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Abstract

Almost everyone is familiar with Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and the famous four note motif that represents fate knocking at the door. His Third Symphony, or "The Heroic Symphony" that was originally written for Napoleon Bonaparte, enjoyed great success and helped shape the future of classical music. However, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony which contains the well-known tune "Ode to Joy" most drastically impacted classical music's future. Beethoven was a master at taking simple ideas and combining them with past musical traditions to create something extravagant and new. This is most evident in his Ninth Symphony. In this work, Beethoven did something that was never done before when he added vocal soloists and a choir into the last movement. This symphony was based on the poem by Friedrich Schiller that emphasized universal brotherhood and unity. To express this, Beethoven added the choir and solo voices, consequently impacting the music of future composers. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony conclusively bridged the gap between classical and romantic music and set the standard for future composers through his use of the choral finale combined with past musical traditions.

Keywords

Beethoven, Ludwig van Beethoven, Ninth Symphony, Ode to Joy, Wagner, Universal Brotherhood, Romantic era, classical music, Symphonies, Choral finale, Choir

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Joyful, Joyful! The Musical Significance of Beethoven's Ninth

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“HUMANITY is united in the ‘Ode to Joy’ and reconnected to its place in the divine plan. The finale is a microcosm of symphonic form, with its four sections and quotations from previous movements. The use of the chorus and soloists laid down a gauntlet that nobody dared pick up until Mahler in his Second Symphony—a whole 70 years later.”¹ Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony contains one of his most well-known melodies ever written. “Ode to Joy” is still sung in churches, homes, and in concert halls all over the world and is even the official anthem of the European Union. During the Napoleonic war and in the midst of depression and suffering from going completely deaf, Beethoven wrote a significantly influential symphony that contained a song about being joyful and uniting all of humanity. Beethoven’s Ninth is widely considered one of the most influential symphonies in classical music, and this work was a major turning point for future music composers and classical music altogether.² His Ninth Symphony is a testimony to taking risks and drawing outside of the box. Rather shocking and radical for his time, Beethoven was hesitant to include a choral movement in his last symphony.³ Until this point in history, composers had not mixed the orchestra and voices in this way. Doing what he felt was necessary for communication to the audience, he expanded upon past musical techniques and forged the way for future composers. Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony conclusively bridged the gap between classical and romantic music and set the standard for future composers through his use of the choral finale combined with past musical traditions.

¹ James, 5.

² Sachs, 4.

³ Levy, 20.

Overall, we see classical influence in the Ninth Symphony as it adheres to the classical symphonic structure of four movements with a sonata form for the first movement, a ternary form for the scherzo, and a theme and variations.⁴ Beethoven used conventional classical forms and familiar musical textures that glanced back to the classical era, such as simple melodies that are present and expanded upon during the piece. He also regarded baroque and early classical era composer Handel as the “greatest of all composers,” and took much inspiration from him.⁵ At the very end of his life, Beethoven spent his time reading *The Works of Handel, in Score, Correct, Uniform, and Complete*, stating that he could still learn from the genius.⁶ He was quoted as saying, “I have wanted them for a long time; for Handel is the greatest and ablest composer; I can still learn from him. Bring the books over to me.”⁷ One can see some of Handel’s characteristics such as his love for the human voice and incredible vocal writings that are included in Beethoven’s Ninth with the addition of a chorus and great solo vocal lines. For example, we see a baritone recitative towards the end of the fourth movement before the entrance of the entire choir (see Example 1). The solo can be compared to the recitatives and arias in Handel’s oratorios, showing the musical continuity over time and inspiration from prior composers.

Example 1: Baritone Recitative from Symphony No. 9, Movement IV, mm. 7–14.⁸

The image shows a musical score for a baritone solo and cello/bass accompaniment. The baritone solo line is in the upper staff, and the cello/bass line is in the lower staff. The baritone solo line has the lyrics "O Freun - - - de, nicht die - se Tö-ne!" written below it. The cello/bass line has a "p" dynamic marking at the end.

