

## Ode to Joy

*Saturday, April 13th, 2019*

Perhaps no single work has loomed larger in the history of Western classical music than the ninth and final symphony by Ludwig van Beethoven. Beethoven's Ninth was the culmination of a career that had already had a transformative effect on music history. In his earlier "heroic" period—epitomized by his "Heroic" *Symphony No. 3*—Beethoven had expanded the scope and formal possibilities of instrumental music beyond anything imagined by his predecessors. And by time he sat down to start writing the Ninth Symphony in 1822, he had redefined what it meant to be an artist in the nineteenth century. It is well-known that Beethoven was near-completely deaf for the final ten years of his life. This is a fact which undoubtedly adds an almost supernatural quality to the expansive sounds he explores throughout the Ninth Symphony. However, the trope of the "suffering artist" has become so familiar to us at this point in history that perhaps it doesn't seem unique: Vincent Van Gogh cut off his ear, Emily Dickinson lived in reclusive isolation, and countless artists have struggled with depression and substance abuse of various kinds. But Beethoven is not simply another name in this long list; he is largely the source of this mythology. In 1802, Beethoven wrote a famous letter to his brothers in which he exclaimed "I would have ended my life—it was only my art that held me back. It seemed to me impossible to leave the world until I had brought forth all that I felt was within me." Published after his death, this so-called "Heiligenstadt Testament" created the template for countless artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in which the stones of personal pain sharpen the sword of artistic insight.

For composers who came after him, the question wasn't whether or not one would follow in Beethoven's footsteps, but simply *how* one would do so. By the end of the nineteenth century, the German music world was split in two by the "War of the Romantics": the avant-garde devotees of Richard Wagner on one side and the more conservative disciples of Johannes Brahms and Clara Schumann on the other. What's fascinating, however, is the fact that both sides of this debate would justify their positions by appealing to this final symphony of Beethoven. Wagner's massive music dramas cracked open and reconfigured the opera just as Beethoven had done to the symphony. While Brahms argued that Beethoven would have continued to innovate inside the handful of traditional genres and forms that characterized all of his late output. Both claimed that their music was the logical extension of this unimpeachable masterwork. In fact, the legacy of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is so long that it extends well into the twentieth century. For instance, have you ever wondered why CDs needed to be 120 millimeters across? This size allows them to hold approximately 80 minutes of music which satisfied Sony executive Norio Ohga's mandate to his engineers that their new audio technology be able to contain the entirety of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony on a single disc.

On the surface, the organization of Beethoven's Ninth is similar to other symphonic works of the time. The piece is cast in four movements with the outer movements in a continuously-developing sonata form and the inner movements a scherzo and slow, gorgeous adagio respectively. But the resemblances to past symphonies more-or-less stop there. The first, and perhaps, most obvious thing that differentiates Beethoven 9 from previous examples of the form is the inclusion of a choir in the final movement. The famous "Ode to Joy," with its text taken from German poet Friedrich Schiller, serves as the capstone for the final movement and make explicit the sense of the infinite that permeates the rest of the work. The opening *creation ex nihilo* of the first movement is mirrored in the evocation of the teeming millions receiving the kiss of the Creator under the canopy of stars in the final lines of the poem. Another thing that differentiates this piece from previous symphonies is the sheer size of it. A single movement of Beethoven's Ninth is as long as an entire symphony by Mozart or Haydn. Nearly a century later, the Austrian composer Gustav Mahler, an heir to the symphonic tradition that Beethoven initiated, famously remarked "A symphony must be like the world...it must contain everything." This monumental work is the first to attempt such a world-encompassing symphonic approach, and perhaps the first to succeed.