
Recordings

Beethoven's Ninth: a survey of CD versions

by John Howard

Ludwig van Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, Op. 125, was first performed on May 7, 1824. Some months ago, I undertook to listen to the available compact disc recordings of this masterpiece, which during 1989 and 1990 became the "theme song" of the international anti-Bolshevik liberation movement. While the Choral Finale with its immortal setting of Schiller's poem, "The Ode to Joy," is most familiar, it is the symphony as a whole, which expresses the development of the ideas most pertinent to the liberation of nations and mankind from political oppression.

At Ben Franklin Booksellers in Leesburg, Virginia, we wanted to put together a package of materials that would introduce people to Beethoven's great work. The "Beethoven gift package" was made available for \$25. It included some compact editions of Beethoven's letters and other documents, and a note card with a portrait of the composer. It featured a CD recording, now that this more advanced technology has overtaken the recordings industry and an increasing number of households have replaced or supplemented their phonographs and cassette recorders with CD players.

Two schools

Conductors auditioned include Zubin Mehta, George Szell, Eugene Ormandy, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Otto Klemperer, Roger Norrington, Dohnanyi, Kurt Masur, Erich Leinsdorf, and Georg Solti. These roughly divided into two schools: rhetorical and non-rhetorical. The former use tempo modifications as a primary means to render the meaning of the music. Klemperer and Furtwängler (and to a lesser extent, Leinsdorf) exemplify this school.

All the others take the "straight ahead" approach now prevalent worldwide. The most famous earlier exponent of this approach was Arturo Toscanini (whose metronomic mania was characterized more than once by Lyndon LaRouche as the most efficient "murder" of Beethoven).

A difficult work to play and sing

Listening to eight or nine recordings (CD only) confirmed my suspicion that an ideal Ninth Symphony has yet to be issued. The work is in fact exceedingly difficult to play and to sing.

The burden is unique on the singers, who have to wait in

silence for 45-50 minutes before tackling very high notes, who have lines with wide leaps, etc. Beethoven realized this, but would not change a note (except for the baritone intended for the first performance). Beethoven did say that he orchestrated to reinforce the choir when it was "in dangerous territory."

An added burden on the singers today is the A-440 elevated pitch, elevated in relation to Vienna pitch in the 1820s, which was close to A-430. The Masur recording of Oct. 8, 1981 is near A-446, the Furtwängler A-444, for example.

Of the several recordings available today at lower pitch and allegedly with "original" instruments (both strings and woodwinds were in considerable flux in the early 1800s), I heard the Norrington. Unfortunately, his "anti-interpretive" approach, as well as the attempt to adhere numerically to Beethoven's metronome markings (this issue warrants separate discussion) produces a result quite unsatisfactory to the whole.

The Norrington recording is interesting with respect to way the "earlier" instruments, and the lighter texture, render the choir more transparent. (Note, Mr. Norrington, that Beethoven asked for, and got, a double-sized orchestra for this symphony; even the winds were doubled!)

In making a final selection, I leaned toward a performance 1) that is available in quantity on CD, 2) had a "live" quality as opposed to being spliced together, 3) gave an idea of the *complexity* of the work, especially the "cross-voicing," 4) was passionately rendered, and 5) was musically satisfactory.

The preponderance of classical recordings today are not live, but reflect a false kind of "perfection" shaped by sound engineers in a studio.

I found two candidates: Wilhelm Furtwängler (live, Vienna Philharmonic May 31, 1953, Nuova Era 013.6301 from Qualiton Imports, New York City), and Otto Klemperer (live, Concertgebouw, Amsterdam, May 17, 1956, Music and Arts CD-242 of Berkeley, California).

I chose the Klemperer, because his tempi are closer to Beethoven's than the Furtwängler. Furtwängler's Adagio is over 19 minutes long, compared with Klemperer's 15 minutes (and a literal adherence to Beethoven's dotted quarter=60 produces an Adagio about 10 minutes in length!) A discussion between Beethoven and his nephew Karl reported in Thayer's *Life of Beethoven*, the standard, classic biography, indicates that the total performing time (May 7, 1824) may have been one hour and three minutes. Klemperer's total music time is about 68 minutes; the difference in time is about 10 minutes.

The Furtwängler recording is definitely interesting, however, and reflects a deeper understanding than Klemperer in some respects, as befits a collaborator of Heinrich Schenker. Furtwängler's friend Schenker was a musicologist who had been influenced by Johannes Brahms and therefore had a connection with the German classical tradition leading back to Beethoven himself.