NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2025

Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with Xian Zhang

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Pytor Ilyich Tchaikovsky: Polonaise from *Eugene Onegin*

Act III of Tchaikovsky's greatest opera, *Eugene Onegin*, opens with a Polonaise that has become a favorite in the concert hall as well as on the stage. Polonaises are generally stately, with a pronounced and repeated rhythm in steady triple time. This one has flair, with large orchestral gestures and the kind of catchy tune that one hums for weeks after a concert. We hear an exuberant fanfare summoning the guests to the dance. The brasses continue to punctuate Tchaikovsky's Polonaise with crisp dotted rhythms; woodwinds and cellos offer contrast in the gentler middle section.

Billy Childs: *Diaspora*: Concerto for Saxophone and Orchestra

Jazz pianist and composer Billy Childs moves easily between the worlds of classical music and jazz. He is the recipient of multiple GRAMMY awards in both arenas. He cites Chick Corea, Keith Emerson, and Herbie Hancock as his jazz influences. In the classical realm, he has been influenced by Stravinsky, Ravel, and Hindemith.

Diaspora, which Childs regards as both a concerto and a tone poem, was commissioned by Young Concert Artists for saxophonist Steven Banks, with support from a consortium of eight orchestras and music festivals. Childs describes it as a chronicle of the Black American experience in the US, using three poems by Black poets as guideposts in the progression of the piece. Its three parts, which are played without pause, take their titles and inspiration from Nayyirah Waheed's "Africa's Lament," Claude McKay's "If We Must Die," and Maya Angelou's "And Still I Rise." Childs unifies the three sections by re-using melodies—but treating them differently, whether by counterpoint or reharmonization. The soloist plays both soprano and alto saxophones. In addition to the unaccompanied saxophone soliloquy that opens "Motherland," Childs includes extended solo cadenzas in Part I and Part II and opens Part III with a gospel-style duet for alto saxophone and piano before bringing in the orchestra. The finale grows into a determined march in triple meter, ultimately

affirming and victorious.

Ludwig van Beethoven: Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, Op. 125, "Choral"
Symphonic music was forever changed by Beethoven's Ninth. Each of its movements is written on an extremely large scale, and the choral finale was unprecedented. In his stormy first two movements, Beethoven traverses bloody battlefields and grapples with mighty struggle. The opening movement unfolds with sweeping majesty, culminating in a spine-chilling coda. Listeners of a certain age will recognize the Scherzo as the theme music to the "The Huntley-Brinkley Report" from the sixties. A virtuoso showpiece of sheer nervous energy, the Scherzo is both a brilliant five-voice fugato and a fully developed sonata form.

The slow movement shimmers with celestial beauty. Beethoven transcends the earthly struggle of the symphony's first half in an Adagio of ineffable, heavenly radiance. For the finale, Beethoven selected Schiller's "Ode to Joy" because of its message of universal brotherhood. He was the first composer to incorporate vocal soloists and chorus into a symphony, one of many ways in which he was a musical pioneer. Coming from the pen of a composer who was, by then, completely deaf, Beethoven's Ninth is truly miraculous.

Pytor Ilyich Tchaikovsky: Polonaise from *Eugene Onegin*

Pytor Ilyich Tchaikovsky
Born: May 7, 1840, in Votkinsk, Viatka District, Russia
Died: November 6, 1893, in St. Petersburg, Russia
Composed: May 1877 to January 1878
World Premiere: March 29, 1879, in Moscow.
Duration: 4 minutes
Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings

If one only knows two excerpts from Tchaikovsky's greatest opera, *Eugene Onegin*, they are the unforgettable Waltz at the beginning of Act II, and the Polonaise that opens Act III. Waltzes and polonaises are both Eastern European dances that enjoyed considerable popularity in 19th-century Russia. After the success of Tchaikovsky's opera, these two examples from *Onegin* became favorites in the concert hall as well as on the stage.

Polonaises are generally stately, with a pronounced and repeated rhythm in steady triple time. This one has flair, with large orchestral gestures and the kind of catchy tune that one hums for weeks after a concert. In

Tchaikovsky's opera, the Polonaise takes place during an elegant ball in the home of a wealthy Russian noble. We hear an exuberant fanfare summoning the guests to the dance. The brasses continue to punctuate Tchaikovsky's Polonaise with crisp dotted rhythms; woodwinds and cellos offer contrast in the gentler middle section.

