



NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2010

BEETHOVEN'S NINTH

In this first classical subscription concert of the new season, Jacques Lacombe and the NJSO take an innovative approach to Beethoven's immortal Ninth Symphony. Its concluding "Ode to Joy" celebrates universal brotherhood, friendship and, by extension, peaceful coexistence in a free world. Between movements of the Beethoven, we will hear excerpts from speeches dealing with freedom and friendship, in the words of such iconic figures as President John F. Kennedy, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi.

The program opens with Aaron Copland's rarely performed *Canticle of Freedom*. "It made sense to begin with an American work that deals with freedom," explains Lacombe. "*Canticle of Freedom* includes chorus, and we have such a wonderful chorus in the Westminster Symphonic Choir. This lesser-known work by Copland deserves to be heard."

Both the Copland and the Beethoven reserve the chorus until the end. The cumulative impact of orchestral music and choral singing in these two works—and added narration in the Beethoven—delivers a powerful and positive message to inaugurate this landmark NJSO season.

Canticle of Freedom

Aaron Copland

Born November 14, 1900 in Brooklyn, New York

Died December 2, 1990 in Tarrytown, New York

No American composer has been more successful at capturing patriotism, American folklore, and the spirit of Mom and apple pie than Aaron Copland. Works like *Appalachian Spring*,

Lincoln Portrait and *Fanfare for the Common Man* resonate with a universality that have made them modern classics.

Context, printed text, subtext

Canticle of Freedom falls into the same general category, but its context, literary text and subtext all differentiate it from the earlier works. Let us first consider the context. *Canticle* was composed for the dedication of the new Kresge Auditorium at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1955. Pressed for time to fulfill the commission, Copland turned to sketches for an incomplete choral work he had begun in 1949, using the lines “Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us ...” In his autobiography, written with Vivian Perlis, he recalled:

These famous biblical words intrigued me, as they had James Agee and Walker Evens, who titled their book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. I used the text and my musical sketches of 1949 as the basis for my new piece for chorus and orchestra.

In fact the text is not Biblical; Copland was speaking metaphorically. It comes from an epic poem by the Scotsman John Barbour (ca.1320–95) entitled *Book of the Illustrious Prince, the Late Lord King Robert de Bruce*. Barbour’s work chronicles the battle of Bannockburn, when Robert the Bruce routed the English forces of Edward II. Copland biographer Howard Pollack believes that the composer first came across the text when his friend Carlos Chávez set part of it in *A! Fredome* (1947).

Copland and the McCarthy hearings

The topic resonated particularly strongly for Copland because, like many left-leaning Americans, he was under investigation during the McCarthy hearings. And that is the subtext. Just as Copland’s *Lincoln Portrait*, *Rodeo*, *Appalachian Spring* and other works were intended as morale boosters during World War II, so too was *Canticle of Freedom* a swipe at the McCarthyites who sought to curtail personal liberties. Copland appropriated Barbour’s essential

message: the sacrosanct quality of freedom as an essential human right.

His 13-minute setting is two-thirds orchestral, not introducing voices until the last section. Copland was more adventuresome in the front end of the piece, which includes brisk and challenging sections for percussion and brass. He restricted his chorus to unison and two part writing, favoring the speech-like rhythms of the text, which he altered from 14th-century Scots dialect to modern English. The result has a compelling simplicity and directness that deliver the message with integrity and force. He wrote to his partner, the photographer Victor Kraft, “It makes a big noise.”

MIT’s Klaus Liepmann conducted the premiere in the new Kresge Auditorium. Eleven years later, at the request of Robert Shaw, Copland revised *Canticle* for the Atlanta Symphony and Chorus. They premiered the revised version under Shaw’s direction on October 19, 1967. *Canticle of Freedom* was Copland’s last composition to use voices.

Copland scored Canticle for two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion—glockenspiel, gong, chimes, vibraphone, xylophone, crash cymbals, suspended cymbals, tam tam, triangle, wood block, whip, side drum and bass drum—harp, mixed chorus and strings. Timing: approximately 13 minutes.

Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, Op. 125 (“Choral”)

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born December 16, 1770 in Bonn, Germany

Died March 26, 1827 in Vienna, Austria

Orchestral literature has magnificent examples of symphonies with voices by Berlioz, Mahler, Shostakovich, Stravinsky and others. Beethoven preceded them all. He was the innovator—the first to take the revolutionary step of incorporating voices into a symphony.

He succeeded beyond anyone's expectation—even his own. The Ninth Symphony is one of those timeless masterpieces that has transcended classical music and become part of popular culture. Small children sing the simple, heartwarming melody of the concluding “Ode to Joy.” But the immediacy and thrill of live performance enhances the personal experience of the symphony for every listener, regardless of age.

