

Notes on Beethoven's Ninth Symphony

by Christopher H. Gibbs

June 13, 2006 - Throughout his career, Beethoven was a fervent believer in Enlightenment values and found ways to express those beliefs in many of his compositions, as well as in his letters and other writings. One of the reasons for the nearly universal appeal of his Ninth Symphony is that people enjoying or seeking freedom see this work as exquisitely expressing a message they wish loudly to proclaim. And that message is simple, almost embarrassingly naïve, one we learn as children: People should get along, we are all brothers and sisters.

An Enlightenment Testament

As a child of the Enlightenment, Beethoven grew up during the American and French revolutions. He later followed political events closely in the newspapers and experienced war first hand when Napoleon's troops invaded Vienna in 1805 and 1809. Beethoven's first large composition, written at the age of 19, was an impressive 40-minute cantata commemorating the death of Emperor Joseph II, who had done so much to liberalize the Austrian empire in the 1780s. Years later, Beethoven struggled to write his lone opera, "Fidelio," which tells the story of a loving wife saving her husband, an unjustly jailed political prisoner. Through her heroic deeds he is rescued and tyranny exposed.

For his last symphony, Beethoven returned to a lengthy poem by Friedrich Schiller that he had long wanted to set to music but for which he had never quite managed to find the right mode of expression: the "Ode to Joy" (1785). Schiller's famous words state that in a new age the old ways will no longer divide people and that "all men shall become brothers." Since its premiere in Vienna in May 1824, performances of the Ninth Symphony have become almost sacramental occasions, as musicians and audiences alike are exhorted to universal fraternity.

The Ultimate Symphony

On a more purely musical level, perhaps no other piece of music has exerted such an impact on later composers. How, many wondered, should one write a symphony after the Ninth? Schubert, Berlioz, Brahms, Wagner, Bruckner, Mahler—the list goes on—all dealt with this question in fascinating ways that fundamentally affected the course of 19th-century music. Schubert, who apparently attended the premiere, briefly quoted the "joy" theme in his own final symphony, written the following year. Almost every Bruckner symphony begins in the manner of the Ninth—low string rumblings that seem to suggest the creation of a musical world. Mendelssohn, Mahler, and Shostakovich followed the model of a choral finale. Wagner was perhaps the composer most influenced by the Ninth, arguing that in it Beethoven pointed the way to the "Music of the Future," a universal drama uniting words and tones, in short, Wagner's own operas.

But composers were not the only ones to become deeply engaged with the Ninth, to struggle with its import and meaning. For more than a century, the work has surfaced at crucial times and places. As the ultimate "feel good" piece, the Ninth has been used at various openings of the Olympic Games, bringing all nations together in song. Its melody is the official anthem of the European Union. The Ninth has also appeared on many solemn occasions. Within recent memory, we may recall protestors playing the Ninth in Tiananmen Square in Beijing or German students doing so during the fall of the Berlin Wall. There were many performances in the wake of 9/11, when the Ninth was once again enlisted for its universal and hopeful message.