

Harmony

FORUM OF THE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA INSTITUTE

NUMBER 16 • OCTOBER 2003

About the Cover

by

Phillip Huscher

Symphony Orchestra Institute

P.O. Box 8619

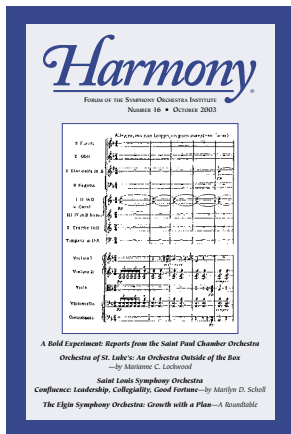
Northfield, IL 60093

Tel: 847.441.5037

e-mail: information@soi.org

Website: www.soi.org

About the Cover



The music on the cover of this issue—the mysterious opening of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony—is one of the most celebrated passages in all of music. It still grabs our attention today, and that was surely Beethoven’s intention, since this is the work he wrote to reach a wider audience and to make even the most complacent of music-lovers sit up and listen.

These first measures strive mightily, as the composer himself so often did, to arrive at a perfect symphonic theme. In fact, the struggle to communicate is the thread that unites this symphony, as Beethoven finally makes clear in his choral finale—the famous “Ode to Joy”—when sound

is literally given voice. The entire symphony shows Beethoven using all the subtlety and mastery of his craft to touch people as never before. He meant for it to be a breakthrough work—music’s first crossover composition. And in the text he picked for the finale—Schiller’s apostrophe to universal brotherhood—Beethoven found his ideal of an inclusive society—a place where people set aside their differences in order to reach a higher goal.

By 1824, when he finished his Ninth Symphony, Beethoven was almost completely deaf. He had long ago given up playing the piano in public, and although he was the announced conductor of the new symphony for the May 7 concert and did indeed appear to beat time and turn the pages of his score (and according to some accounts, even indulge in some over-the-top theatrical gesturing), the players and the singers had been warned beforehand to pay him no attention. Instead, they all followed the discreet, utterly reliable beat provided by Michael Umlauf, the concertmaster.

When, in one of the most famous accounts in all music, the audience burst into applause, Beethoven could not hear the ovation. Only when his contralto soloist tapped him on the shoulder and turned him around, did he see his public applauding wildly. Like many important artworks, Beethoven’s grandest symphony and most influential composition was not recognized at

first as a landmark, and on the night of the premiere, Beethoven went home in a funk over the meager profits. For several years after Beethoven's death, the Ninth Symphony was considered too difficult to perform (and too long to program easily). It was not established in the repertoire until the middle of the 19th century.

In more recent times, the humanistic message of this symphony has been welcomed far and wide, from Japan, where New Year's sing-along performances are as popular as our *Messiahs*—the German *freude* is often learned phonetically, to sounds that mean roughly “getting out of the bathtub”—to Berlin, where, to celebrate the destruction of the Wall in 1989, Leonard Bernstein changed *freude* (joy) to *freiheit* (freedom). Beethoven's Ninth has also been raided for the disco and for television commercials, and it has been appropriated for all manner of political purposes. But it has the power to transcend the here and the now. Nearly 200 years after it was composed, Beethoven's Ninth is one of our icons—a work of almost universal appeal, and a score that reminds us of the indispensable role music plays in our lives.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.