

## Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827): Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, Op. 125

*by Michael Steinberg*

Few musicians would assert that the Ninth is the greatest of all symphonies, that it is the summit of Beethoven's achievement, perhaps not even that it is his finest symphony or, in any altogether personal way, their own favorite. Yet we treat it as though we did in fact believe all those things. It claims a special place, not only in the history of the symphony and in Beethoven's growth as an artist, mensch, and public figure, but also in our own hearts and heads, in what we remember in our lives and what we look forward to. A performance of it can never be an ordinary event, just another concert, and not even the phonograph record—whose democratic way of making all things indiscriminately accessible is certainly a mixed blessing—has been able to kill that. Insistently, its shadow falls across the music of the nineteenth century and the early years of our own. Everywhere, we hear the echoes of its mysterious opening, of its bizarreries, its recitatives and hymns, its publicly waged struggle for coherence and resolution.

More, by carrying to new heights the concept of the victory symphony as worked out in the *Eroica* and the Fifth, it redefines the nature of symphonic ambition. Explicitly, it seeks to make an ethical statement as much a musical one. It stands as roadblock, model—often a dangerous model—and inspiration. It demands that we come to terms with it. Adrian Leverkühn, the composer hero of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, must "revoke" it, and Michael Tippett began his Third Symphony, an eloquent report in music on the human condition in the year 1972, from the urge to respond to its

affirmation with some questions of his own. Quite simply, it is "the Ninth Symphony"—or even just "the Ninth"—and when Leverkühn gives voice to his need to "revoke the Ninth Symphony," we do not stop to wonder whether he means Haydn's or Dvořák's or Mahler's.

The Ninth is the confluence of many currents and forces in Beethoven's life: of an involvement since boyhood with the work of Friedrich von Schiller and a plan cherished over thirty years to set his ode *An die Freude* (To Joy); of a fugue subject jotted down in a notebook about 1815 and again in somewhat altered form two or three years later (this became the main theme of the scherzo); of an invitation from the Philharmonic Society of London to visit England in the winter of 1817-18 and to bring two new symphonies with him; of plans actually made around 1818 for two symphonies, one in D minor, the other to include a choral "Adagio Cantique... In ancient modes"; of Beethoven's acceptance in 1822 of the London Philharmonic Society's commission of a symphony, this being the outcome finally of the negotiations begun in 1817.

Since 1812, the year of the great and frustrated passion between himself and Antonie Brentano, "the Immortal Beloved," Beethoven's life had been in a continuous state of crisis, the most draining elements of which were those tied to the drawn-out litigation over the guardianship of his nephew Karl. Since 1812, the year of the Seventh and Eighth symphonies and of his last violin sonata, Opus 96, he had written little, at least measured by his standards of inspiration and industry. The other major works of the decade were the final revision of *Fidelio* and the E-minor Piano Sonata, Opus 90 (both in 1814); the two cello sonatas, Opus 102 (1815); the song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte* (To the Distant Beloved) and the A-major Piano Sonata, Opus 101 (both in 1816); and the *Hammerklavier* Sonata, Opus 106 (1819). Beethoven's legal battle with

his sister-in-law came to an end in April 1820 with a ruling in his favor—technically, anyway, though in fact Beethoven's assumption of guardianship over Karl precipitated new miseries for uncle and nephew alike.

In any event, Beethoven, as Maynard Solomon puts it, "set about reconstructing his life and completing his life's work." The process was slow. In what was left of 1820, he completed the E-major Piano Sonata, Opus 109, and the following year he was able to do most of the work on its two successors, the A-flat Sonata, Opus 110, and the C-minor, Opus 111. By 1822 he was again possessed by a rage of energy, putting the final touches on the last two sonatas, composing the *Consecration of the House* Overture, finishing the *Missa solemnis* (for which the deadline had been March 1820), and achieving most of the shockingly inventive *Diabelli Variations*.

