

Program Notes for Beethoven 9

Written by Peter Laki

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*"The Promise of Living" from The Tender Land (1954, rev. 1955)
by Aaron Copland (Brooklyn, 1900 – Tarrytown, NY, 1990)*

After the resounding success of the ballet *Appalachian Spring*, the idea of a peaceful idyll in rural America continued to inspire Aaron Copland, who gave his opera, *The Tender Land*, a similar setting in an idealized Midwest. The libretto was written by Copland's lover Erik Johns under the pseudonym Horace Everett.

One of the key moments in the opera is "The Promise of Living," sung at the end of Act I. This moving song of thanksgiving was based on the old revivalist hymn "Zion's Walls," which Copland had earlier arranged in his *Old American Songs* (1950-52). The "Dean of American Composers," as Copland was often called, expressed his deep love for traditional American songs by including them in his symphonic and dramatic works; it was one of his most important contributions to 20th-century music.

In the opera, "The Promise of Living" is sung by a quintet of soloists. The present version for mixed choir is by Copland himself.

*The promise of living with hope and thanksgiving
Is born of our loving our friends and our labor.*

*The promise of growing with faith and with knowing
Is born of our sharing our love with our neighbor.*

*The promise of loving, the promise of growing
Is born of our singing in joy and thanksgiving.*

*For many a year we've known these fields
And know all the work that makes them yield.
We're ready to work, we're ready to lend a hand.
By working together we'll bring in the blessings of harvest.*

*We plant each row with seeds of grain,
And Providence sends us the sun and the rain.
By lending a hand, by lending an arm
Bring out the blessings of harvest.*

*Give thanks there was sunshine, give thanks there was rain,
Give thanks we have hands to deliver the grain.*

O let us be joyful, O let us be grateful to the Lord for his blessing.

*The promise of living, the promise of growing
The promise of ending is labor and sharing and loving.*

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Les Préludes (1854)

by Franz Liszt (Doborján, Hungary [now Raiding, Austria], 1811 – Bayreuth, 1886)

No one in the 1840s had a more dazzling pianistic career than Franz Liszt. Lionized throughout Europe as a traveling virtuoso, Liszt was widely regarded as the Paganini of the piano. Then, after 1848, he abruptly stopped his concert tours. Whereas his earlier home base, to the extent that he had one, was Paris, he now moved to Weimar, where he became the conductor of the court orchestra. Having broken up with the Countess Marie d'Agoult, the mother of his three children, he began a new long-term relationship with Princess Carolyne zu Sayn-Wittgenstein.

It was in the wake of these fundamental life changes that Liszt began to focus on orchestral music like never before. But he had no intention of cultivating the four-movement symphony in the classical tradition. His ambitions were of a different kind: he had a cycle of shorter, one-movement works in mind that would each be based on an extra-musical program: a poem or painting that would provide inspiration and determine the form and the whole atmosphere of the composition.

Liszt eventually completed twelve “symphonic poems,” as he called them (a thirteenth was to follow many years later). Of these, *Les Préludes* is the most often performed today. The title comes from a long poem by French Romantic poet Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869), which describes a series of episodes in turn peaceful and turbulent, all “preludes,” as Liszt wrote in his preface to the score, “to that unknown hymn, the first and solemn note of which is intoned by Death...”

Some of the musical material of *Les Préludes* came from an unpublished choral work called *The Four Elements*, another attempt to encompass a multitude of life experiences. In reworking that material, Liszt employed a special kind of variation technique for which he became famous. Also known as “character transformation,” this method consists in repeating the same theme throughout the work with major changes in rhythm, tempo, and harmony that completely alter its character. The immediate model for this procedure was Schubert’s *Wanderer* fantasy for piano, which Liszt arranged for piano and orchestra in 1851; however, Liszt took the idea much further than Schubert had done.

In *Les Préludes*, Liszt subjected two separate themes to character transformation. One seems more brooding at the beginning, reminiscent of the “*Muss es sein?*” (“Must it be?”) theme from Beethoven’s last string quartet, becoming more resolute as the piece progresses. The other first played as a lyrical melody by a quartet of horns, turns into a military march at the end. These transformations suggest that the various peaceful and turbulent episodes of the literary model are all part of a single human experience.



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Symphony No. 9 ("Choral") in D minor, Op. 125 (1824)
by Beethoven

With the Ninth, Beethoven created more than a symphony. Almost as soon as it was written, the Ninth became a major icon of Western culture. Its message affirms the triumph of joy over adversity like no other piece of music has ever done. And its revolutionary form, its unprecedented size and complexity and, above all, the introduction of the human voice in the last movement, changed the history of music forever. The work's import and the means by which its message is expressed are both unique: each explains and justifies the other.

