

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

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born in Bonn, baptized December 17, 1770; died in Vienna, March 26, 1827

The idea of setting Friedrich Schiller’s *An die Freude* (Ode to Joy) had attracted Beethoven since his days in Bonn, before he left for Vienna. On January 26, 1793, one of his patrons, Bartholomäus Fischenich, wrote to Charlotte von Schiller, “He proposes to compose Schiller’s *Freude*, strophe by strophe. I expect something perfect, since he is wholly devoted to the great and sublime.” At this point *Freude* had not been associated with any symphonic project.

Beethoven returned to the idea many times. In 1812 he jotted down a setting of the poem’s first line among sketches for the Seventh and Eighth symphonies, perhaps intended for a choral overture; they surfaced instead in the *Namensfeier* Overture. In 1818 Beethoven had in mind a symphony with voices “that could sing something pious, in the ancient modes,” but it was not until 1822–23 that he connected his Schiller idea with such a symphony, and even as late as the summer of 1823 he was still experimenting with instrumental solutions to the finale. (The finale of the A minor String Quartet, op. 132, was the beneficiary.)

To arrive at its final form in the Ninth Symphony, Beethoven cut and rearranged Schiller’s poem to suit his own poetic vision. Beethoven struggled considerably over how to link the choral section and its introductory instrumental variations to the lengthy preceding instrumental movements. He eventually hit upon the solution of a baritone recitative using his own words.

The melody for the *Ode to Joy* setting also underwent a long gestation period. Of special interest is its incarnation in the *Choral Fantasy*, op. 80, of 1808; that work, also for chorus and orchestra, employs a text by obscure poet Christoph Kuffner that is very similar in content and rhythm to Schiller’s *Freude* poem.

Beethoven’s first movement is of imposing stature, rooted in traditional sonata form, with an ingenious layer of variation and thematic transformation. About the celebrated opening, Donald Francis Tovey, well known for his penetrating music analyses, wrote, “Of all the passages in a work of art, the first subject of the first movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony has had the deepest and widest influence on later music.” This theme, proclaimed fortissimo in unison by the entire orchestra, grows out of a mysterious murmuring of open fifths in the strings. Opening themes arising from soft pedal tones, now common in the repertoire, all stem from the opening of the Ninth Symphony—Wagner’s *Das Rheingold*, Strauss’s *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Mahler’s First Symphony, to mention only a few.

The main theme of the second-movement scherzo, so perfect in its final form, went through an evolutionary process of several years, though it is clear in the sketches that Beethoven conceived of it as a fugue subject from the start. To make his brief but striking introduction to the fugue, he simply extracted the theme’s characteristic leaping gesture. Each iteration of the gesture adds another note in the home-key chord—an original and stunning presentation of an ordinary harmonic occurrence, which also provides one of the best timpani “licks” in the repertoire. After a trio that also uses contrapuntal techniques, the five-voice fugue returns. Just when it seems that the presto transition and trio are returning for yet another statement in the coda, Beethoven

abruptly cuts off the music and the movement comes to a sudden close—an artful device he had used in his Seventh Symphony.

Beethoven casts both the slow movement and the finale in variation form using quite different techniques. The slow movement begins by varying two alternating themes, an idea stemming from Haydn. Beethoven's two themes are in contrasting key and meter. Though the second theme is just as beautiful as the first, it is curiously abandoned after these two alternations; the remainder of the Adagio features variations on the first theme and an extensive coda.

Beethoven chose to write this symphony in the key of D minor, a key he used only rarely, well aware of its historical associations with despair, storminess, and oppression. He admired, for instance, the powerful examples of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Requiem. Beethoven's finale journeys from the darkness of the minor-key opening into the major-mode triumph of the *Ode to Joy*. He begins dramatically with a crashing discord (D minor with B-flats) and a furious seven-bar Presto, followed by cello/bass recitatives (which Beethoven had originally fitted with words) alternating with passages from each of the preceding movements. The introduction served as his vehicle for bringing the vocal parts into the Symphony. In a sketchbook where he usually kept musical rather than prose notes, Beethoven outlined this scheme:

This is a day of jubilation, worth singing about . . . (Theme of the first movement)
O no, that won't do; I want something more pleasant . . . (Theme of the second movement)
That is no better, merely rather more cheerful . . . (Theme of the third movement)
That's also too tender. Must find something more rousing like the . . .
I'll sing you something myself . . . (Theme of the fourth movement)
That will do!
Now I have found a way to express joy.