As part of this regeneration, the various projects and ideas connected with the Ninth Symphony began to sort themselves out. In the summer of 1822, Beethoven was possibly still thinking of a pair of symphonies analogous to the Fifth/*Pastoral* and Seventh/Eighth pairs of 1808 and 1812. But by 1823, with his other projects completed, he was ready to focus on a single work, though he was not yet sure whether the finale would be vocal or instrumental (the material he sketched for a "finale instrumentale" grew in 1825 into the last movement of the A-minor String Quartet, Opus 132). The first movement was ready fairly early in 1823; most of the remainder was complete at least in outline in Beethoven's head by the end of that year. Not surprisingly, what gave Beethoven the most trouble was the question of how to get into the finale; how, that is, to write a passage whose task it would be to "justify" the unprecedented intervention of the human voice in a symphony. The "Eureka!" moment seems to have occurred around November 1823. Anton Schindler, Beethoven's amanuensis of those years, tells us that "one day [Beethoven] entered the

room exclaiming 'I've got it! I've got it!' and showed me the sketchbook with the words, 'Let us sing the song of the immortal Schiller—*Freude*,' whereupon a solo voice immediately begins the hymn to joy.’

Once the score was finished, a performance had to be organized. Beethoven, annoyed with the Viennese and their passion for Rossini, flirted with Berlin, and only the energetic and flattering intervention of his friends saved the premiere for the city that had been his home for the previous thirty-one years.

Endless difficulties attended the choice of theater, conductor, and soloists, not to mention questions of budget and the price of tickets. The program itself occasioned more argument; it was definitely good that the original plan of preceding the new symphony with the *Missa solemnis* in its entirety was scrapped. (The three movements of the Mass that were, in the event, sung had to be billed as Three Grand Hymns to get around the ecclesiastical interdict against the performance of liturgical music in a theater.)

Beethoven was especially pleased with his astonishing young women soloists: Henriette Sontag, only eighteen, had already created the title role in Weber's *Euryanthe* and was to go on to a career of high distinction; the twenty-year-old Karoline Unger later earned the considerable regard of Donizetti and Bellini. The tenor, Anton Haitzinger, then twenty-eight, also had an impressive career ahead of him; little is known of Joseph Seipelt, the bass, other than that he was a compromise third-choice candidate and that at the concert his high F-sharp gave out.

Not least of the touchy questions that had to be dealt with was that of Beethoven's own participation. Although by then as good as totally deaf, he had nonetheless tried

to conduct the dress rehearsal of the November 1822 *Fidelio* revival and suffered a dreadful and humiliating disaster. (For that matter, remember Spohr's account of the preparations for the Seventh Symphony's premiere in 1813.) Even so, the possibility was discussed of having Beethoven conduct the exceedingly difficult *Consecration of the House* Overture. That did not happen, but he did stand on the stage during the Ninth Symphony before an orchestra and chorus who had been instructed by the "real" conductor, Michael Umlauf, to pay no attention to him.

Though a financial catastrophe for Beethoven, the concert evoked intense enthusiasm. The scherzo was actually interrupted by applause—probably at the surprise timpani entrance in the second section—and an encore was demanded. When the performance ended, Beethoven was still hunched over, turning the leaves of his score, and Karoline Unger gently turned his head around so that he might see the applause he could not hear.

Schott of Mainz published the symphony in the summer of 1826. Beethoven agonized long over the dedication, rejecting in turn his pupil Ferdinand Ries (the one who had been so startled by the "wrong" horn entrance in the *Eroica*), Emperor Francis I of Austria, Tsar Alexander I of Russia, the London Philharmonic Society, and Louis XVIII of France. He settled at last on Frederick William III of Prussia, son of the cellist-king, Frederick William II, for whom Mozart had written his last three string quartets. Beethoven's choice of this drably cautious monarch seems off, but Maynard Solomon suggests a haunting explanation. Since 1810, rumors had circulated in print that Beethoven was the illegitimate son of Frederick William II (or in some versions Frederick the Great), and no appeals to concern for his mother's honor or just common sense moved the composer to deny these stories. "One wonders," Solomon

writes, "if it is altogether accidental that Beethoven chose to dedicate his symphony on the brotherhood of man to the son of the man rumored to be his own father."

