Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
September 23-24-25, 2022
97th Season / Subscription Program 1
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Our 95th season in 2020-21 was of course canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Much of that season was to have been a celebration of the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth, featuring his music on multiple programs. In 2021-22, we returned to Overture Hall, with a season that nearly completed this delayed celebration. However, this concert, initially rescheduled to September 2021 was once again postponed due to continuing COVID concerns. We finally complete our Beethoven celebration with his *Symphony No.9*, last and largest of his symphonies. The ninth, ending with a great choral celebration of joy and humanity, is the perfect work to symbolize coming through what we as a community—and humanity as a whole—have endured since early 2020. Joining the Madison Symphony Orchestra and Chorus for these programs are four fine vocal soloists: soprano Laquita Mitchell, mezzo-soprano Kirsten Larson, tenor Jared Esguerra, and bass Matt Boehler. The program opens with a feature for our retired principal oboist Marc Fink, who played in the Madison Symphony Orchestra for nearly half of its 97 seasons—here we belatedly celebrate his retirement in 2020 after 48(!) seasons with the orchestra, with Mozart's *Oboe Concerto*.

Mozart's oboe concerto is one of the genial instrumental works he composed while working in his hometown of Salzburg. What the young Mozart wanted most in the world at this time was a career as an opera composer, and all three movements of this fine concerto have a distinctly operatic sound.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Born: January 27, 1756, Salzburg, Austria.
Died: December 5, 1791, Vienna, Austria.

Concerto in C Major for Oboe and Orchestra, K. 314
Composed: Spring or summer 1777.
Premiere: Probably in Salzburg in 1777, by oboist Giuseppe Ferlendis or in Mannheim in early 1778 by Friedrich Mann.
Previous MSO Performances: This is our first performance of the concerto.
Duration: 21:00.

Background

Mozart composed this concerto for a Salzburg friend, Guiseppe Ferlendis.

In 1773, Mozart returned to Salzburg after a childhood spent traveling the courts of Europe as a *Wunderkind*, under the supervision of his father, Leopold. He spent much of the next eight years in his hometown, working as a church musician for the Archbishop, Leopold's patron. While the younger Mozart's main duties were connected with the cathedral, he found time to compose a great deal of non-sacred music—symphonies, concertos, and serenades—and to take a leading role in the provincial but active musical life of Salzburg. Many of the works Mozart composed in this period were for friends and fellow musicians. One of these was Giuseppe Ferlendis, the oboist in the Archbishop's orchestra. Ferlendis was just a year older than Mozart, and Leopold described him as a "great favorite in the orchestra." It is not known if and when Ferlendis played the concerto in Salzburg: Mozart left Salzburg in September 1777 on a job-hunting tour to Mannheim and Paris, and Ferlendis left Salzburg in 1778. We do know that Mozart took the score along on this tour: he reported in one of his letters that oboist Friedrich Mann played it at least five times in early 1778. He also revised the work in Mannheim: when an amateur flutist there commissioned Mozart to write two flute concertos, one of the works he produced was a transposed and slightly revised version of the oboe concerto.

What You'll Hear

The concerto is in the traditional Classical three-movement form:

- A broad opening movement focused on the development of a few main ideas.
- A lyrical slow movement.
- A fast-paced closing movement alternating a main theme with contrasting music.

The concerto is laid out in three movements. The first (*Allegro aperto*) begins with an orchestral introduction that lays out a pair of thematic ideas that are distinctly operatic in character. The oboe enters with the same themes, decorating them in the manner of an 18th-century opera singer. There is a short development and a conventional recapitulation before a grand pause that allows the soloist to play a solo cadenza. Mozart's slow movements are nearly always lovely and lyrical, and this one (*Adagio non troppo*) is no exception: an aria for the soloist, often in gentle conversation with the orchestra. Once again, there is space for a short cadenza near the end. The final movement (*Allegro*) is a good-humored rondo, in which a single theme reappears throughout the movement in alternation with contrasting episodes. The main theme is a rather military-sounding melody, laid out at the beginning by

the oboe. (Mozart liked this tune well enough to re-use it a few years later as an aria in his opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio*.) In a somewhat unusual move, Mozart leaves space for a third solo cadenza just before the final statement of the main theme.

Beethoven's ninth symphony is a profound musical journey, from the mysterious, atmospheric opening, through a massive scherzo, and a sublime slow movement. The culmination is Beethoven's enormous choral finale, setting the ecstatic words of Friedrich Schiller's *Ode to Joy*. This jubilant celebration of human dignity and freedom is as relevant in 2022 as it was at the first performance in 1824.