Everything in Beethoven's career seems to have prepared the way for this exceptional composition. It is the culmination of the so-called "heroic style," known from Symphonies No. 3 and 5, among others. But it is also the endpoint of a series of choral works with all-embracing, cathartic, and solemn endings. The series began in 1790 with two cantatas on the death of Emperor Joseph II and the inauguration of Leopold II, respectively; the concluding chorus of the latter begins with the words *Stürzt nieder, Millionen* ("Fall to your knees, ye millions")—a close paraphrase of Schiller's "Ode to Joy," the text Beethoven used in the final movement of the Ninth. The most direct precursor of the "Choral" Symphony is certainly the Choral Fantasy (1808), but let it also be remembered that Beethoven's only opera, *Fidelio*, contains another quote from Schiller's poem in its final scene: *Wer ein holdes Weib errungen...* ("A man who has found a gracious wife...")

The poem had preoccupied Beethoven since at least 1792: in that year, an acquaintance of the composer's informed Schiller's sister that

A young man...whose talents are universally praised...proposes...to compose Schiller's *Freude*, and indeed strophe by strophe. I expect something perfect for as far as I know him he is wholly devoted to the great and the sublime.

In a way, then, Beethoven was preparing to write this work all his life. The actual compositional work took about a year and a half, from the summer of 1822 through February 1824.

Beethoven's plans to set Schiller's "Ode to Joy" began to take a new shape in 1816-17, around the time he received a commission for a symphony from the Philharmonic Society of London. At this point, he had two distinct compositions in mind—a new pair of symphonies similar to Nos. 5-6 (1807-08) or 7-8 (1811-12), which had also been conceived in pairs. But the Tenth Symphony never progressed beyond a few sketches. The Ninth remained Beethoven's last work for orchestra.

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Even though Beethoven had long planned to set the "Ode to Joy" to music, he hesitated over whether or not the last movement of a symphony was the proper place for such a setting. After sketching the choral finale, he appears to have had second thoughts and jotted down ideas for a purely instrumental last movement, ideas he later used in his string quartet in A minor, Op. 132. He felt that the introduction of voices needed special justification; the difficulties he experienced in crossing this particular line can be seen from the many stages the introduction went through in the sketches. At one point, for instance, the rejection of the themes from the first three movements was entrusted to a singer (not the cellos and basses as in the final version). The singer, after dismissing the scherzo as *Possen* ("farce") and the Adagio as "too tender," exclaimed: "Let us sing the song of the immortal Schiller!"

In the end, Beethoven set only about half of the "song of the immortal Schiller," freely repeating and rearranging the lines. He used the revised version of the poem, which Schiller had published in 1803.

The opening of the symphony, with its open fifths played in mysterious string tremolos (rapid repeated notes), has been described as representing the creation of the world, as the theme emerges from what seems an amorphous, primordial state. There is an atmosphere of intense expectancy; the tension continually grows until the main theme is presented, *fortissimo*, by the entire orchestra. It is significant that the mysterious opening is immediately repeated, as it will be two more times in the course of the movement, significantly prolonging the sensation of suspense. The main theme is moved into a new key the second time, and into an unexpected one at that. The first movement of a D-minor symphony normally gravitates upward toward F major. Beethoven chose a descent to B-flat instead (incidentally, B-flat will also be the key of the symphony's slow movement). The Allegro follows the outlines of sonata form, but the individual stages of that form do not quite function the usual way. In traditional sonata form (Mozart, for instance), the tensions that build up in the development section are resolved in the recapitulation. In the Ninth Symphony, a tendency present in several works from Beethoven's middle period becomes stronger than ever: the tensions keep increasing to the end. The movement's lengthy coda contains some new material of a highly dramatic character; it ends on a climactic point, with no resolution in sight.

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The second movement is based on a motif of only three notes, played in turn by the strings, the timpani (specially tuned at an octave instead of the usual fourth), and the winds. The tension-filled motif is developed in a fugal fashion, with subsequent imitative entrances—this fugal theme appeared in Beethoven's sketchbook as early as 1815. The Trio, or middle section, switches from triple to duple meter, and from D minor to D major, anticipating not only the key of the finale but the outline of the "Ode to Joy" theme as well. For the first time, we reach a haven of peace and happiness that foreshadows the finale. But for the moment, the Trio is brushed aside by the repeat of the dramatic "Molto vivace." At the end, Beethoven leads into the trio a second time, but breaks it off abruptly, to end the movement with two measures of octave leaps in unison.

The sublime third movement Adagio is one of Beethoven's most transcendent utterances. It has two alternating melodies: one majestic, the other tender. Each recurrence of the first theme is more ornate than the preceding one while the second theme does not change. The movement culminates in a powerful brass fanfare, followed by a wistful epilogue.

We are jolted out of this idyll by what, in 1824, must have counted as the most jarring dissonance ever written. Wagner referred to this sonority as the Schreckensfanfare ("fanfare of horror"), and, at the opening of the finale, it forcefully suggests that we have arrived at a point where all previous rules break down. We can no longer predict the future on the basis of the past; what follows has no precedent in the history of music.

In a 1995 study, musicologist David Levy interprets the finale as a four-movement symphony in its own right that mirrors the four movements of the Ninth Symphony itself (opening, scherzo, slow movement, finale). After the fanfare, Beethoven begins the first of these sections by evoking the past: the themes of the first three movements appear, only to be emphatically rejected by the dramatic recitative of the cellos and basses. The first two-measure fragment of the "Ode to Joy" theme, however, is greeted by a recitative in a completely different, enthusiastic tone as the tonality changes to a bright D major.