A poem with a punch

Friedrich von Schiller wrote “An die Freude” (“To Joy”) in 1785. Beethoven read the work as a youth and considered setting its text to music as early as 1793. He admired Schiller greatly and felt a strong affinity with the poet's philosophy of universal brotherhood. That the musical setting did not come to fruition for so many years is one indication that he considered it to be a project of great importance. Beethoven's major progress on the Ninth Symphony took place in 1822 and 1823. His sketchbooks indicate that he originally planned an instrumental finale. Sometime in 1823, however, he merged Schiller's ode into the finale.

Portent and thunder: the first movement

The Ninth is, of course, inextricably identified with the “Ode to Joy.” But to overlook the massive impact of the first three movements is impossible. The symphony opens with the strings outlining a groundswell of open fifths in the dominant key of A, stark and rumbling, before the main theme erupts in a decisive D minor downward unison swoop. The battle has begun, and the tonal indecision of the first measures sets the aural stage for artful fluctuation between key centers. Tonal ambiguity occurs in all four movements of the symphony.

The first movement is the longest of all Beethoven's opening movements. This sweeping, majestic music culminates in a spine-chilling coda. At the very point of emotional exhaustion, when we are certain that the power and drama of this movement is played out, Beethoven hammers home the darkness of D minor with thunderous success.

Echoes of the 1950s and 1960s: the “Huntley–Brinkley” theme

Only in this symphony did Beethoven place his scherzo second rather than third. Listeners of a

certain age will always associate this stormy movement with the Huntley–Brinkley NBC News Show from the 60s. The *Molto vivace* concentrates the storm of the first movement into sheer nervous energy. A virtuoso showpiece for orchestra, the second movement is both a brilliant five-voice *fugato* and a fully developed sonata form movement. Its principal rhythmic motive is underlined to electrifying effect by timpani tuned in octaves. Some relief from the rhythmic and harmonic tension comes in the D major trio section, where we hear our first inkling of humor in this very serious symphony.

Celestial beauty: the slow movement

All volcanic rumblings and storm clouds dissipate in the slow movement. Beethoven transcends the earthly struggle of the symphony's first half in an *Adagio* of ineffable, heavenly beauty. After the thunderclaps of the scherzo, the tranquil woodwind chord that opens the *Adagio* is an oasis of calm. The music that follows is deeply tender and emotionally intense: this is Beethoven at his most human and loving.

Shriek of anguish, followed by a hymn to universal brotherhood

From his earliest works, Beethoven knew how to make an audience sit up and take notice. A cacophonous shriek at the start of the finale shatters the celestial calm of the slow movement. The music leaves no doubt that what will follow is of major importance. Before presenting the "Ode" melody, Beethoven briefly references each of the first three movements. This bold gesture unifies the symphony and makes his Ninth one of the first cyclic symphonies. Despite the enormous length of the first three movements, they have all been leading up to this spectacular finale. In the context of the beginning turbulence and the ensuing string bass recitative, allusion to the first three movements of the symphony heightens the dramatic efficacy of the "Ode" theme. By the time the orchestra delivers the simple, step-wise melody of the "Ode," it is as if the clouds are parting. From there, Beethoven delivers several orchestral variations on the theme before the entrances of the bass soloist and the chorus.

As in the slow movement, the music vacillates between D major and B-flat major. D major is now the anchor key. Beethoven's sense of humor resurfaces in a march in B-flat, which

combines German military band with Turkish soldier music. The fiendishly difficult double fugue that ensues serves as a brilliant transition. When the chorus re-enters, it sings forth with the most exuberant declamation yet of praise and thanksgiving.

Schiller's poem has 18 sections. Beethoven selected about half, rearranging and repeating the stanzas to suit his own musical needs. The result is a very personal interpretation of the poem, emphasizing its themes of universal fraternity.

The premiere: Beethoven's greatest public event

The Ninth Symphony received its first performance in Vienna on May 7, 1824. Beethoven's friends had arranged a program that included his new *Consecration of the House Overture*, three movements from the *Missa Solemnis* and the new symphony.

The premiere was a tremendous success. Thunderous applause reverberated through the hall after the symphony's final chords. The composer, now completely deaf, was still beating time, oblivious that the orchestra had followed the *Kapellmeister* Michael Umlauf and not himself. Realizing that Beethoven *could not hear* the applause, contralto soloist Caroline Unger gently turned him around, so that he could acknowledge the audience's acclaim.

Historic importance of Beethoven's Ninth

Historically, the substance of a symphony had been concentrated in the first movement. Beethoven's Ninth changed that. Its inner movements had an unusually large scale. The enormous finale shifted the psychological weight of the Ninth. Through his four heroic movements, Beethoven depicted a monumental struggle, with an ultimate victory. The emergence of triumph out of tragedy is an essential message of this miraculous symphony, underscoring Beethoven's call to universal brotherhood.

The Ninth is scored for flutes, piccolo, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, contrabassoon, horns, trumpets, trombones, timpani, triangle, cymbals, bass drum and strings. The finale adds a quartet of vocal soloists plus mixed chorus. Timing: approximately 67 minutes.