Beethoven may not have been the creator of the symphony, but he was a master at taking past traditions and expanding upon them, which brought the symphony to a new level. Martin Geck states,

Before Beethoven, writers of symphonies had continued to hold the view that the composer begins by creating a

⁴ Heger and Moore, 42–45.

⁵ Sachs, 49.

⁶ Jones, n.p.

⁷ Jones, n.p.

⁸ Beethoven, 284.

musical phrase or period and then goes on to orchestrate it, but by the time of Beethoven's Third Symphony and certainly his Fifth at the latest, this was merely one truth that was offset by another complementary truth: the orchestral apparatus generated certain musical developments from within itself.⁹

Beethoven found the balance between honoring the sturdy and established traditions of the baroque and classical eras, while also propelling music forward in a transformative way. Another way he honors classical forms and traditions is through the inspiration he took from Mozart's Symphony No. 40. The second movement of the Ninth uses fugal textures in a sonata form exposition, similar to the finale of Mozart's "Jupiter" symphony.¹⁰ Example 2 shows the lead fuge subject that was inspired directly by Mozart and classical traditions in the second movement of the Ninth. An octave jump begins the theme and is followed by a series of staccato quarter notes.

Example 2: Symphony No. 9, Movement II, mm. 9–12.¹¹



While we see continuity in regard to past musical eras such as the classical period, throughout his years of composing the symphony and especially with the creation of his Ninth, Beethoven expanded and modified the classical era forms.¹² This solidified the beginning of the romantic era. He felt greater freedom and internal reflection was necessary for successful compositions, making him unafraid to take such liberties. For example, in his Ninth Symphony, Beethoven put a scherzo in as the second movement, which was unusual for the time.¹³ Critics took notice of this not necessarily to criticize Beethoven, but to examine how he once again departed from tradition. He also demonstrated the impact of larger ensembles and greater instrumental texture. The

⁹ Geck, 12.

¹⁰ Levy, 70.

¹¹ Levy, 71.

¹² Sachs, 45.

¹³ Levy, 69.

orchestration for the Ninth Symphony expands beyond any past symphony, including Beethoven's own past works. The score includes two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two drums, violins, violas, and cellos.¹⁴ We also see the addition of trombones, double bassoon, triangle, piccolo, and cymbals for certain movements. This is most likely the first time we see a total of four natural horns all scored in a single symphony.¹⁵ Beethoven's expanded orchestra allowed for new colors, textures, and depth that was remarkable for the time.

Perhaps the most notable divergence from classical traditions and step toward the romantic era is the emphasis Beethoven places on self-reflection and expression, the most prominent characteristics in the romantic era. Music historian Harvey Sachs explains, "In the astonishingly individualistic compositions that he produced between the ages of thirty-two and forty-two, he extended the boundaries of tonality, lengthened and transmuted the old forms, and allowed intensely personal expression much freer rein than it had previously known in music."¹⁶ Beethoven is known for his use of self-expression as a form of catharsis, both in his writings and musical compositions.¹⁷ This could be partially due to his personal emotional struggle with deafness. Music and writing may have been the outlet that allowed Beethoven to express his pain of having an incurable condition.¹⁸ Art was the one thing that kept Beethoven on the earth for as long as he was. In a letter to his brothers, Beethoven said, "Only *art* held me back, ah it seemed to me impossible to leave the world before I had brought forth all that I felt destined to bring forth, and so I muddled on with this wretched life."¹⁹ While Beethoven's deafness is truly a tragedy, it seems this struggle guided Beethoven to his musical expressiveness, which in turn greatly expanded the classical symphony and turned to romanticism. Self-expression, expanded and lengthier forms, and greater orchestration were ways Beethoven took the great classical conventions, and made them romantic.

A specific way we see expanded self-expression and emotion is through Beethoven's addition of the chorus in the final movement. It is clear with

¹⁴ Grove, 309.

¹⁵ Grove, 309.

¹⁶ Sachs, 45.

¹⁷ Sachs, 45.

¹⁸ Sachs, 45.

¹⁹ Sachs, 44.