Billy Childs: *Diaspora*: Concerto for Saxophone and Orchestra

Billy Childs
Born: March 8, 1957, in Los Angeles
Composed: 2022
World Premiere: February 9, 2024, in Minneapolis. Steven Banks was the soloist, with Ruth Reinhardt conducting the Minnesota Orchestra.
Duration: 20 minutes
Instrumentation: two flutes (second doubling piccolo & alto flute), oboe, English horn, two clarinets, bassoon, contrabassoon, three horns, two trumpets, two trombones, timpani, percussion (marimba, xylophone, vibraphone, tubular bell, cymbals, brake drum, wood blocks, tam tam, cowbell, triangle, tambourine, suspended cymbal, snare drum, bass drum), harp, piano, celesta, solo soprano and alto saxophone, and strings

Billy Childs moves easily between the worlds of classical music and jazz. He has won six GRAMMY awards as a jazz pianist and arranger and has twice won a classical GRAMMY for Best Instrumental Composition. He studied at the University of Southern California-sponsored Community School of the Performing Arts, then earned his undergraduate degree at USC in composition. He began playing jazz piano professionally while still a teenager and spent six years in the ensemble with trumpeter Freddie Hubbard. Beginning in 1988, Childs gained acclaim as a solo artist. He cites Chick Corea, Keith Emerson, and Herbie Hancock as his jazz influences. In the classical arena, he has been influenced by Stravinsky, Ravel, and Hindemith.

Diaspora, which Childs regards as both a concerto and a tone poem, was commissioned by Young Concert Artists for saxophonist Steven Banks, with support from the Kansas City Symphony, Cincinnati Symphony, Aspen Music Festival, Chautauqua Institute, New World Symphony, Minnesota Orchestra, Detroit Symphony, National Symphony Orchestra, and the San Diego Symphony. He has called it a chronicle of the Black American experience in the US, using three poems by Black poets as guideposts in the progression of the piece. Its three parts take their titles and inspiration from Nayyirah Waheed's "Africa's Lament," Claude McKay's "If We Must Die," and Maya Angelou's "And Still I Rise."

Soloist Steven Banks observes that Childs starts his musical saga before Africans came to this country and leads to the future. He describes Part I, "Motherland," as "full of love, security, and joy;" Part II as "standing up for ourselves and putting up a fight, if necessary," and Part III as an anthem dedicated to Black resilience and determination. Childs unifies the three parts, which are played without pause, by re-using melodies – but treating them differently, whether by counterpoint or reharmonization. The soloist plays both soprano and alto saxophones. In addition to the unaccompanied solo that opens "Motherland," Childs includes extended

solo cadenzas in Part I and Part II and opens Part III with a gospel-style duet for alto saxophone and piano before bringing in the orchestra. The finale grows into a determined march in triple meter, ultimately affirming and victorious. His extensive program note for *Diaspora* follows in its entirety.

