

Beethoven's Ninth

SCHERMERHORN SYMPHONY CENTER

LAURA TURNER HALL

May 28, 2009 at 7 p.m.

May 29 & 30, 2009 at 8 p.m.

Nashville Symphony

Leonard Slatkin, *conductor*

Arianna Zukerman, *soprano*

Kelley O'Connor, *mezzo-soprano*

Jeffrey Springer, *tenor*

Nathan Berg, *bass-baritone*

Nashville Symphony Chorus

George Mabry, *chorus director*

SAMUEL BARBER

Prayers of Kierkegaard, Op. 30

Arianna Zukerman, *soprano*

Kelley O'Connor, *mezzo-soprano*

Jeffrey Springer, *tenor*

intermission

BEETHOVEN

Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125 "Choral"

Allegro ma non troppo, un poco maestoso

Molto vivace

Adagio molto e cantabile

Presto - Allegro assai - Allegro assai vivace

Arianna Zukerman, *soprano*

Kelley O'Connor, *mezzo-soprano*

Jeffrey Springer, *tenor*

Nathan Berg, *bass-baritone*

SAMUEL BARBER

(born in West Chester, Pennsylvania, 1910; died in New York, 1981)

Prayers of Kierkegaard, Op. 30

Scored for soprano soloist, incidental solos for alto and tenor, 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), 3 oboes (3rd doubling English horn), 3 clarinets (3rd doubling bass clarinet), 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, bass drum, church bells or chimes, cymbals, snare drum, tam-tam, triangle, whip, xylophone, piano, harp, strings and mixed chorus

estimated length: 17 minutes

In 1942 Samuel Barber received a commission from the newly established Koussevitzky Music Foundation, founded by the famous Boston Symphony Orchestra conductor in memory of his late wife, Natalie. No composer today would wait as long as Barber did before fulfilling such a prestigious commission, but in 1953 he finally began composing his *Prayers of Kierkegaard* for orchestra, mixed chorus, soprano solo and “incidental” tenor and alto solos.

Several external factors inspired Barber’s creation of the piece. First, while in Rome in 1951, he had been profoundly moved by the monks of St. Anselmo singing Gregorian chant. He wrote home, “The simplicity and sincere style with which they sang this overwhelming music warmed all the corners of my heart.”

Second, Barber had been immersing himself in the writings of the Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), whose persistent quest for the truth resonated with his own spiritual searching. Barber typically preferred not to give verbal explanations of his music, but he wrote in notes for the premiere:

“It is difficult to give a philosophic appraisal of Kierkegaard’s standpoint since he elaborated no philosophy and was indeed the sworn enemy of philosophical systems.... The entire literary production of Kierkegaard is motivated by the intent of bringing men into a religious relationship with God, and throughout his writings one finds his three basic traits of imagination, dialectic and religious melancholy. The truth he sought after was ‘a truth which is true for me,’ one which demanded sacrifice and personal response.”

The third factor influencing this piece came in the summer of 1953, when Barber found “the right voice” in Leontyne Price to sing the premiere of his recently completed *Hermit Songs*. Her talents inspired the lovely soprano solo in *Prayers of Kierkegaard*, which he completed in January 1954. That fall Barber wrote a message to be delivered to Koussevitzky’s successor, Charles Münch, who would conduct the December 3 premiere, saying, “I have worked with Leontyne on the solo and she does it beautifully.” He also advised choosing “first-rate ‘church-soloist’ voices” for the tenor and alto solos, and said he hoped Münch would use the two “real bells” they had discussed, since these would sound more like monastery bells than the typical orchestral tubular bells.

The premiere with the BSO, Leontyne Price, the Cecilia Society Chorus, contralto Jean Kraft and tenor Edward Munro was well received, as was the repeat performance five days later in New York with the BSO, Price, the Schola Cantorum and supporting soloists Mary McMurray and Earl Ringland. Having committed to *Prayers of Kierkegaard* even before the premiere, the Chicago Symphony under Fritz Reiner soon performed the work, but Barber’s favorite rendition took place in Vienna — in German — with, as he reported, the “soaring and disembodied” voice of soprano Hilde Gueden and conductor Massimo Freccia, who “had all the correct tempos and succeeded in creating a mystical and at the same time passionate atmosphere.”

The work is in four continuous sections that draw on four different Kierkegaard prayers: 1. the opening prayer of “The Unchangeableness of God,” a sermon Kierkegaard said he first delivered in 1851; 2. a prayer from 1850, interspersed in one of his many *Journals*; 3. an 1848 prayer from *Christian Discourses*; and 4. an 1847 prayer, again from his *Journals*. Relying on translations by David Swenson, Alexander Dru and Walter Lowrie, Barber rearranged the texts by making cuts, reordering lines and translating certain phrases himself to suit his musical needs.

Barber’s opening evokes Gregorian chant with its unaccompanied male voices singing in unison, though the melody is the composer’s own invention. The orchestra brings on a full choral outburst, the first juxtaposition of ancient and modern styles that is the hallmark of the work. Barber illustrates the “unchanging” point of the text by remaining in the same key throughout the first section, though he switches between minor and major and soft and loud for expressive purposes. Out of the depths a plaintive oboe solo emerges, signaling the second section. The serenity of the beautiful soprano solo reflects the text’s focus on Christ’s patience.

