

**Ludwig van Beethoven – Symphony No. 9 in D minor Opus. 125**

This monumental work is undoubtedly born out of the period of *Weimar Classicism* made historic by the work of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller during the period 1788–1832. The concept that academia could cause such a '*kulturkampf*' in the areas of philosophy, science, psychology, art, literature, and aesthetics was not only a continuance of 'renaissance' trends but has always produced exciting moments in human achievement. The 12<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance gave us the *Vulgate* Bible, academic dialogue and huge advances in Common and Canon Law. The 16<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance gave us the concept of the modern university, where young men could formally study history, the classics and literature – without being clerics. And so it was with the '*Sturm und Drang*' of the Age of Enlightenment.

Furthermore, the political landscape of Europe during the very quick rise and fall of the Napoleonic Empire, almost compelled commentary from artists – since all were affected in such tangible ways. Similarly, the ideas of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* that had provided the maxim for the French revolution had already taken root on the north American continent where a constitution had been set down by 1789. It is almost surprising that Beethoven didn't write an "American" Symphony.

The struggle that comes during the period of European Revolution is but a cry for freedom – and the expression of artistic values that would pertain to '*Freude*' ('joy')– relate to human dignity and freedom. It is a quick, just and relevant step to '*Freiheit*' ('freedom') used during the 'Fall of the Wall' and Leonard Bernstein's historic performance of this work in Berlin on Christmas Day, 1989.

The Philharmonic Society in London commissioned this work in 1817, the same year that Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" was published. However, the gestation period for this symphony started much earlier. Since his youth Beethoven had been inspired by Schiller's text '*An die Freude*' and was internally committed to setting it to music. This was his opportunity – and though the text follows Schiller's revisions of 1803, it has Beethoven's personal stamp on it - in particular the additional lines of text as marked in this programme. \*

So, what forces would be appropriate to such a broad inner conviction? The scope of this symphony is immediately apparent from the opening bars – the 'bare fifth' in the music throwing open the field for titanic birth. The first movement, following traditional form, manages to conjure a spirit of majesty and possibly depicts the imperial establishment. The second movement, reminiscent of the driving force of the seventh symphony seems to be an 'unshackling' from what has gone before, with strong rhythmic tensions giving way to a 'trio' section of warmth and melody. The third movement, a melancholic paean of meditation is the calm before the storm.

The fourth movement which Dr. Charles Rosen describes as a symphony within a symphony is also in four defined sections performed without breaks. The first section contains the exposition of themes and the introduction of the choral splendour that literally 'gives voice' to the sentiments of Schiller's text. The second section is the almost 'turkish' march given to the tenor – with the characteristic '*becken angebunden*' (cymbal attached to bass drum) of military marches – a device to be used later and so often by Mahler. The third section starts with the '*Seid umschlungen, Millionen*' appeal from the tenors and basses and introduces the concept of the Divine Father in Heaven, who surely *must* be loving and omnipresent above the firmament. The finale leads from the fugue that joins together "*seid umschlungen*" and "*freude schöner*" to the culminating triumph of God's own light or *Götterfunken*.

Despite its London commission from the Philharmonic Society - the work was premiered in Vienna at the Kärntnertor Theater on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1824 with forces that John Bell Young describes as "a reflection of its largesse as much as its purpose, which was as much musical as it was humanistic." The later performances with Ferdinand Ries topped four hundred performers on stage, and the idea of the 'massed force' was sealed. In the first performance, Kapellmeister Michael Umlauf conducted – with Beethoven on stage as a 'co-maestro'. Following his similar experiences with a performance of *Fidelio* two years earlier, Herr Umlauf had instructed all performers to ignore Beethoven's gestures, since it was clear that he could no longer hear the music.

This did not stop that first performance being an outpouring of support for the composer. Vienna's usually staid audience gave the master five standing ovations – during which it is reported that contralto Caroline Unger walked over and turned him around to accept the adulation. The roars from the audience and the continuing cheers gave concern to a military squadron who were called in to 'keep the peace'. Beethoven was visibly moved. Though the subsequent performance of this work a few weeks later met with shadowed enthusiasm and poor attendance – the work which we know and love had already etched itself into the conscience of humanity.

Beethoven's ability to move the spirit and capture the heart of political struggle have made him an icon of political symbolism. During the Second World War, Beethoven remained a constant symbol for Germany, but interestingly also filled the halls across the channel with performances of Beethoven's Fifth with its morse code opening symbolizing 'V' for victory.

The ninth symphony has long been the yardstick for venerable maestri. Arturo Toscanini – having performed it several times - notably in 1948 - only lent his assent to the famous RCA Victor recording of 1952 with the NBC Orchestra. This timeless performance with Farrell, Merriman, Peerce and Scott, with the legendary Robert Shaw Chorale is still a benchmark recording with Toscanini's trademark tautness and rhythmic drive. A far more teutonic

interpretation is Wilhelm Furtwängler's performance of 1951 at re-opening of the Bayreuther Festspielhaus. When the Festspielhaus first opened, there was a performance of Beethoven's Ninth – with Richard Wagner conducting - and Arthur Nikisch, another musical giant playing in the orchestra. It was fitting that this piece was chosen in place of the usual Wagner opera to re-open the fabled theatre after its suspension by allied forces . This now legendary interpretation with Schwarzkopf, Hogen, Hopf and Edelmann is essentially 'romantic' in concept and deeply spiritual. Both these fine performances allow us to understand the wide gulf within musical interpretation that this symphony affords, now including modern interpretations on period instruments by Norrington, Herreweghe and Gardiner.

The 'Ninth' continues to be the chosen piece for spectacular public events – invoking its special political spirit of 'brotherhood'. Its famous melody is the National Anthem of the European Union. Daniel Barenboim has performed it with Israeli and Palestinian youth - performing as the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra. Seiji Ozawa performed the last movement at the 1998 Winter Olympics, symbolic of the brotherhood of all nations. Now, we are proud to present this time-honoured and challenging work – a historic milestone for any orchestral organization - achieved remarkably quickly by our Symphony Orchestra of India.

***Zane Dalal (2009)***