

Ludwig van Beethoven began planning a concert (or, as he called it, an "Academy") of his music in the spring of 1824. He had not given a concert for a decade, even though he was now famous: the king of France had awarded him a medal, the Philharmonic Society of London was courting him, and a group of distinguished residents of Vienna had just published an open letter to him entreating him to present his music in Vienna, not abroad.

Despite his fame, however, Beethoven could not possibly have known that his latest symphony would become perhaps the most famous piece of classical music in Western culture. The Ninth Symphony has fascinated listeners, critics, and analysts since the moment of its first performance. It has generated pop songs, hymn tunes, television theme music, and a variety of cultural phenomena to an extent matched only by Handel's *Messiah*. In Japan, performances of the Ninth are a crucial part of New Year's Eve celebrations: choral societies rehearse the piece diligently, and every year performances of the symphony on December 31 number in the dozens. Indeed, the format of the modern CD was determined by a Japanese firm's insistence that the symphony fit on a single disk.

Many later composers were guided by this symphony, which was both a milestone and a millstone. "He was an artist," said Franz Grillparzer at Beethoven's funeral, "and who shall arise to stand beside him?" The opening sound of the symphony's first movement, ambiguous as to key and meter, a figuration of chaos out of which order comes only gradually, gives a sense of the breadth of the symphony to follow; this general

plan has been imitated by many subsequent composers, and not just second-rate imitators. It is difficult not to hear echoes of Beethoven, and of this symphony in particular, in a number of very long symphonies, sometimes with vocal participants, that seek a combination of personal and universal expression.



Portrait of Beethoven, 1824

This engraving is based on a chalk drawing by Stefan Decker reportedly made by the artist a few days after Beethoven's concert of May 1824. Perhaps it shows the haircut that Schuppanzigh praised in the conversation books. It certainly does not show Beethoven's dark complexion, his pockmarked face, or his often slovenly appearance.

Carl Czerny on Beethoven's concert:

There is surely no more significant musical news that I can write you about from our dear old Vienna than that Beethoven finally gave repeated performances of his long-awaited concert, and in the most striking manner astonished everyone who feared that after ten years of deafness he could now produce only dry, abstract works, bereft of imagination. To the greatest extent, his new Symphony breathes such a fresh, lively, indeed youthful spirit; so much power, innovation and beauty as ever [came] from the head of this ingenious man, although several times he certainly gave the old wigs something to shake their heads about.

The Ninth Symphony has a unique place in Western culture and brings with it so many associations, so much critical and analytical history, and so much significance retrospectively that it is not easy to imagine this composition in Beethoven's Vienna. Whereas Viennese society of the time has passed into memory and museums, the Ninth Symphony has remained alive and seems more a part of our own time (or perhaps of all times) than of Beethoven's. In a sense, of course, it is one of the joys of music that this should be so. But our perception is inevitably different from that of the first audience, and our purpose here is to put ourselves in their place, in the Vienna of 1824, to consider the Ninth Symphony as a part of its own culture. In this way we may gain a new perspective on an old friend and perhaps enrich our understanding of Beethoven's genius and of this symphony's unique qualities.

To nineteenth-century Viennese, a symphony was a piece of concert music, though not a significant one. Mozart's forty-one symphonies and Haydn's 104 or so are certainly notable music — they are now played by orchestras everywhere — but they are of another world. The symphony of the late eighteenth century had been essentially a curtain-raiser played at the beginnings of musical events — a sort of wallpaper music that prepared the way for more important things to come: operas, concerti, oratorios. Thus a review of 1805: "The concert opened with a Haydn symphony which, as is usual with the opening pieces of concerts, was only half heard." Or again in 1800: "First a quartet or a symphony, which basically is viewed as a necessary evil (you have to start with something!) and therefore to be talked through."