The chorus begins the third section in quiet, hymn-like fashion. Barber builds to an emotional peak before subsiding for the entrance of the tenor, alto and soprano solos. Here he produces some of his most avant-garde harmonies, though the technique of having the choral tenors underpin the counterpoint in longer note values was centuries old. "With increasing motion and rapture," the intertwined parts bring on a section of quiet chanting for two antiphonal choirs, which gains even greater intensity.

The fourth section explodes out of this climax in vigorous orchestral fanfares. A "frenzied" choral declamation subsides into murmured phrases divided among three choirs. This is the passage in which Barber wanted the sound of "distant, if possible off-stage" bells. A radiant chorale in the composer's lush neo-Romantic style brings the work to a fitting conclusion.

TEXT FOR *PRAYERS OF KIERKEGAARD*

O Thou Who art unchangeable,
Whom nothing changes,
and remain at rest
in Thee unchanging.
Thou art moved
and moved in infinite love by all things:
the need of a sparrow, even this moves Thee;
and what we scarcely see,
a human sigh,
this moves Thee, O infinite Love!
But nothing changes Thee, O Thou unchanging!

Lord Jesus Christ
Who suffered all life long
that I, too, might be saved,
and Whose suffering still knows no end,
this, too, wilt Thou endure:
saving and redeeming me,
this patient suffering of me
with whom Thou hast to do —
I, who so often go astray.

Father in Heaven,
well we know that it is Thou
that giveth both to will and to do,
that also longing,
when it leads us to renew
the fellowship with our Savior and Redeemer,
is from Thee.
Father in Heaven, longing is Thy gift.
But when longing lays hold of us,
oh, that we might lay hold of the longing!
When it would carry us away,

that we also might give ourselves up!
When Thou art near to summon us,
that we also in prayer might stay near Thee!
When Thou in the longing dost offer us
the highest good,
oh, that we might hold it fast!

Father in Heaven!
Hold not our sins up against us
But hold us up against our sins,
So that the thought of Thee should not remind us
Of what we have committed,
But of what Thou didst forgive;
Not how we went astray,
But how Thou didst save us!
— Søren Kierkegaard

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

(born in Bonn, 1770; died in Vienna, 1827)

Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125 “Choral”

Scored for soprano, alto, tenor and bass soloists, 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, strings and mixed chorus

estimated length: 1 hour, 7 minutes

The idea of setting Friedrich Schiller’s *An die Freude* (Ode to Joy) had attracted Beethoven since his days in Bonn, before he left for Vienna. On January 26, 1793, one of his patrons, Bartholomäus Fischenich, wrote to Charlotte von Schiller, “He proposes to compose Schiller’s *Freude*, strophe by strophe. I expect something perfect, since he is wholly devoted to the great and sublime.” At this point *Freude* had not been associated with any symphonic project. Beethoven returned to the idea many times. In 1812 he jotted down a setting of the poem’s first line among sketches for the Seventh and Eighth symphonies, perhaps intended for a choral overture; they surfaced instead in the *Namensfeier* Overture.

In 1818 Beethoven had in mind a symphony with voices “that could sing something pious, in the ancient modes,” but it was not until 1822-23 that he connected his Schiller idea with such a symphony. To arrive at its final form in the Ninth Symphony, Beethoven cut and rearranged Schiller’s poem to suit his own poetic vision. Beethoven struggled considerably over how to link the choral section and its introductory instrumental variations to the lengthy preceding instrumental movements. He eventually hit upon the solution of a baritone recitative using his own words.

The melody for the *Ode to Joy* setting also underwent a long gestation period. Of special interest is its incarnation in the *Choral Fantasy*, Op. 80, of 1808. That work, also for chorus and orchestra, employs a text by the obscure poet Christoph Kuffner that is very similar in content and rhythm to Schiller’s *Freude* poem.

Beethoven’s first movement is of imposing stature, rooted in traditional sonata form, with an ingenious layer of variation and thematic transformation. About the celebrating opening, Donald Francis Tovey, well known for

his penetrating music analyses, wrote, “Of all the passages in a work of art, the first subject of the first movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony has had the deepest and widest influence on later music.” This theme, proclaimed fortissimo in unison by the entire orchestra, grows out of a mysterious murmuring of open fifths in the strings. Opening themes arising from soft pedal tones are now common in the repertoire, and all stem from the opening of the Ninth Symphony — we can hear them in Wagner’s *Das Rheingold*, Strauss’ *Also sprach Zarathustra* and Mahler’s First Symphony, to mention only a few.

The main theme of the second-movement scherzo, so perfect in its final form, went through an evolutionary process of several years, though it is clear in the sketches that Beethoven conceived of it as a fugue subject from the start. To make his brief but striking introduction to the fugue, he simply extracted the theme’s characteristic leaping gesture. Each iteration of the gesture adds another note in the home key chord — an original and stunning presentation of an ordinary harmonic occurrence, which also provides one of the best timpani “licks” in the repertoire. The five-voice fugue returns after a trio that also uses contrapuntal techniques. Just when it seems that the presto transition and trio are returning for yet another statement in the coda, Beethoven abruptly cuts off the music and the movement comes to a sudden close — an artful device he had used in his Seventh Symphony.