Beethoven's Ninth that he felt words mixed with melody rather than melody alone would adequately express the text of the poem. The words of "Ode to Joy" were very much on his mind and he felt a necessity to bring them out with a choral finale. With a tune first heard in the instruments alone, the voices come in at the very end with remarkable force, singing the same "freunde" theme (see Example 3). While instruments can evoke a great deal of emotional expression, the voice can often express things that instruments alone cannot.

Example 3: Symphony No. 9, Movement IV, *Prestissimo*, mm. 68–69.²⁰

The image shows a musical score for the choral finale of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, Movement IV, measures 68-69. The score is in G major and 4/4 time. It features four vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and a full orchestra (Violins, Cellos, Double Basses). The lyrics are: "Freu - de, schö - ner Göt - ter-fun - ken! Göt - ter -". The music is marked "ff" (fortissimo) and "Prestissimo".

With a poem discussing such humanistic messages as the "Ode to Joy" poem, words only seemed appropriate. Program notes for the symphony state, "But the finale is like nothing else in symphonic music: scored for four soloists, full chorus, and orchestra, it is extremely long (longer than any of the other movements) and highly complex—almost a symphony in miniature, with its own introduction, scherzo-like section, slow music, and grand wrap-up."²¹ Beethoven created a new kind of symphonic movement that audiences had never heard before with the addition of the human voice and choral finale.²² The text consists of

Joy, beautiful spark of divinity,
 Daughter of Elysium,
 We enter drunk with fire,
 Heavenly one, your sanctuary!
 Thy magic power reunites,

²⁰ Beethoven, 388–389.

²¹ Huscher, 4. This program was removed from CSO's website by September 28, 2022.

²² Huscher, 4.

All that custom has strictly divided;
 All men become brothers
 Where your gentle wing abides.²³

To express the joy and brotherhood written in this text, Beethoven mixed a unifying melody with the words. The coda of the fourth movement has the chorus ending with a “mighty shout” on the words,

Daughter of the starry realm,
 Sing we of the Heav’n-descended!
 Heav’n-descended!²⁴

The addition of soloists and choir in the finale of this symphony contributes to the boisterous spirit and reflection of humanity that Friedrich Schiller’s poem represents. Mozart’s “Jupiter” finale expanded classical music in the classic period like was never seen before, but Beethoven’s finale pushed the limit even further, adding great expression with the human voice.²⁵

Beethoven’s Ninth also requires great virtuosity from the ensemble, which is a highly romantic quality. In fact, the symphony was so grandiose and extravagant that the audience could not grasp the music during the first few performances.²⁶ The sopranos had to stop singing in the first performances because it got too high for them to sing.²⁷ The vocal lines require much technical skill, both the solo and choral lines. The use of soloists also points toward the romantic era with the emphasis on solo virtuosic performances. Romantic composers and musicians valued grand solo performances and enjoyed showing off the technical skill of performers. Beethoven has a baritone solo recitative, bass solo, and tenor solo, one of the first times we see vocal soloists with such great background accompaniment, which ultimately influenced Wagner. Beethoven’s Ninth also requires extreme virtuosity from the string and wind players. Rapid scales up and down the octaves and quick arpeggios proved challenging for instrumentalists. American musicologist Lewis Lockwood states, “After 1818, new forms of mastery were to result in some of his greatest and most profound works, many of them utterly baffling to his contemporaries, technically challenging even to the best

²³ Levy, 101.

²⁴ Grove, 388.

²⁵ Huscher, 4.

²⁶ Huscher, 3.

²⁷ Huscher, 3.

performers of his time, and only gradually accepted as monumental achievements.”²⁸ Reviewers called the first performance incomprehensible because of the virtuosity of the music and players.²⁹ An early review declared that there are wild harmonies and almost ludicrous passages for bassoon and horn.³⁰ The Ninth Symphony’s emphasis on virtuosity led right into the romantic era and contributed to the rise of soloistic performances and orchestral virtuosity. This intensity may have been because of his deafness and inability to actually hear the performers, or it could have simply been the high standard Beethoven held for all performers.