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The "Ode to Joy" theme is first played by the cellos and basses without any accompaniment. It is subsequently joined by several countermelodies (including a particularly striking one in the bassoon) and finally repeated triumphantly by the entire orchestra. Then the music suddenly stops and the Schreckensfanfare unexpectedly returns, followed by the entrance of the baritone soloist who takes up the last phrase of the earlier instrumental recitative to lead into the vocal presentation of the "Ode to Joy." As before, during the instrumental variations, the melody grows and grows in volume and excitement until (at the words *Und der Cherub steht vor Gott*) there is a new interruption.

The second major section of the movement starts here, with the scherzo-like "Turkish march" for tenor solo and a battery of percussion instruments. It has been dubbed the "Turkish march" because of a musical style influenced by the Turkish janissary bands popular in Vienna at the time. The theme of the "Turkish march," with its extra percussion parts, is, of course, a variation on the "Ode to Joy" melody. This episode is followed by an orchestral interlude in the form of a fugue, also based on the "Ode to Joy." The melody is recapitulated in its original form by the orchestra and chorus, and then the music stops again.

In the third section (the "slow movement"), the men from the chorus introduce a new theme (*Seid umschlungen, Millionen*). If the "Ode" celebrated the divine nature of Joy, this melody represents the Deity in its awe-inspiring, cosmic aspect. Whereas the first theme proceeded entirely in small steps, the second one is characterized by wide leaps; this sudden expansion in the dimensions of the melody conjures up a sense of the infinite and God's throne above the starry skies.

The last section begins with the two themes heard simultaneously in what Levy calls a "symbolic contrapuntal union of the sacred and the profane." The solo quartet returns to the first strophe of Schiller's poem; once more, the music starts anew to rise to new heights of joyful energy. Three slow sections intervene to delay this final ascent; the second of these (an Adagio cadenza for the four solo singers) momentarily brings back memories of the symphony's slow movement. But finally, nothing can stop the music from reaching a state of ecstasy. After the last unison D in measure 940, the journey is completed and there is nothing left to say.

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*O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!
Sondern lasst uns angenehmere anstimmen, und freudenvollere.
Freude, schöner Götterfunken,
Tochter aus Elysium,
Wir betreten feuertrunken,
Himmlische, dein Heiligtum.
Deine Zauber binden wieder
Was die Mode streng geteilt,
Alle Menschen werden Brüder
Wo dein sanfter Flügel weilt.*

*Wem der grosse Wurf gelungen,
Eines Freundes Freund zu sein,
Wer ein holdes Weib errungen,
Mische seinen Jubel ein!
Ja, wer auch nur eine Seele
Sein nennt auf der Erden rund!
Und wer's nie gekonnt, der stehle
Weinend sich aus diesem Bund.*

*Freude trinken alle Wesen
An den Brüsten der Natur,
Alle Guten, alle Bösen
Folgen ihrer Rosenspur.
Küsse gab sie uns und Reben,
Einen Freund, geprüft im Tod,
Wollust ward dem Wurm gegeben,
Und der Cherub steht vor Gott.*

*Froh, wie seine Sonnen fliegen
Durch des Himmels prächt'gen Plan,
Laufet, Brüder, eure Bahn,
Freudig, wie ein Held zum Siegen.*

*Seid umschlungen, Millionen!
Diesen Kuss der ganzen Welt!
Brüder! überm Sternenzelt
Muss ein lieber Vater wohnen.*

*Ihr stürzt nieder, Millionen?
Ahnest du den Schöpfer, Welt?
Such ihn überm Sternenzelt,
Über Sternen muss er wohnen.*

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*O friends, not these sounds!
Let us sing more pleasant and more joyful ones instead!*

*Joy, beautiful divine spark,
daughter from Paradise,
We enter, drunk with fire,
Heavenly One, into your sanctuary.
Your magic reunites what daily life
Has rigorously kept apart,
All men become brothers
Wherever your gentle wings abide.*

*Anyone who has been greatly fortunate
To be a true friend to a friend,
Each man who has found a gracious wife,
Should rejoice with us!
Yes, anyone who can claim but a single soul
As his or her own in all the world!
But anyone who has known none of this must steal away,
Weeping, from our company.*

*All beings drink of Joy
At Nature's breasts,
All good creatures, all evil creatures
Follow her rosy path.
She has given us kisses and vines,
A friend loyal unto death,
Pleasure has been given to the worm,
And the angel stands before God.*

*Happily, as his suns fly
Across the sky's magnificent expanse,
Hurry, brothers, along your path,
Joyfully, like a hero to the conquest.*

*Be embraced, you millions!
This kiss for the entire world!
Brothers -- beyond the starry canopy
A loving Father must dwell.*

*Do you fall on your knees, you millions?
Do you sense the Creator, world?
Seek Him above the starry canopy,
Beyond the stars must He dwell.*