The Ninth Symphony traces a path from darkness to light, and of this process and of the struggle for clarification. The famous opening, imitated over and over in the nineteenth century, offers a microscopic view. We hear at first just two very soft notes, E and A, sustained in the horns, vibrating in violins and cellos. As at the beginning of the *Eroica*, where the initial E-flat chords were made horizontal and turned into a melody, two-note figures—sometimes E/A, sometimes A/E—detach themselves as melodic fragments. Their appearances come to be more closely spaced, and they cease to be so surely and regularly downbeating. The two notes even become three. The effect is of crescendo, but it is a crescendo achieved by rhythmic and harmonic tension and by the gradual expansion of range as well as by actual increase in volume.

At a certain point in the crescendo the E's drop away, to be instantly replaced by D's in the bassoons and horns that cloud the texture more than they penetrate it; the new note in fact sounds strangely dissonant against the prevailing A's. The D turns out to be the "answer" the whole orchestra agrees on at the great *fortissimo* summit of that first crescendo; the tense anticipation of that note is Beethoven's utterly personal mark. The same could be said of the powerful perversity that has Beethoven finally arrive in D minor with a great downward-plunging theme that begins by emphasizing A.

This is the only first movement in a Beethoven symphony in which no repeat is marked for the exposition. Even so, this is, as the scale of the initial arrival at D minor suggests it will be, a huge structure. The material itself is diverse, ranging from the

sternly angular to the softly lyric, from the calmly scored to the intensely intertwined. The most songful of Beethoven's ideas, a sweetly euphonious melody for woodwinds, has about it a haunting sense of something familiar, but the speed of events is such that we scarcely have time to trace this.

The entrance into the development is striking. Beethoven has taken the music to B-flat major, and that is where he concludes the exposition with a series of emphatic cadences. At this point, instead of modulating to another harmonic area, he picks the music up and puts it down somewhere else (as he had at the start of the *Eroica's* first-movement coda). To be specific, he goes the smallest possible step from B-flat to A (with a wonderful orchestral detail: a *pianissimo* A on trumpets and timpani half a measure after the shift, as though to ratify it). And we are back to the A/E open fifths of measure 1. Beethoven, in other words, sets us up to believe that he is going to repeat the exposition in the conventional way, and it is the startling intrusion of F-sharp to produce the chord of D major—the more startling because still *pianissimo*—that alerts us to the fact that we are on a new patch of road.

D major turns out to be a mirage. Of course Beethoven is never causal about placing anything so noticeable, but for the moment we must wait to discover what else he has in mind. He presents the development in two large chapters. The first is concerned with stirring the elements of the first theme around in various ways: here the moods and sonority shift quickly and often. The second chapter is also based on the first theme, but now Beethoven treats it in a fugued texture.

As the temperature rises, we come to realize that the F-sharp in the D-major chords at the start of the development was the seed of the most dramatic event in the movement. This is the recapitulation. Beethoven approaches it with a superlative sense of drama

and suspense, and when the long buildup on the dominant has reached the bursting point, the resolution is not the D-minor arrival that we expect, but a cataclysm in D-major. The sense of pressure is tremendous because the chord is not given with the stabilizing D in the bass but, rather, is tensely poised over the critical F-sharp. At the same time, the D-ness, so to speak, is affirmed by a thirty-eight-measure timpani roll on D.

After this volcanic entry, the rest of the recapitulation seems more normal, but *seems* must be stressed. Everything is recognizable as a revisiting of something from the exposition, but at the same time, Beethoven sheds new light on every element and every event, by placing it in a new harmonic context, by scoring it differently, and, most subtly and beautifully, by his constant contractions and expansions. For example, ideas that occurred two measures apart earlier on are now separated by four measures; on the other hand, a fifty-measure process is now compressed into twelve.