The ensuing variations—some instrumental, some vocal—treat the *Ode to Joy* theme freely, with contrasting episodes intervening periodically. These episodes include what Beethoven referred to as a “Turkish” part (a term from Mozart's time, indicating march music with percussion—bass drum, triangle, and cymbals); an energetic, climactic double fugue; and a joyful coda that is interrupted once by a meditative cadenza for the solo voices and concludes in a prestissimo whirlwind. A striking moment comes at the end of the third choral variation at “*steht vor Gott*” (stands before God) right before the “Turkish” march. The last word, sung on a harmonically unexpected chord, sends the following passage into a surprise key instead of following the typical path to the home key. Later the exposed octave leaps at the climax of the double fugue provide an exalting chill at the words “*der ganzen Welt*” (to the whole world).

Beethoven did most of his work on the Ninth Symphony in 1823, but did not complete the finishing touches until the next February. His thoughts then turned to having the Symphony performed, but he had doubts about Vienna as the locale because he had come to distrust the musical taste of the city; he made inquiries about having it performed in Berlin. When this got back to his friends and supporters they sent him a touching declaration of their appreciation and begged him to allow his latest works to be performed in Vienna. The result was a concert on May 7, 1824, that included the *Consecration of the House Overture*, parts of the *Missa solemnis*, and the Ninth Symphony.

Beethoven's desire to conduct the entire concert despite his deafness was accommodated by having him stand next to Michael Umlauf, whose beat the players had been strictly instructed to follow. The famous anecdote about the moving incident in response to the performance varies slightly according to the teller. Either after the Scherzo (according to the great pianist Sigmund Thalberg) or after the finale (as reported by contralto soloist Caroline Unger and by Beethoven's friend Anton Schindler), Beethoven stood turning over the pages of his score utterly deaf to the storm of applause until Mme. Unger pulled him by the sleeve and pointed to the audience, whereupon he turned and bowed.

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Scored for soprano, alto, tenor, and bass soloists, mixed chorus, 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, and strings

Text and Translation

An die Freude

O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!
sondern lasst uns angenehmere anstimmen,
und freudenvollere.

—*Beethoven*

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,

Ode to Joy

O friends, not these sounds!
Rather let us begin to sing more pleasantly
and more joyously.

Joy, fair spark of the gods,
daughter of Elysium,
We enter, intoxicated with fire,
Heavenly One, your holy place.
Your magic again unites
what custom strictly divided;
all men become brothers
where your gentle wings abide.

Whoever has had the great fortune
of being friend to a friend,
whoever has won a loving woman,
let him add his jubilation!
Yes, even he who calls but one soul
on earth his own!
And he who has never done it, let him
steal away, weeping, from this company.

All creatures drink joy
at Nature's breast,
all good, all evil ones
follow her trail of roses.
She gave us kisses and vines,
a friend, proven faithful to death;

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, überm Sternenzelt
Muss ein lieber Vater wohnen.

Ihr stürzt nieder, Millionen!
Ahnest du den Schöpfer, Welt?
Such ihn überm Sternenzelt!
Über Sternen muss er wohnen.

—*Friedrich Schiller*

Pleasure was given even to the worm
and the cherub stands before God.

Happy, as his suns fly
through heaven's magnificent design,
follow, brothers, your path,
joyfully, like a hero to victory.

Be embraced, ye millions!
This kiss to the whole world!
Brothers, beyond the starry sky
surely a loving Father dwells.

Do you fall prostrate, ye millions?
Do you sense the Creator, World?
Seek Him beyond the starry sky!
Beyond the stars He must dwell.

Phrases of the above text are alternated and combined, especially in the latter part of the movement.