> Concerto for Saxophone and Orchestra is a symphonic poem which strives to chronicle the paradigm of the forced Black American diaspora, as sifted through the prism of my own experience as a Black man in America. When Steven Banks approached me about the piece, the first thing we discussed was the narrative: What particular story would the piece tell? How would it unfold? We decided that, much in the same way that [Maurice] Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit* illustrates three poems by Aloysius Bertrand in three separate movements, so would this concerto do with poems by black poets. But then I started thinking of the elegantly succinct and fluent structure of [Samuel] Barber's Symphony No. 1, where in one multi-sectioned suite, he brilliantly ties together a handful of thematic materials into a seamless and organic whole. So, I started to compose from the vantage point that the poems Steven and I settled on ("Africa's Lament" by Nayyirah Waheed, "If We Must Die" by Claude McKay, and "And Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou) would be guideposts which inspired the direction of a three-part storyline: *Motherland, If We Must Die,* and *And Still I Rise*. Also, I wanted to tie the piece together thematically with various melodies and motifs treated in different ways (inverted, augmented, contrapuntally treated, reharmonized, etc.), like a loosely structured theme and variations—except there are several themes used.
>
> Movement I: MOTHERLAND
>
> The program of the composition starts out on a positive note; the first theme played solo by the soprano saxophone, and later joined by an uplifting scherzo accompaniment from the orchestra, is meant to evoke a sense of well-being and security as Africans are living in the motherland (Motherland being the name of the first section). Of course, it is understood that within the confines of Africa itself, there were tribal wars, treachery, and misery—even slavery; it's not a utopia I'm trying to illustrate here. Rather, I want to depict a sense of purity—a purity arising from having been thus far unobstructed by the outside destructive forces that would later determine our fate. So, the movement starts with a soprano sax melody that begins as a diatonic motif (accompanied by marimba and pizzicato cello), but then quickly becomes chromatic, modulating to several remote tonalities. After this, a 16th-note pattern in the strings transitions the listener into a sense of foreboding, signaling trouble on the horizon. As the harmonies of the string patterns continue to shift toward a more ominous shade, the soprano saxophone takes on a more urgent tone, playing short bursts of melodic fragments. Then a battle ensues, a battle between the slave traders and the future slaves, as signaled by the triplet figures in the soprano sax accompanied by triplet patterns in the orchestra, and climaxing in an orchestral tutti section bolstered by a brass fanfare. After a dissonant orchestral hit, the soprano sax utters a melancholy theme as the slaves are being led to the slave ship. This takes us to the first saxophone cadenza, which to my mind, represents a moment of painful reflection about being captured like a wild animal and led to a ship, the destination of which is to a future hell.

Movement II: IF WE MUST DIE

Part two of the journey (inspired by the powerful Claude McKay poem of the same name) begins with the first vision of the slave ship. This is illustrated by a loud tutti blast in the orchestra, following a slow six-measure buildup. The alto saxophone is now the voice of the piece, introducing a rapid 12-tone theme which turns out to be a constant phrase weaving in and out of the entire piece at various moments (it actually made its first appearance back in the first part, during the battle between the African natives and the slave traders). The slaves are boarded onto the ships and the middle passage journey to America begins; sweeping rapid scales in the lower strings, woodwinds, and harp describe the back-and-forth movement of the waves. This section develops and reaches a high point with a jarring saxophone multiphonic pair of notes followed by a forearm piano cluster; we now see America for the first time, from the point of view of the slaves. A percussion section and saxophone exchange—followed by an antiphonal, almost pointillistic push and pull between the alto saxophone and the orchestra—aims to represent the confusion, rage, and terror of the slave trade, where families are ripped apart as humans are bought and sold like cattle. The subsequent section is a mournful lament of despair, meant to outline the psychological depression caused by the sheer brutality of this new slavery paradigm. The melodic theme here, played by the alto sax, is in its original version, whereas the melancholy soprano sax theme near the end of the first movement is the inversion of this melody. While this is happening, there is a background pattern played by vibraphone and celesta which depicts a slow and steady growing anger; this figure gets faster and faster until it overtakes the foreground and brings us into the next scherzo-like section. This section is marked by an interplay between the alto sax and the orchestra and is describing a resistance, anger, and rebellion against being subjected to subhuman treatment over the course of centuries. After the apex of this segment occurs—characterized by five orchestral stabs—the alto saxophone plays a short and tender cadenza which signifies the resilience of black Americans and the introduction of the idea of self love, self worth, and self determination.

Movement III: AND STILL I RISE

This final section of the concerto/tone poem is about black empowerment. The church has always been a cultural focal point in the black community, a sanctuary providing psychological and emotional relief from the particular hardships of black life in America. It is also a place to worship, pray, and wrestle with the larger spiritual and existential questions which concern all of humankind. And beyond that (or perhaps because of that), the church is historically the central hub of black political and cultural activism in America. This is the ethos that the last section of the concerto is reflecting. So, this final chapter of the piece starts out with a hymn-like passage, which is actually a variation of the opening folk-like melody at the very beginning of the concerto. It is a plaintive reading orchestrated for just alto saxophone and piano, as though the solo saxophonist were a singer accompanied by a piano during a Sunday church service. Soon the melodic theme in the alto sax is treated with a lush accompaniment reminiscent of the Romantic era, as a healing self-awareness and love becomes more palpable. This is followed by march-like ostinato which symbolizes steely determination in the midst of

great and formidable obstacles as the alto sax plays rapidly above the orchestral momentum, until we finally reach the victorious fanfare at the conclusion of the piece. Maya Angelou's shining poem reminds us (and America) that black people cannot and will not be held to a position of second-class citizenship—we will still rise.

