

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1779-1827)

***Meerestille und glückliche Fahrt, Op. 112* (“Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage”)**

Work composed: 1815

World premiere: December 25, 1815, in Vienna, Beethoven conducting

Despite recognizing Beethoven's genius, Goethe described the unruly and unkempt composer as loud and vulgar when they met at Teplitz in 1812. Beethoven, on his part, had complete admiration for the German poet/philosopher, setting to music several dozen of Goethe's poems as songs, and such imposing scores as the overture and incidental music to *Egmont*. Three years after their meeting, Beethoven composed his cantata, “Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage,” based on two poems by the German author. When the piece was published in 1822, the composer sent a copy to Goethe with a brief dedication; the poet never responded, and Beethoven was nonplussed. A second letter followed a year later, urging acknowledgement, again to no avail.

In his superb and penetrating biography of the composer, Maynard Solomon described “Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage” as “a small masterpiece of tone painting, which treats one of Beethoven's favorite subjects—tranquility penetrated by agitation, dissolving into joyful triumph.” The first poem deals with the fears of a ship's crew caught in “the irons,” e.g., no wind and hence no movement. The music is disturbingly quiet save for two terror-filled eruptions from the chorus. The arrival of life-saving winds in the second poem dissolves the gloom and apprehension as Beethoven conveys the liberating energy through flowing triplets and hearty shouts of deliverance from the chorus.

Composed for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four French horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings.

Duration: 10 minutes

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

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

Work composed: 1822-24

World premiere: May 7, 1824, in Vienna, Beethoven conducting

At roughly 65 minutes, the Ninth Symphony is twice as long as a typical Classical-period symphony (the Eighth, for example, typically runs about 26 minutes). Beyond the question of size, however (and one must mention that his Third Symphony, the “Eroica,” clocked in at a hefty 50 minutes or more), the Ninth clearly was both the fulfillment of a change in attitude about the nature of the symphony and a model for succeeding generations of composers to emulate or assimilate. Beginning with the *Eroica*, Beethoven began to transform the symphony from an objective musical form to a philosophical/emotional/spiritual statement about the nature of mankind. With the Ninth, the extra-musical message required Beethoven to add a sung text that expressed the democratic ideals that emerged

during the Enlightenment of the late 18th century and which would furnish the energy for much of the political and social upheavals of the Romantic era and beyond.

Even at the time, commentators were sensitive to the power and uniqueness of the Ninth Symphony, though their reasons and observations often seem contradictory. In 1841, a review in *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* of a performance led by Mendelssohn opined: “The grandiose D-minor symphony, the most wonderful, most mysterious, and most subjective work by Beethoven, closed the concert as it closed the artistic life of the great, eternal master. At the same time, it became the keystone of a truly remarkable artistic period, exalted by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven.” The author in his remarks saw this piece as a summation; it is clearly a retrospective viewpoint. To Wagner, on the contrary, the Ninth was nothing less than a dawning of a new era of music. He interpreted the finale’s *Ode to Joy* text by Friedrich Schiller as an avatar of his own music dramas, as if to say that the purely instrumental symphony was a dead end in need of replacement by an artistic creation that embraced music, literature and the visual arts.

Composers of the 19th century drew inspiration from the work. Many of Bruckner’s symphonies begin with a similar evocation of primordial chaos out of which his musico-spiritual universe forms. On perhaps a more mundane level, the Overture to Wagner’s *Flying Dutchman* begins with “hollow fifths” that absolutely mirror the opening of the Ninth. So too Brahms in his First Piano Concerto and Dvořák in his 7th Symphony begin portentously in the nether regions of the orchestra in a manner that obviously hearkens back to the opening minutes of the Ninth Symphony—same key, too! Mahler follows suit, as well, particularly in his *Resurrection* Symphony, but elsewhere as well. Needless to say, both Bruckner and Mahler certainly took the Ninth’s prodigious length to heart, producing several symphonies that actually exceed Beethoven’s in overall duration.

Beethoven thought long and hard about his “Choral” Symphony. Though much of its composition occurred in 1822-23, sketches reveal that he was already drafting the beginning of the vast opening movement as early as 1816. The idea of incorporating Schiller’s *An die Freude* (“To joy,” written in 1785) came to the composer earlier still, in 1793, well before he had composed his First Symphony. Of the original poem’s 18 sections Beethoven selected about half, rearranging and repeating stanzas to fit his own musical conception.