A symphony was expected to begin loudly. Standard symphonies used in concerts (as opposed to those used for operas) consisted of several (usually four) move-

ments, each having a different mood. The opening movement, occasionally preceded by a slow introduction, was generally the most substantial: it had a lively tempo and contrasted two sets of themes and two different keys. These themes were then developed in various ways—combined, transposed, divided into constituent elements—before being repeated in the original key. A slower, more lyrical movement followed, providing a contemplative or passionate contrast to the usually extroverted opening movement. Most symphonies by Mozart and Haydn had a minuet as the third movement, the clear phraseology and regular rhythm of the familiar dance offering a moment of relaxation. The symphony closed with a lively finale, a fourth movement, usually lighter and briefer than the opening movement. The whole thing lasted perhaps fifteen minutes.

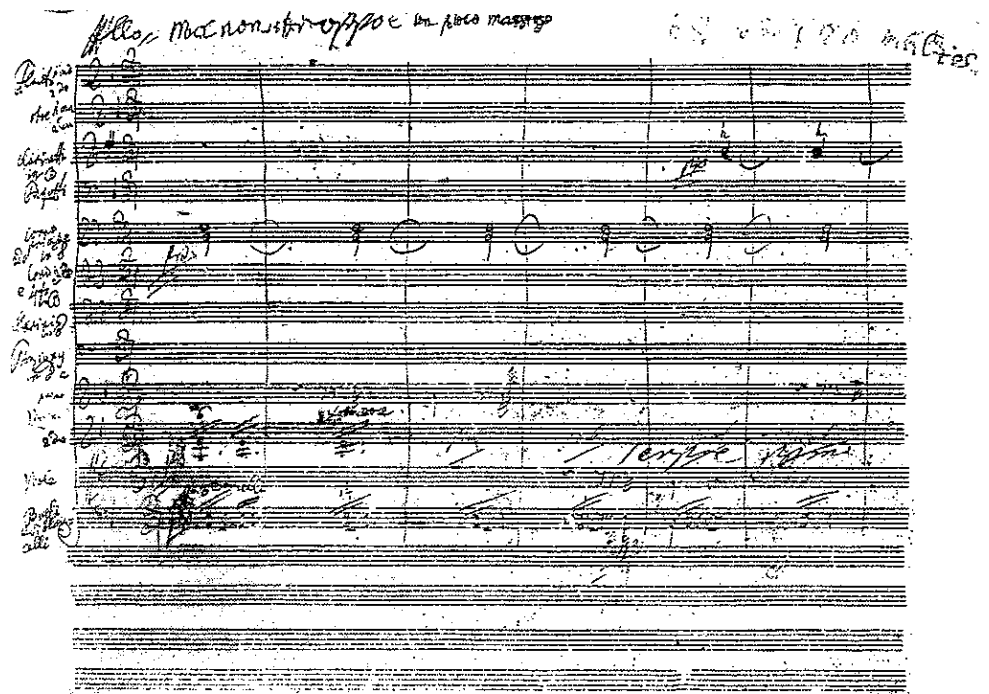
Symphonies were much in demand in Vienna. Virtuoso soloists needed two or three for a concert: one to open the concert, one to close it, and perhaps one to call for attention after an intermission. Every oratorio opened with a symphony; and many, complete or partial, were used as intermission fillers in the theaters (“I was very attentive, not only in the *Singspiele*, but also to the symphonies between the acts, which the audience pays so little attention to”).

By the time of Haydn and Mozart, symphonies had already begun to gain a new musical importance. As symphonies got larger and musically more significant, concert programs might include only parts of a symphony, or split its performance (as Mozart did with his “Haffner” symphony), presenting part at the beginning of the concert, the rest at the end. By the time of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, the role of curtain-raiser was being taken over by concert overtures.

Beethoven’s Third (“Eroica,” 1803) and Seventh (1813) symphonies had expanded enormously the traditional weight and function of the symphony. Beyond physical scope, Beethoven’s symphonies, especially the Fifth and Sixth, had created a sense of the multiple movements as a single work that possessed a psychological sequence through the several segments, a progression that generally represented struggle leading to triumph and transcendence.

Many of the unusual aspects of the Ninth Symphony were not entirely new in Beethoven’s thinking. The Fifth Symphony, which begins in C minor but ends in a triumphant C major, saves the highest and lowest instruments—piccolo and contrabassoon—for the C-major finale; and the Ninth begins in a spooky not-quite D minor but ends in a blaze of D major (with the piccolo and contrabassoon again entering only in the last movement, in the “Turkish March” of the finale).