Ludwig van Beethoven
Born: December 17, 1770 (baptism date), Bonn, Germany.
Died: March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria.

Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125 ("Choral")
Composed: Early sketches of the symphony date from 1815, though the famous "Ode to Joy" melody is even earlier. Beethoven began concentrated work on the symphony during the summer of 1823, and completed it in February 1824.
Premiere: May 7, 1824, Vienna.
Previous MSO Performances: 1935, 1976, 1980. 1995, 2004, and 2015.
Duration: 65:00.

Background
Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* was a truly groundbreaking and radical work in its time, notable for its complexity and unprecedented choral finale.

Almost a quarter of a century separates Beethoven's first and ninth symphonies, a quarter century that saw encroaching and eventually total deafness, personal tragedies, musical triumphs, and the composition of Beethoven's greatest music. There is also a twelve-year gap between the completion of his eighth and ninth symphonies. When we compare the *Symphony No.9* to the abstract works that Beethoven wrote at the end of his life, it seems a bit dated. There are many elements that seem to hearken back to the "heroic" style that had occupied him in the opening decade of the 19th century. Much more striking, however, are the new and innovative elements: the extraordinary introduction to the opening movement, the masterful contrapuntal writing, and of course the massive finale—the first symphonic movement to include vocal soloists and a chorus. This symphony had a

profound effect on virtually every 19th-century composer that followed Beethoven, from Berlioz and Wagner to Brahms.

The symphony was not an immediate success, and several reviewers wondered openly whether Beethoven's age and deafness might be beginning to take their toll. Part of their reaction may have been the result of a poor performance. The musicians hired for the *Akademie* concert on May 7, 1824 had had only three rehearsals and it is obvious that they did not have the new symphony under their fingers at time of the premiere. (One eyewitness account, for example, notes that the string basses had no idea how to play the recitative section in the finale, and emitted nothing but a confused rumble at this point.) Beethoven himself did little to help the performance—he insisted on conducting, even though he was completely deaf by this time. Even the most sympathetic observers noted that his wild gestures were completely out of sync with the orchestra. The performance was saved from utter disaster by an assistant conductor, Ignaz Umlauf, and the orchestra's concertmaster. It was this concert that produced one of most well-known Beethoven legends. At the close of the finale, Beethoven was apparently unaware that the audience was applauding until he was tapped on the shoulder by the mezzo-soprano soloist, Caroline Unger.

We know a great deal about Beethoven's creative process—we have hundreds of pages of musical sketches that document the evolution of his works. The sketches, written in Beethoven's nearly illegible handwriting (He was writing for his own benefit after all, not for a bunch of 21st-century musicologists!), show that the ninth symphony had a long and complicated evolution. The earliest sketch seems to have been a preliminary version of the scherzo theme Beethoven wrote in the winter of 1815-16, and the musical ideas that would be forged into the ninth symphony emerged over the next few years. In his book about the ninth symphony, Nicholas Cook explodes an enduring myth about this process, that Beethoven planned not one, but two symphonies. The essential plan of the ninth symphony—a four-movement work in D Minor with a choral finale—seems to have been complete by 1818, but then Beethoven set the symphony aside for a few years. He began serious work in the summer of 1823, completing the *Symphony No.9* in February of 1824.

Beethoven seems to have been fascinated for many years with Schiller's poem *An die Freude* ("To Joy"—written in 1785). The poet and playwright Friedrich Schiller was one of the leading voices of democratic thought in Vienna, and his plays were occasionally banned during the 1790s because of their "dangerous" sentiments. Beethoven may have thought about setting *An die Freude* as early as

1796, and may in fact have composed a now-lost setting of the poem in 1798 or 1799. Lines from *An die Freude* appear even earlier, in a cantata Beethoven composed on the death of Emperor Leopold II in 1790, and selections from the poem also appear in his opera *Fidelio* (1806). In setting *An die Freude* in the ninth, Beethoven freely rearranged and edited Schiller's poem, focusing in particular on the lines that deal with the winged goddess Joy, and the feelings of brotherhood she inspires. The unforgettable melody used to set Schiller's poem had a similarly long history. Some scholars have traced the "Joy" melody to as early in Beethoven's career as 1794, but it reached its nearly final form in his *Choral Fantasy* (1808) and his song *Kleine Blumen, kleine Blätter* (1810).

What You'll Hear

It is of course the great choral finale, based upon Schiller's text and Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" melody that gets all the attention, but the three opening movements are just as revolutionary:

- A vast opening movement with a mysterious introduction.
- An uncommonly complex scherzo movement.
- A serene slow movement that has complexities of its own.

