

## **Concert: Beethoven 9th**

*Bernard Holland - The New York Times*

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LAST night's concert by the Boston Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall gave us, first of all, a progress report on a young ensemble hovering between its beginnings four years ago as a maverick community orchestra and its still-unrealized ambitions.

Second, it offered an unusual look at a familiar piece – the Beethoven Ninth Symphony – namely, a performance in which the composer's much questioned and usually disregarded metronome markings were taken with great seriousness by the conductor Benjamin Zander.

Beethoven welcomed the invention of the metronome, which he saw as one means of making his music clear to present and future performers. Using this device later in his life, he went carefully through the bulk of his writings affixing tempo designations to each. Many of the markings are so rapid – almost to the point of unplayability – that subsequent interpreters have come to accuse either the composer's metronome or the composer himself of aberrant behavior. Mr. Zander disagrees, and Monday's performance seemed aimed at proving that Beethoven's tempos are not wrong, but simply misunderstood.

The qualities of the Boston Philharmonic, in a curious way, spoke both for and against Mr. Zander's policies. The rapid tempo in Beethoven's Adagio, for example, profited greatly from the orchestra's ardent string sound, and the heightened speed simply added that much more grace to the movement's sense of otherworldliness. This same

tempo, on the other hand, posed terrible problems for Mr. Zander's violinists, who simply could not keep up with the triplet 16th notes.

The slower tempos in the choral finale offered new opportunities for grandeur and weight and an alternative to the sense of hysterical onslaught we often hear. They added at the same time, however, the danger of a plodding uniformity; and, as the music developed, Mr. Zander was never quite able to lift Beethoven's ideas clear of their thudding, marchlike beginnings.

The slower tempos also strained mightily the sopranos of the Chorus Pro Musica, who had that much longer to carry aloft Beethoven's killing extended high notes. But then, these stratospheric moments have a way of transfixing choruses with such awe and terror that somehow a way through is found. This chorus managed, too, but just barely.

In general, the Boston Philharmonic asked some valid questions about Beethoven performance practices and how they have developed – or perhaps degenerated – over the years. But these earnest young players never quite mustered the kind of collective technique necessary to provide any real answers. The orchestra performed honorably despite the strains and roughnesses, but it will take securer playing than this to really test Mr. Zander's faith in Beethoven and his metronome. The soloists – all good – were Jennifer Barron, Pamela Gore, Gene Tucker and David Arnold.