The story of the Ninth Symphony’s premiere in 1824 is the stuff of legend. The composer was almost completely deaf (though insisted on conducting anyway) and had to be turned toward the audience by the mezzo-soprano soloist, Caroline Unger, to witness the enthusiastic applause accorded him by the attending audience. Their response must have seemed especially reassuring since Beethoven had to be persuaded to give the first performance in Vienna. He had expressed serious doubts about Viennese receptivity in the 1820s, so enamored were the Austrian capital’s citizens of Italian opera to the exclusion of “serious” symphonic music. At rehearsals, in fact, Beethoven refused to simplify the vocal parts, telling the singers they had been spoiled by performing too much Italian music. Lest we think that Beethoven thought only about artistic issues, Anton Schindler (the composer’s friend and early biographer) reported that Beethoven fainted when he learned

how little money was made by the concert.

And now to the music: the enormous first movement seems even vaster in scale than its sheer length suggests. The opening tremolo-like figure in strings serves as a kind of painterly wash filled in initially by open fifths intoned by the brass before the initial theme tentatively unfolds with a tonality-defining minor or major third (F or F-sharp). Even when he finally enters an F natural about half a minute into the movement, establishing D-minor as the home key, the swirling orchestral figures almost conjure up the aural equivalent of an interstellar nebula in the earliest stages of coalescing into an astral body. The basic intervals of the primary theme, D, F, A and the octave D, form an example of an *Ur tema*, a kind of thematic nugget made of from the notes that define a triad; this kind of “tune” (if we may call it that) is a uniquely German/Austrian construct having its roots in Haydn but extending forward through Bruckner, Mahler and Richard Strauss (as in the opening minutes of *Also sprach Zarathustra*).

Another factor in creating a sense of enormous space and time is how Beethoven in this movement tends to resolve harmonic sequences on weak beats, which tends to add to the effect of continual motion. There are virtually no cadences, or resting points, either, furthering the sense of a long, arduous journey through the dark anguish of D-minor. To emphasize the funereal aspects of this massive conception, Beethoven introduces a strangely affecting chromatic theme in the lengthy coda, its half-step descents no-doubt recognizable to his contemporaries as a symbol of death. (Think of Dido’s “Lament” from Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* and the “Crucifixus” from Bach’s Mass in B minor for two earlier examples.)

What follows this exhausting and relentlessly dramatic opening movement is not an expected slow movement, but another quick-paced jaunt, this time a driven scherzo whose main theme is articulated not only by the usual orchestral suspects, but by the timpani in the third (of four) rhythmic thrusts that make up the motif. The Trio in duple meter consists of variations in which a short, folk-like tune is repeated over and over with different accompanying figures and harmonies.

The glorious *Adagio* grows from two related themes, one in B-flat, the other in D-major, and both given full variation treatment by one of the great masters of that form. The moods of this movement vacillate between serenity and aspiration to perhaps a higher spiritual state suggested by upwardly reaching violin figurations. The enormous contrast between this slowly unfolding, reflective and warmly human movement and the energetic, even manic, preceding scherzo enhances the scope of the symphony ever further.

The famously familiar finale opens with a harshly dissonant *Schreckensfanfare* fashioned from the unstable commingling of D-minor and B-flat major chords; when repeated further along, it has been changed into a new-fangled chord made from all the notes of a D-minor scale. Even as radical a composer as Berlioz felt uneasy about these dissonant chords, wondering if they were “an infringement on the dignity of art.” In between these outbursts, the music resembles an operatic recitative, though played on instruments rather than sung. After the second dissonant blast, Beethoven slowly unveils his trump card, the well-loved

“Ode to Joy” theme on a solo orchestral cello.

The movement is a vast set of variations on the “Ode” tune. The first three variations are purely instrumental, the only changes deriving from the addition of harmonic accompaniments. The melody itself remains as originally stated. Not quite literal quotations of themes from the first three movements reinforce the notion of a journey through time, space and ultimately resolution in triumphant D-major glory—the key of the “Hallelujah!” chorus and the “Gloria” from the B-minor Mass.

The unfolding of the variations seems to embrace the whole range of human experience, touching upon bumptious rusticity, a “Turkish” march, massed choral voices, individual ariose solos, a musical tour de force in the guise of an enormous double fugue, and so on. In its very inclusiveness the finale of the Ninth Symphony seems a prescient evocation of what Mahler would say eight decades hence, that the symphony is indeed a world. No other work approaches Beethoven’s Ninth in its heartfelt humanity and ultimate optimism, another powerful reason it continues to hold sway in our collective heart.

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