The Ninth Symphony also gave way to the romantic characteristic of the conductor as the interpreter of the music. The conductor served a very different purpose in times prior to Beethoven’s Ninth. They served no role in interpreting or expressing the music but was simply there as a time beater. In baroque and classical music, the conductor was often just another member of the orchestra, beating time from the chair to keep the ensemble together. In a performance of the Ninth in 1845, conductor Ignaz Moscheles said, “Now, will you allow me to be the hand which sets these fingers in motion, and imparts life to them? May I try to convey to you all the inspirations I feel when I hear the works of the great masters? Thus may we achieve excellence.”³¹ The conductor began serving as a virtuosic player, acting as the interpreter between the orchestra and the audience.³² For example, in the choral finale specifically, a conductor would be necessary for bringing in the chorus and keeping them in time with the orchestra. The depth of the added vocal lines demands an orchestral leader to be up front. The great contrasts in dynamics and wide instrumental textures in the Ninth also require the expanding role of a conductor. The conductor also was able to put their own personality into the work and make it somewhat their own. For example, when Wagner conducted the Ninth, he carried on Beethoven’s spirit in it, but one can also see some of Wagner’s personality in the way he specifically interpreted and slightly changed the work.³³ The rise of the modern conductor really began with this symphony, and through it, we see different interpretations of the work, with changes in tempo, dynamics, and sometimes even redoing

²⁸ Lockwood, 187–189.

²⁹ Lockwood, 189.

³⁰ Cook, 42.

³¹ Cook, 48.

³² Cook, 48.

³³ Cook, 48.

instrumentation. Nicolas Cook, British musicologist, said, “The Ninth symphony achieved lasting success in performance only after the dual leadership system had been swept away and the modern conductor had taken over. It is, in this sense, a work of Romantic repertory.”³⁴ This work gave way to the concept of the conductor that we still see today.

Solidifying the bridge to the romantic era, Beethoven’s Ninth greatly influenced and set the standard for essentially all future composers. Most notably impacted by the Ninth Symphony is Richard Wagner. Wagner considered Beethoven the greatest composer and repeatedly claimed that his Ninth Symphony in particular provided the standard for all future music. Wagner valued words and felt that words in addition to the music best portray the messages music contains. J. Peter Burkholder explains, “He believed that Beethoven had done everything that could be done in instrumental music and had shown in his Ninth Symphony the path to the future by joining music to words.”³⁵ He viewed himself as Beethoven’s one true successor, moving the art of music forward from the Ninth.³⁶ For Wagner, any music that contained just instrumental music was now dead and only art that combined all art forms was significant. Beethoven had accomplished all there was to be accomplished in instrumental works with his Ninth Symphony in Wagner’s eyes. For him, the Ninth Symphony was the end of absolute music.

Beethoven greatly influenced Wagner’s idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* or “total artwork,” which combined art from all areas into one work. For Wagner, artists can only be satisfied by the union of art forms.³⁷ By adding the human voice into the symphony, Wagner believed that Beethoven created the new standard for music.

This *last symphony* of Beethoven’s is the redemption of music out of its own element as a *universal art*. It is the *human gospel* of the art of the future. Beyond it there can be no *progress*, for there can follow on it immediately only the completed artwork of the future, *the universal drama*, to which Beethoven has forged for us the artistic key.³⁸

³⁴ Cook, 64.

³⁵ Burkholder, 677.

³⁶ Burkholder, 677.

³⁷ Burkholder, 678.

³⁸ Wagner, 66.

