the realization that the music they had just heard had been written by a deaf man overwhelmed the audience. A less romantic account of the same event comes from one of the violinists in the orchestra:

The work was studied with the diligence and conscientiousness that such a huge and difficult piece of music demanded. It came to the performance. An illustrious, extremely large audience listened with rapt attention and did not stint with

enthusiastic, thundering applause. Beethoven himself conducted, that is, he stood in front of the conductor's stand and threw himself back and forth like a madman. At one moment he stretched to his full height, at the next he crouched down to the floor, he flailed about with his hands and feet as though he wanted to play all the instruments and sing all the chorus parts . . . The actual direction was in Duport's hands; we musicians followed his baton only . . . Beethoven was so excited that he saw nothing that was going on about him, he paid no heed whatever to the bursts of applause, which his deafness prevented him from hearing in any case . . . He always had to be told when it was time to acknowledge the applause, which he did in the most ungracious manner imaginable.

The opening of the *Allegro ma non troppo*, quiet and harmonically uncertain, creates a sense of mystery and vast space. Bits of theme flit about in the murk and begin to coalesce, and out of these the main theme suddenly explodes to life and comes crashing downward—this has been universally compared to a streak of lightning, and surely that must have been Beethoven's intention. He introduces a wealth of secondary material—some lyric, some martial—but the opening subject dominates this sonata-form movement, returning majestically at crucial moments in the drama. The ending is particularly effective: the coda opens with ominous fanfares over quiet tremolo strings, and out of this darkness the main theme rises up one final time and is stamped out to close the movement.

The second movement, marked *Molto vivace*, is a scherzo built on a five-part fugue. The displaced attacks in the first phrase, which delighted the audience at the premiere, still retain their capacity to surprise; Beethoven breaks the rush of the fugue with a rustic trio for woodwinds and a flowing countermelody for strings. Some of the material in the scherzo was the first part of the symphony to be written—its principal theme appeared in Beethoven's notebooks as early as 1815, seven years before he began the actual composition of the symphony.

Beethoven at first conceived of the *Adagio molto e cantabile* in straightforward theme-and-variation form, based on the opening subject. In the course of its composition, however, he came up with a second theme he liked so much that he could not bring himself to leave it out, even though it had no real place in the movement's variation form. First heard in the second violins and violas, this second theme is of such radiant lyricism that Beethoven considered

having the chorus enter here rather than in the last movement. He rejected this idea but decided to keep the second theme in the movement; the clearest way to understand the resulting form is to see it as a set of variations with contrasting interludes based on the second subject.

The very opening of the finale has bothered many listeners. After the serenity of the third movement, the orchestra erupts with a dissonant blast. It hardly seems a proper opening for a movement whose ultimate message will be the dignity and brotherhood of man. But Beethoven's intention here was precise—he referred to this ugly opening noise as a *Schrecken-fanfare* (“terror-fanfare”), and with it he wanted to shatter the mood of the *Adagio* and prepare his listeners for the weighty issues to follow. Then begins one of the most remarkable passage in music: in a long recitative, cellos and basses consider a fragment of each of the three previous movements and reject them all. Then, still by themselves, they sing the theme that will serve as the basis of the final movement and are gradually joined by the rest of the orchestra. Again comes the strident opening blast, followed by the entrance of the baritone soloist, who puts into words what the cellos and basses have suggested: “Oh, friends, not these sounds! Rather let us sing something more pleasing and more joyful.” These words are not from Schiller's text but were written by Beethoven himself, and they help us understand the interrelation of the parts of the *Ninth*: each of the first three movements represents something entirely different and each has a validity of its own, but none offers *the* message that Beethoven will impart in the finale.

That truth will come in Schiller's text, with its exaltation of the fellowship of mankind and in man's recognition of his place in a universe presided over by a just and omnipotent god. Beethoven's choice of “An die Freude” as the text for his finale would probably have surprised Schiller himself, for the poet later came to dislike his own poem and spoke of it disparagingly. “An die Freude” was originally a drinking ode, and if the text is full of the spirit of brotherhood, it is also replete with generous praise for the glories of good drink. Beethoven used less than half of Schiller's original text, cutting all references to drink and certain other stanzas and retaining those that speak most directly to his evocation of a utopian vision of human brotherhood. Musically, the last movement is a series of variations on his opening theme, the music of each stanza varied to fit its text.

One of these sections deserves attention, for it has confused many listeners. The finale reaches an early climax when the chorus sings “und der Cherub steht vor Gott!” A moment of silence follows, and out of that silence the woodwinds begin to play some of the most

bumpkinish music Beethoven ever wrote. Critics have tried to make sense of this section in different ways—some hear it as military music, others as a village band, blatting and tooting away. It seems wildly out of place, a blot on the otherwise noble texture of the movement. But what Beethoven does with this makes it all clear. Gradually the pace quickens, and bit by bit the other sections of the orchestra join in, followed by the tenor solo (“Froh”) and the chorus. The music begins to surge ahead, and suddenly it takes off and soars, and out of that awkward little woodwind theme Beethoven builds a magnificent fugue for full orchestra. The theme that had seemed clownish moments before is now full of grandeur, and Beethoven’s music mirrors the message of the symphony: even the simplest and least likely thing is touched with divinity and—if properly understood—can be seen as part of a vast and noble universe.

In a world that daily belies the utopian message of the *Ninth Symphony*, it may seem strange that this music continues to work its hold on our imagination—it is difficult for us to take the symphony’s vision of brotherhood seriously when each morning’s headlines show us again the horrors of which man is capable. Perhaps the secret of its continuing appeal is that for the hour it takes us to hear the *Ninth Symphony*, the music reminds us not of what we too often are, but of what—at our best—we might be.