The coda is astonishing. First of all, it is exceptionally long. In thematic manipulation it partakes of the character of a second development, though the steady harmonic orientation to D minor makes it very different from a development. D major makes a touching return in a dolce horn solo, but here again Beethoven withholds something by setting the episode over an A in the bass rather than the firm D. In a wonderfully imaginative passage, single woodwinds add their chatter to the serene horn solo, only to find themselves gradually drowned by the growing assertiveness of the strings as they stalk up and down broken chord figures. Then the strings recede, to reveal that the woodwinds' chatter has never ceased. For the final section of this chapter, Beethoven introduces one of his ostinato basses to initiate a crescendo to the final *fortissimo* statement of the first D-minor theme. Franck and Bruckner are two composers who were much taken with this device.



The scherzo is a huge structure, as obsessive in its driving and exuberant play with few ideas as the first movement was generous in its richness of material. Much as the tiny scherzo in the *Hammerklavier* Sonata is a satiric variant of the ferocious first movement, so does this scherzo continue—bizarrely—what came before. Here Beethoven starts right off with his descending D-minor chord, but was a chord ever laid out more oddly than this one with its irrepressible kettledrums? When first we heard D major, it was amid the roaring flames of the first movement's recapitulation. When it returns in the trio, it is rustic, comfortable, more in the manner of the pastoral horn solo in the first movement's coda. There is also something about it of hymnic or communal music. It reaches forward towards the world of the Ode to Joy, and bit by bit we begin to get the idea that the conquest of D major is at the center of the Ninth Symphony's scenario.

Two bars of upbeat—clarinets, bassoons, middle and lower strings—ease us into the Adagio. Beethoven at first alternates two themes of contrasting gait (Adagio molto e cantabile in 4/4 and *Andante moderato* in 3/4), key (B-flat major and D major), and temperature. He varies both themes, drops the second altogether after a single return (in G major—D must still be held in reserve), but envelops the first in ever more fanciful decoration. It is carried to a double climax with noble fanfares and a magnificent striding into new harmonic regions. The effect is one of exultation and, at the end, profound peace.

The metronome mark in the score of 60 to the beat for the Adagio is worth observing; however, conductors are so much in thrall to tradition, one based on a language of solemnity from much later in the nineteenth century, that the tempo we most often hear is likely to be something like two-thirds of the one Beethoven indicates. At the

traditional slow pace, the music must move with four, or even eight impulses per measure to Beethoven's tempo, the effect will be of scramble and haste. If, on the other hand, you pay attention to how the harmony moves and let that determine your breathing and pulse rate, you will discover that with only two impulses per measure you can, at exactly the tempo Beethoven prescribes, have a wonderfully spacious sense of forward motion, a true *adagio molto*. In one of the later variations, the violins take wing in fantastical flights of sixteenth-notes and sixteenth-note triplets. At Beethoven's tempo we can hear that he does not intend an *espressivo*, much-leaned-into violin melody with some vague wind chords behind; rather, the winds play the theme, clearly and intelligibly, and the violins add an ecstatic—and brilliantly virtuosic—counterpoint, comparable to the rapturous obbligato with which the solo violin accompanies the *Benedictus* in the *Missa solemnis*.

The most horrendous noise Beethoven could devise shatters the peace in which this great *Adagio* concludes, and now an extraordinary drama is played before us. Cellos and basses protest what Wagner called the "Schreckensfanfare" (fanfare of terror) in the gestures of operatic recitative. Instrumental recitatives are not in themselves new: examples so specific one could set words to them occur in such familiar works as Mozart's great Piano Concerto in E-flat, K. 271, and Haydn's Concertante in B-flat, and one scholar has pointed out close and particular resemblances of the Beethoven Ninth recitatives to those in a piano concerto by Ludwig Böhner. But these recitatives of Beethoven's are not just stylized allusion to opera; they are part of a real scenario. At stake is a problem that Beethoven turned into a mighty headache for generations of composers to follow: what are we going to do for a finale?

The suggestion the orchestra makes initially is to return to the first movement. As silly as it is unlikely, this proposal is turned down by the low strings in an angry recitative.