Whereas a classical symphony had formerly consisted of a substantial first movement to which several shorter movements were appended, in the Ninth Beethoven shifts the weight from the first movement toward the end. This is not accomplished, however, by lightening the beginning; the first movement is grand, solemn, and perhaps tragic music, whose nebulous opening creates both doubt about the key (is it



Beethoven's Score of the Ninth Symphony

The score is not easy to read, and it is little wonder that the copyists preparing the orchestral parts (see p. 158) had difficulty deciphering the manuscript. The instruments are listed at the left: woodwinds at the top, brass in the center, and strings at the bottom. Not included on this first page are the vocalists and instruments that will enter later: soloists and chorus, trombones, piccolo, contrabassoon, bass drum, and cymbals. His notations at the top—
 “All[egr]o. Ma non troppo. Un poco mosso”—indicate tempo.

major? minor?) and a sense of timelessness that immediately signals the listener that this is a work of cosmic proportion.

The shift of weight is achieved partially by the reordering of the movements. The Scherzo, here as elsewhere in Beethoven replacing the Mozartean minuet, is moved to the second position; its humorous—or sinister—kettledrum solos and its rhythmic tricks do not serve as relief after the slow movement; the outer sections of this Scherzo are themselves in first-movement forms. The slow movement comes third, a lovely and passionate series of variations on two themes in two keys; the first theme—beginning much like the beautiful slow movement of the “Pathétique” piano sonata—is in the key of B-flat, representing the dark side of this work (B-flat is significant in the first movement and returns for the “Turkish March”), while the alternating theme is in a celestial D major, the key toward which the symphony as a whole is moving.

(6.11)

But Beethoven produces the main shift of weight through a final movement of gigantic proportions: a chorus and a quartet of vocal soloists break into song, singing Beethoven's version of Schiller's ode to joy, *An die Freude*. Everything has been leading up to this: the last movement opens by reviewing and rejecting the music of the foregoing movements. Beethoven had experimented with interlocking movements in his Fifth Symphony, where the minor-key Scherzo leads without interruption into the triumphant C-major finale (with piccolo and contrabassoon), and this contrast is revisited when music from the Scherzo returns at the end of the development of the Finale. In the Ninth Symphony, however, the triumph comes not with a blazing start but in the course of the finale itself.

Nobody has succeeded in describing in analytical terms all the complexities and balances of this titanic finale. It is like a concerto, in which the soloists and chorus take the role of the solo instrument; it is like a symphony in itself, with varying moods, tempos, and movements; it is like an oratorio, with solo singers and choir; it is like a French revolutionary cantata, culminating in a great passionate outburst. But it is mostly the statement of a personal credo: "All men shall be brothers," centered around a folklife melody of such grandeur and simplicity that nobody ever forgets it.

This symphony is neither a curtain-raiser nor an intermission feature; and it is not what one was used to listening to in Vienna of 1824.

Life in Vienna

Vienna today still looks in many ways as it did to Beethoven. The Danube still flows past the edge of the city. The center is still dominated by the Steffl, the great Gothic spire of Saint Stephen's Cathedral. The magnificent Baroque buildings of Fischer von Erlach and others continue to give an imperial majesty to the city. One can still linger, have a good meal, and do a lot of reading in the many cafés and restaurants. The traditional four-wheeled, two-horse fiacre is still used for transport, although now it often moves on rubber tires and carries tourists.

In 1824 Vienna was still a fortified city, with eight main gates and twenty-seven bastions in its massive city walls. Just outside the walls, an open defensive ring, the glacis, on which no permanent building was allowed to stand, separated the center of the city from the newer suburbs. The glacis was some nineteen hundred feet across, roughly the range of a late seventeenth-century cannon (the last Turkish invasion had been in 1683). An outer ring of defenses and customs houses, the Linien, stood beyond the suburbs and defined the city limits.

The major buildings announce that Vienna was the capital of a great empire: the central complex of the Hofburg Palace; the Versailles-like Schönbrunn Palace, built by Maria Theresa, used at the Congress of Vienna, and once occupied by Napoleon; the Belvedere, built in the early eighteenth century for Prince Eugene of Savoy in grat-