Ludwig van Beethoven: 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
Composed: 1822–24
World Premiere: May 7, 1824, in Vienna's Kärntnerthor Theater.
Duration: 65 minutes
Instrumentation: three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, three bassoons (third doubling contrabassoon), four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, and strings. The finale adds a quartet of vocal soloists plus mixed chorus.

What makes Beethoven's Ninth Symphony so memorable? Entire books have been written to answer that question, and many more will doubtless follow. But the immediacy of a live performance enhances the symphony's impact. The Ninth always provides a revelation, whether to a first-time listener or the veteran concert-goer.

Friedrich von Schiller wrote his poem "Ode to Joy" ["An die Freude"] in 1785. Beethoven read it as a youth and felt a strong affinity with Schiller's philosophy of the joy that unites all humankind in brotherhood. As early as 1793 he considered setting the text. By 1818, he had come up with the revolutionary idea of incorporating voices into a symphony. Finally, in 1822, his thoughts germinated in the finale to the Ninth Symphony. Selecting about half of Schiller's 18 sections, Beethoven rearranged and repeated stanzas to suit his musical needs. The result is a very personal interpretation of the poem, emphasizing the call to universal brotherhood.

The Ninth is inextricably identified with its choral finale. But to overlook the massive impact of the first three movements is impossible. Each segment of this enormous symphony broke musical ground in a striking way.

At the outset, the strings outline a groundswell of open fifths, stark, and rumbling, before the main theme erupts in a decisive D-minor downward unison swoop. The battle has begun in this longest of all Beethoven's opening movements. He takes time for sweeping, majestic music, culminating in the 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 finality.

Only in this symphony did Beethoven place his scherzo second rather than third. Listeners of a certain age still associate this movement with the "The Huntley-Brinkley Report" from the sixties. The Molto vivace concentrates the storm of the first movement into sheer nervous energy. A virtuoso showpiece, it is both a

brilliant five-voice fugato and a fully developed sonata form. Timpani tuned in octaves underline its principal rhythmic motive, with electrifying effect. Some relief from the rhythmic and harmonic tension occurs in the D-major trio section.

All volcanic rumblings and dark clouds dissipate in the slow movement. Beethoven's architecture starts to become clear. He 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 beauty and calm. The music that follows is deeply tender and emotionally intense: this is Beethoven at his most human and loving.

A cacophonous shriek opens the finale, shattering the celestial calm. The music leaves no doubt that what will follow is of major importance. Beethoven briefly alludes to the three previous movements before presenting the Ode melody. This bold gesture makes his Ninth one of the first cyclic symphonies and heightens the dramatic effect of the Ode. By the time the orchestra delivers the simple, step-wise melody, it has the effect of a rainbow. From there, Beethoven declaims several orchestral variations on the theme before introducing the bass recitative and the chorus.

After the buildup to a climactic pause, Beethoven's sense of humor surfaces in a march for German military band. The double fugue that ensues is the last section for orchestra alone. Fiendishly difficult, it serves as a brilliant transition. When the chorus re-enters, it sings forth with the most exuberant declamation yet of praise and thanksgiving.

Through four heroic movements, Beethoven wages a struggle between minor and major, with an ultimate victory by major mode. The emergence of triumph out of tragedy—the triumph of universal brotherhood—is the essential message of this miraculous symphony.

You may not think you know anything about Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), but his writings are likely more familiar than you realize. If you're an opera buff, you probably know Verdi's *Don Carlo* and *Luisa Miller*—well, the librettos to both operas are based on Schiller plays. Then there's *William Tell*, whose popular orchestral overture came from a major French grand opera by the Italian expatriate Gioachino Rossini. Guess what: *William Tell* is another Schiller play. How about Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda*? Tchaikovsky's *The Maid of Orleans*? You guessed it: Schiller again. Even Puccini's ever-popular *Turandot* has links to Schiller.