The opening movement (*Allegro ma non troppo, un poco maestoso*) begins with a famous set of open fifths, tonally ambiguous and suggesting nothing so much as boundless space. Only gradually does it become apparent that this is in fact in D minor, and the main theme is based upon the falling fourths and fifths that spring from the opening sonority. The movement as a whole is in sonata form—a virtual requirement for symphonic first movements—but there is nothing typical about the form here. He defies expectations throughout, going to an unusual key for the second group of themes, and upsetting the form by reinterpreting the main theme in D Major in the recapitulation. At the end, after some 500 measures of exhaustively working with his thematic material, Beethoven introduces an entirely new theme, a dour figure that brings the movement to a close.

The second movement, almost invariably a slow movement in earlier symphonies, is here a scherzo. Scherzos are typically lightweight and lighthearted (or—in Beethoven's case—blustery) movements, but the scherzo of the ninth is expanded to match the proportions of the rest of the symphony. The opening section (*Molto vivace*) is a sonata-form movement unto itself: two groups of themes are introduced and thoroughly developed, often in an intensely contrapuntal manner. The trio (*Presto*) features a complete change of character and meter. This section also has elements of sonata form, developing a pastoral main theme. The scherzo music makes an abbreviated return, and Beethoven ends with his favorite musical

joke: the trio's music returns briefly, making it sound as if it will return as well, before he brusquely tosses it aside and ends the movement.

In this symphony, the slow movement comes third (*Adagio molto e cantabile*)—outwardly a simple and direct theme and variations on a lovely hymnlike melody. However, he has actually woven together two themes and two sets of variations through the movement. The mood is almost universally sublime until the closing section, when a strident fanfare seems to hint at what is to come in the finale.

The enormous and complex finale begins with crashing dissonance: Richard Wagner referred to these measures as the "fanfare of terror." The passage that follows is something new in this symphony, and has been imitated by many composers. In a rhetorical fashion, he presents brief reminiscences of all of his main ideas from the three preceding movements, linked by short string bass recitatives. It is as if, like a good public speaker, Beethoven is summing up all of his main points before moving on to his peroration. He hints at the "Joy" theme before presenting it in full in the basses—one of the most satisfying and profound moments in all of music. The movement as a whole presents a series of variations on this theme. After three variations, however the "fanfare of terror" returns. Beethoven's masterstroke, used to introduce the voices, is a brief text of his own ("O friends, not these tones…") that he inserts before beginning *An die Freude*. In a few short measures, this recitative changes the character of the symphony—rejecting all of the storm and stress of the previous music, and setting the finale onto a joyful course. After the first set of choral variations, Beethoven inserts a droll "Turkish March" that serves as the background to a tenor solo, and gradually develops into an orchestral double fugue. One more triumphant statement of the "Joy" theme, and then another startling innovation: a thundering recitative for the full chorus, doubled by trombones. This gives way to a second and even more magnificent double fugue for chorus and orchestra. The coda is full of irresistible joy: fast-paced orchestral passages alternating with sublime vocal lines.

Interpreting the Ninth

In his book on Beethoven's string quartets, Joseph Kerman paints a picture of Beethoven during the 1820s, an aging, deaf, and virtually unlovable man "…battering at the communications barrier with every weapon of his knowledge." If this is true, what does the ninth symphony *mean*? This is a question that scarcely makes sense for most symphonies before this one, but it is precisely this question that is responsible for much of the huge collection of writing about this work. The long transformation from the D minor of the opening movement to the triumphant D Major of the finale seems to beg the question, and interpretations are legion.

Romantic writers conjured up elaborate programs for the symphony. In the political upheavals of the 1840s, the words of *An die Freude* were sung as a revolutionary anthem...and today it is sung as the anthem of the European Union. The ninth symphony becomes immensely popular in times of war—during both world wars, each side claimed the ninth symphony and Beethoven himself as exclusive property. Richard Wagner saw the ninth symphony as a forerunner of his own musical ideals, as Beethoven attempting reaching beyond Classical style towards an integration of vocal and instrumental music. Some music theorists have gone to the other extreme, ignoring any interpretation of the text to show the finale as a supreme example of Beethoven's development technique. In Japan, massive performances of the *Symphony No.9* (often including choirs numbering in the thousands) have long been a New Year's Eve tradition, and the symphony is accepted as a symbol of Japanese cultural unity. Victorian English writers found in the words of the finale an affirmation of Christian faith, while during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, Chinese Communists interpreted the symphony as Beethoven's rejection of capitalism and his embrace of class struggle.

This is a piece with broad enough shoulders enough to support a host of interpretations, but in the end, it is bigger than any of them. It is not only one of Beethoven's final artistic statements, it is one of the great works that define our culture.

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