Suggestions to go back to the second and third movements meet the same scornful, furious response. Finally, after three tries and three rejections, the woodwinds offer something apparently new and different. It is the mere adumbration of a theme, but even so, those hectoring cellos and basses change their tone: with some emphatic cheering along by winds and drums, they lose no time in expressing their enthusiasm. Now we might in retrospect understand why the lyric melody near the beginning of the first movement sounded somehow familiar: it foreshadowed the fresh idea that the woodwinds have just offered.

Are there listeners left who, when they hear that foreshadowing, do not hear beyond it to the melody to come? But what must this moment have been like for Franz Schubert and the other who heard it in the Kärntnerthor Theater on 7 May 1824 and for whom the tune just around the corner was not yet a fact of life? Those four bars of quiet melody, posed on a dominant harmony, all eagerness and anticipation, what did they sound like, what did they suggest?

The orchestra rounds off the strings recitative with a firm cadence, and without a second's pause for breath—a wonderful and characteristic detail wiped out by generation after generation of mindless conductors—one of the world's great songs begins. It was J. W. N. Sullivan, in his beautiful book *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development*, who tied to the music of the composer's last years Wordsworth's phrase about "a mind forever/Voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone." But we also find in late Beethoven a quest for simplicity, for immediacy, and here, his "großer Wurf," his great gamble, to invent *the* quintessentially popular tune succeeds miraculously. (It includes that one anticipation, the shift that comes one beat before we expect it—the note to which the word *alle* will eventually be set—to remind us that this is, after all, by Beethoven.) This sound Beethoven spreads before us in a

series of simple and compelling orchestral variations, interrupted by a return of the horrendous fanfare that began the movement. What earlier was matter for our imaginations now becomes explicit. The recitative is really sung now, and to words that Beethoven himself invented as preface to Schiller's Ode (and not quite the ones he had blurted out to Schindler): "O friends, not these tones; Rather, let us tune our voices In more pleasant and more joyful song."

Having begun with variations, Beethoven continues on that path. It is a free set that begins simply, much like the orchestral variations that followed the first statement of the theme. The chorus seconds the solo bass, but Beethoven reserves the sound of the soprano voice, solo and chorus, for a line that must have pierced the ever lorn and lonely composer deeply: "Wer ein holdes Weib errungen,/Mische seinen Jubel ein!" (He who has found a goodly woman,/Let him add his jubilation too!). The vision of the Cherub standing before God is set before us by a harmonic diversion of great simplicity and stunning power. Then, with a boldness of contrast that no other composer except perhaps Mahler would have dared, he brings us the sound of a distant and approaching marching band as men are bidden to follow their courses "gladly, like a hero to the conquest." The orchestra continues the discourse in a double fugue, whose complexities are effectively spelled by a return of the Ode in grandly plain form.

Classical variations traditionally had a slow variation near the end. Here this becomes what is in effect an entire slow movement. The command, "Seid umschlungen, Millionen!" (Be embraced, ye Millions!), is given at first by men's voices, trombones, and low strings in unison, in a manner meant to evoke church chant—a remnant of the old plan for an "Adagio Cantique...in ancient modes." For Schiller's verses about the Creator, the loving Father who surely dwells "above the canopy of the stars,"

Beethoven invents the most mysterious, anti-gravitational, unearthly music in the symphony. While he does not want the Adagio to be too slow, he does want the singing and playing to be *divoto*. After the vision of the Creator, all is pure joy, and the music, pausing only for an ecstatically virtuosic cadenza for the solo quartets, rushes headlong to its intoxicated finish.

Schiller himself did not think much of his ode *To Joy*—and who, reading it away from Beethoven's setting, would disagree with him? He had been dead eighteen years when Beethoven set it to music, and it is impossible, though intriguing, to guess how he might have reacted to Beethoven's symphony. But Beethoven read into it what he needed. What is sure is that he transformed it, not only in spirit, but literally, by selecting, omitting (above all, omitting), transposing, reordering. And once the words have entered, they, and of course even more, Beethoven's transcendent responses to them, sweep us along

As joyously as His suns fly  
Across the glorious landscape of the heavens  
...Gladly, like a hero to the conquest.

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