Beethoven casts both the slow movement and the finale in variation form using quite different techniques. The slow movement begins by varying two alternating themes, an idea stemming from Haydn. Beethoven’s two themes are in contrasting key and meter. Though the second theme is just as beautiful as the first, it is curiously abandoned after these two alternations; the remainder of the Adagio features variations on the first theme and an extensive coda.

Beethoven chose to write this symphony in D minor, a key he used only rarely, well aware of its historical associations with despair, storminess and oppression. He admired, for instance, the powerful examples of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* and Requiem. Beethoven’s finale journeys from the darkness of the minor-key opening into the major-mode triumph of the *Ode to Joy*. He begins dramatically with a crashing discord (D minor with B-flats) and a furious seven-bar Presto, followed by cello/bass recitatives alternating with passages from each of the preceding movements. This introduction served as his vehicle for bringing the vocal parts into the symphony. In a sketchbook where he usually kept musical rather than prose notes, Beethoven outlined this scheme:

“This is a day of jubilation, worth singing about . . . (Theme of the first movement) O no, that won’t do; I want something more pleasant . . . (Theme of the second movement) That is no better, merely rather more cheerful . . . (Theme of the third movement) That’s also too tender. Must find something more rousing like the . . . I’ll sing you something myself . . . (Theme of the fourth movement) That will do! Now I have found a way to express joy.”

The ensuing variations — some instrumental, some vocal — treat the *Ode to Joy* theme freely, with contrasting episodes intervening periodically. Beethoven includes what he referred to as a “Turkish” part (a term from Mozart’s time, indicating march music with bass drum, triangle and cymbals); an energetic, climactic double fugue; and a joyful coda, with its whirlwind prestissimo ending interrupted once by a meditative cadenza for the solo voices. A striking moment comes at the end of the third choral variation, at “*steht vor Gott*” (stands before God) right before the “Turkish” march. The last word, sung on a harmonically unexpected chord, sends the following passage into a surprise key instead of following the typical path to the home key. Later, the exposed octave leaps at the climax of the double fugue provide an exalting chill at the words “*der ganzen Welt*” (to the whole world).

Beethoven did most of his work on the Ninth Symphony in 1823, but did not complete the finishing touches until the next February. His thoughts then turned to having the symphony performed, but he had doubts about Vienna as the locale because he had come to distrust the musical taste of the city; he made inquiries about having it performed in Berlin. When this got back to his friends and supporters, they sent him a touching declaration of their appreciation and begged him to allow his latest works to be performed in Vienna. The result was a concert

on May 7, 1824, that included the *Consecration of the House Overture*, parts of the *Missa Solemnis* and the Ninth Symphony.

Beethoven's desire to conduct the entire concert despite his deafness was accommodated by having him stand next to Michael Umlauf, whose beat the players had been strictly instructed to follow. The famous anecdote about the response to the performance varies slightly according to the teller. Either after the scherzo (according to the pianist Sigismond Thalberg) or after the finale (according to Caroline Unger, the contralto soloist, and to Beethoven's friend Anton Schindler), Beethoven stood turning over the pages of his score utterly deaf to the storm of applause until Mme. Unger pulled him by the sleeve and pointed to the audience, whereupon he turned and bowed.

— Program notes ©Jane Vial Jaffe

TEXT AND TRANSLATION FOR BEETHOVEN'S NINTH SYMPHONY

An die Freude

O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!
sondern lasst uns angenehmere anstimmen,
und freudenvollere.

— *Beethoven*

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 dem Erdenrund!
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.

Ode to Joy

O friends, not these sounds!
Rather let us begin to sing more
pleasantly
and more joyously.

Joy, fair spark of the gods,
daughter of Elysium,
We enter, intoxicated with fire,
Heavenly One, your holy place.
Your magic again unites
what custom strictly divided;
all men become brothers
where your gentle wings abide.

Whoever has had the great fortune
of being friend to a friend,
whoever has won a loving woman,
let him add his jubilation!
Yes, even he who calls but one soul
on earth his own!
And he who has never done it, let him
steal away, weeping, from this company.

All creatures drink joy
at Nature's breast,
all good, all evil ones
follow her trail of roses.
She gave us kisses and vines,
a friend, proven faithful to death;
Pleasure was given even to the worm,

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.
— *Friedrich Schiller*

and the cherub stands before God.

Happy, as his suns fly
through heaven's magnificent design,
follow, brothers, your path,
joyfully, like a hero to victory.

Be embraced, ye millions!
This kiss to the whole world!
Brothers, beyond the starry sky
surely a loving Father dwells.

Do you fall prostrate, ye millions?
Do you sense the Creator, World?
Seek Him beyond the starry sky!
Beyond the stars He must dwell.

Phrases of the above text are alternated and combined, especially in the latter part of the movement.

— *Program notes ©Jane Vial Jaffe*