

CONCERT 17th August 2020

Dear WHO members and friends,

Well I hope you enjoyed the last two weeks of notes about Beethoven's trials and especially the momentous works composed during the last few years of his life. I feel we cannot move on without spending a week with what many would regard as his greatest achievement, the Ninth Symphony, the Choral. This work is universally known and admired and the theme of the final movement has been adopted as the anthem of a free and united Europe.

Beethoven was the first composer to use voices in a symphony, and the ninth was one of many ways that showed Beethoven's genius as an innovator who routinely broke the established rules.

Friedrich Schiller, along with Goethe, were the giants of German literature. Beethoven knew Schiller's poetry from his Bonn years and admired his work enormously, but stated in letters that his poems were very hard to set to music. He had done so with Goethe's poetry, setting them to song, but with "An die Freude" he deliberated for so long. It is simply a poem about the equality of all human beings and their relationship to a deity. This area of spirituality had been reawakened (as mentioned last week) in Beethoven during his final years. Perhaps it was proper that the universal message was left until Beethoven was at the height of his symphonic powers. The essential message that all men are equal under God clearly resonated with him after living through a Europe dominated by the aftermath of the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars. I'm sure his own life of turmoil and separation from friends and family also promoted the recognition of the poem and a desire to promote its ideals with special treatment. When Beethoven first came to know the poem it contained the line "Beggars will become the brothers of princes" but by the time he came to set the poem years later Schiller had made several alterations, including the substitution of that line for the famous "Alle Menschen werden Brüder", all mankind will become brothers.

There was palpable excitement in Vienna when, after nearly a dozen years since his eighth symphony, Beethoven was working on a new symphony. He had moved more than 30 times in his 30 years in Vienna but wherever he went so did his desk including, in an inner draw, his "Letter to the Immortal Beloved" penned years earlier and never sent. The woman it was intended for was never mentioned, but clearly Beethoven was greatly traumatised and secretive as, although he had not sent it, he had kept it. It was not found until after his death and, as soon as it was discovered, there was a frenzy of speculation as to who the woman was. This was the case up to more recent times, with exhaustive research extending to checking the timetables of mail coaches etc. Certain Beethoven scholars have come up with what they feel is the definitive answer to the mystery but there is still not total agreement as to who she was. We will probably never know for sure. One thing seems to be consistent. The affair, if it happened, was probably in the Bohemian spa town of Karlovy.

Beethoven was given to spending time in spa towns, which probably gave him physical relief from his many ailments. Indeed much of the ninth symphony was written in the spa town of Baden south of Vienna.

In typical fashion Beethoven upset the Viennese musical establishment by offering the premiere of the symphony to the general manager of the Berlin Theatre. It was only after an open letter, signed by 30 leading figures in Vienna's musical circles, pleading with him to allow it to be performed in Vienna, that Beethoven changed his mind. He then entered into negotiations with several theatres, playing them off against one another, before finally settling on a venue. Beethoven then put together the musicians, orchestra, soloists and chorus but by now there was only time for two rehearsals. The contralto, Karoline Unger threw a tantrum in the second and last rehearsal calling Beethoven "a tyrant over all vocal organs". The soloists all demanded Beethoven simplify their parts. Of course he didn't! This first performance however, was a triumph and was forever etched in the history of Vienna's extraordinary musical history. Beethoven had insisted on conducting but given his deafness it was arranged that Michael Umlauf would conduct and Beethoven would stand next to him turning pages and giving tempi. There are many and varied accounts of the concert performed on the 7th of May 1824, which also included the overture "Consecration of the House" and three movements: Kyrie, Credo and Agnus Dei from Missa Solemnis. Suffice it to say the reception was fantastic, acclaiming him five times with handkerchiefs and hands raised and hats thrown in the air. Karoline Unger took him kindly by the arm and turned him around to see the cheers and bravos emanating from the audience, of which he was oblivious. This grand finale with all guns blazing had been a long time in

the making, first with *Gegenliebe*, a song for piano and high voice, then in the Choral Fantasy and eventually the highlight of his final symphony.

I count myself honoured to have performed this extraordinary work on a number of occasions, most notably with Sir Charles Mackerras at the Sydney Opera House. In that performance Mackerras, in my opinion the greatest of Australian conductors, brought a fascinating degree of scholarship to the performance, especially his interpretation of the last movement. He was the same in performances of Wagner and Janacek (of whom he was a world authority), which I can attest to first hand. We will follow his stellar career and the legacy he left to Australian music and audiences, more closely in a future letter

The symphony has four movements. Three purely instrumental movements: *Allegro ma non tanto*; *un poco maestoso*, *Molto vivace* and *Adagio molto e cantabile - andante moderato*. The fourth is marked *Presto- Allegro Assai* lasting 24 or so minutes and includes all the work's vocal aspects and even the intrusion of a "Turkish" band. That Beethoven could include the Ottoman enemy who had besieged Vienna in 1683 into his composition was, I believe, evidence of his universality and statement of brotherhood.

As a reality check to the adulation shown to Beethoven at this premiere performance were the tragic events of later that year. In June 1824 Karl, his nephew, informed his uncle that he wanted to leave the University of Vienna and join the military. Beethoven was finally accepting that Karl was not destined to be the next generation's Beethoven, and he could not control his nephew's future. In August 1826 Karl took a carriage south to Baden (where much of the ninth symphony was written) and attempted to kill himself with a pistol he had bought by pawning his watch. He grazed his head, was found by some walkers and asked to be taken to his mother. Beethoven's humiliation was complete. His nephew had attempted suicide and requested his mother's company rather than his uncle's. All of Vienna heard the gossip.

When Karl was released from hospital he was returned to Beethoven in compliance with the final and protracted court findings. Together they left to stay with brother Johann. Karl was constantly moody and Beethoven was in constant discomfort. The tension in the house was apparently palpable.

Beethoven was terminally ill and on returning to Vienna suffered numerous treatments from a range of physicians, some of whom he insulted, some of whom he sacked.

Eventually and mercifully he received the last rites and on the afternoon of March 26th 1827, he took his last breath.

So many great recordings of this work exist. Amongst the historic conductors of note are Klemperer, Furtwängler and Toscanini. More recently Karajan, Harnoncourt, Abbado and Barenboim. After the Berlin Wall came down Bernstein gave a performance of the Ninth where, after each movement, musicians changed places so that as many members from Europe's leading orchestras could take part. Many conductors feel free to take Beethoven's metronome markings merely as a guide. The secret of success in this endeavour is to have the profound knowledge needed as well as the skills to convince the highly professional musicians in front of you that these interpretations are worthy of Beethoven's vision.

I hope that a more intimate knowledge of the man will enhance the profound experience of enjoying this symphony more fully. It is indeed amongst the greatest of all musical achievements.