In fact, in terms of his influence on music, Schiller is second only to Goethe among German authors. The two men were great friends from the mid-1790s, when they both lived and worked in Weimar. The friendship lasted until Schiller's death in 1805; Goethe lived until 1832. A poet, aesthetician and historian as well as dramatist, Schiller studied both law and medicine before settling on literature. Although his style and philosophy shifted during his career, he remained an idealist, combining his lofty thoughts with a gift for compelling dramatic action.

Although Schiller professed no profound knowledge of music, he married an accomplished amateur pianist and he believed that empathy for music was essential to poetic expression. His articles and poetry on aesthetics in society and their relation to moral grace and human dignity inspired many composers. It is Beethoven's immortal setting of Schiller's "Ode to Joy" ["An die Freude"], however, that is the German writer's greatest contribution to music.

The Ninth Symphony received its first performance at Vienna's Kärntnerthor Theatre on May 7, 1824. Beethoven's friends had arranged an all-Beethoven program that included the new *Consecration of the House* Overture, Op. 124, three movements from the Missa Solemnis, and the new symphony. Beethoven's biographer Maynard Solomon calls that concert "the greatest public event of this period of his career."

The orchestra for the occasion was expanded to include 24 violins, 10 violas, and 12 cellos and basses; the woodwinds were doubled. The Ninth Symphony was a smashing success. Thunderous applause reverberated through the theatre after the final chords. Immersed in the music, Beethoven continued to beat time to music that still resonated in his mind's ear. He was oblivious that the orchestra had been following the *Kapellmeister* Michael Umlauf and not himself. Upon realizing that the composer could not hear the applause, the contralto soloist Caroline Unger gently turned him around, so that he could perceive and acknowledge the acclaim of his audience.

That poignant tale adds to the lore surrounding the Ninth Symphony. In our time, it has marked many important occasions. Notable among these was the late Leonard Bernstein's performance after the Berlin Wall was dismantled in 1989, with a subtle but significant change in the text: "Freude" ["joy"] to "Freiheit" ["freedom"].

Midway through the finale of the Ninth Symphony, Beethoven switches gears. After an exuberant series of variations on the "Ode to Joy" theme, he takes a left turn from the home key of D major and lands on an F major chord, signaling a dramatic shift in an already dramatic movement.

What follows is quite remarkable. The passage, marked *Alla marcia*—in march style—is in B-flat major, a key that Beethoven has already used eloquently in the slow movement. Now, however, his modus operandi is altogether different. With bassoons, contrabassoons, and bass drum, Beethoven launches into a military march. He soon adds woodwinds, triangle, cymbals, horns, and trumpets.

Beethoven was emulating the Turkish Janissary band, a holdover from the Sultan's honor guard. The term comes from the Turkish words *yeni çeri*, which mean "new troop." Originally, janissaries were military ensembles serving several functions. On the battlefield, they were in the thick of action, stirring the soldiers to victory. In the Ottoman court, they furnished ceremonial music, playing at important occasions. The instruments were Turkish drums, cymbals, tambourines, triangles, winds, and a "Turkish crescent," a pole festooned with small bells and tinkling metallic discs. (The English called the latter a "jingling johnny.")

Janissary ensembles were introduced to Europe in the early 17th century and soon spawned copycat groups substituting western cousins of the Anatolian and Turkish instruments. To European ears, Janissary music represented Eastern culture. The fashion for this style peaked in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Operas such as Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and Rossini's *Il Turco in Italia* capitalized on the vogue.

Beethoven had previously used Janissary sounds in his incidental music to The Ruins of Athens. In 1824, when he incorporated the *Alla marcia* segment into the Ninth Symphony, the most recent military conflict had been Napoleon's invasion of Vienna in 1803. But the Habsburg monarchs had a centuries-old feud with the Ottomans that would also have resonated strongly with the Viennese. The tenor soloist joins Beethoven's march, singing "Brothers, run with shining eyes, heroes, happy, and victorious." The irony would not have been lost on Beethoven's Viennese audience.