Beethoven's expressiveness, willingness to try new things, and ability to communicate emotion and morality with the audience were characteristics that influenced Wagner's own compositions and influenced his belief that musical dramas are the true musical art forms.³⁹ This philosophy was seen through the many operas Wagner created, as he focused intently on the genre. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony also influenced Wagner's philosophy that the vocalists in his operas should be secondary to the orchestra and simply ride over the orchestra like a boat.⁴⁰ The orchestra is of chief importance and conveys the inner aspects of the drama, while the added text and other art forms help portray the events and situations of the piece.⁴¹ From this, Wagner developed his idea of *leitmotifs*, where recurring melodic instrumental themes portray the emotions of the story. *Leitmotifs* are present in several of Wagner's works, specifically in his operas such as the *Ring* cycle and *Tristan and Isolde*. The chorus is essentially accompaniment for the orchestra in Beethoven's Ninth. The instruments are of first importance and convey the emotion of universal brotherhood. All of Beethoven's works, but especially this symphony, provided Wagner with much of his philosophy about the musical drama.

Beethoven's Ninth also influenced other composers immediately following him and for centuries after. Schubert had his own "Beethoven project" between 1824 and 1828 where he tried to capture Beethoven's legacy of the Ninth and incorporate his ideas into his own compositions. This project included works such as the Cello Quintet, A-minor Quartet, the Octet, and the "Great" C-major symphony.⁴² Schumann also thought Beethoven's Ninth was the standard to which all future symphonies must be judged.⁴³ He enjoyed Schubert's Symphony in C major because he felt it met the standard that Beethoven would have wanted. In addition, large instrumental textures and expanded lengths followed in symphonies after Beethoven's Ninth. This is seen by Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* with its rich variety of instruments and emphasis on drama and character, along with its extreme length. Berlioz also noted that the rise of the concert orchestra and a symphony concert formed out of Beethoven's Ninth.⁴⁴ In writing about a performance of Beethoven's

³⁹ Wagner, 66.

⁴⁰ Burkholder, 678.

⁴¹ Burkholder, 678.

⁴² Gingerich, 6.

⁴³ Gingerich, 214.

⁴⁴ Levy, 147.

Ninth in which Mendelssohn played first violin, an unnamed reviewer for the *Berliner allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* noted: “Everything granted, this finale is nevertheless the most interesting, deeply felt, and original work ever to flow from the great artist’s pen, for it reveals his individuality more than any of his other works. —Where has one ever heard anything like it?”⁴⁵ We see this inspiration in his Symphony No. 2. The symphonies of Mahler and Bruckner have also built on the grandeur of the Ninth and sought equal emotional expression. Berlioz’s two distinct contrapuntal themes in *Symphonie fantastique*, the use of choral voices in Berlioz’s *Romeo et Juliette*, Mahler’s Second and Eighth Symphonies, and Brahms’s First Symphony are just some of the great works that directly represent Beethoven’s Ninth.⁴⁶ The shadow of this symphony is also seen in other genres such as the resemblance of the Ninth’s first movement to Wagner’s *The Flying Dutchman*.⁴⁷ There is no doubt that the completion of Beethoven’s final symphony radically influenced future music and all of his symphonies remain the head of music just as the plays of Shakespeare remain the basis of literature.⁴⁸

Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony set the bar for future romantic music and greatly influenced all future composers through his use of the choral finale combined with past musical traditions. Beethoven took a risk and stepped outside his own comfort zone through the integration of the human voice in the orchestra. This symphony greatly influenced Wagner who created the most influential operas and musical dramas of the day. In addition, Beethoven shows his genius in taking past classical traditions and developing them to a whole new level through the complexity of instrumentation and extreme expressiveness. While composers often went in different directions with their inspiration from the Ninth, it was impactful nonetheless. David Benjamin Levy states,

Perhaps the greatest overriding legacy of the Ninth Symphony is its sheer monumentality, a scale of writing that indeed opened wide the door for Wagner, Bruckner, and Mahler. These three composers, more than any others, stood toe to toe with the Ninth Symphony. Others sought to circumvent it. None could escape its immense shadow.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Wallace, 51.

⁴⁶ Levy, 172.

⁴⁷ Levy, 172.

⁴⁸ Grove, 399.

⁴⁹ Levy, 173.

Music history is like a wheel. It is cyclical, yet progresses forward, and few works prove this more than Beethoven's Ninth. He wrote an immensely impactful symphony about being joyful while completely deaf, a testimony of being faithful to what one is called to do until the very end.

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