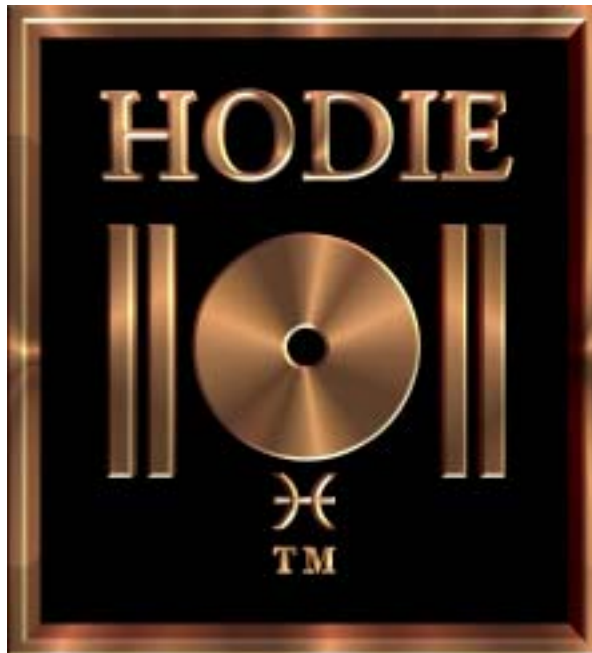


The *Ninth Symphony* – “Genesis”

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The text - The musical theme of the *Ode to Joy* - The piece



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The most striking fact about the genesis of the *Ninth Symphony* is that it took 29, if not actually 30 years, to realize the final combination of words and music. Three different factors, which developed in parallel, seem to have been quite instrumental along the way. They are essential to understand the rather tortuous character of Beethoven’s creating process.

- 1- **The text** - The major steps of Beethoven’s long-term relation to Schiller’s text.

- 2- **The musical theme of the *Ode to Joy*** - A summary of Beethoven’s numerous attempts to blend vocal music in the complex language of instrumental music, together with a brief history of the theme of the *Ode to Joy*.

- 3- **The piece** - The plan of a symphony including a finale with chorus. The sketches. Finalizing the *Ninth Symphony*.

1- The text

Although Beethoven considered setting Schiller’s text to music as early as 1792, the actual work on the *Ninth Symphony* is based on the 1803 revised version of the poem. The various steps towards setting Schiller’s Ode to Joy to music run chronologically as follows :

Late 1792 / early 1793 - First plan to set Schiller’s *Ode to Joy* to music.

1799 - First sketches on a line from the Ode to Joy - “There must dwell a loving Father” („*Muß ein lieber Vater wohnen*“) .

1804-1805 - Another excerpt : “Whoever has taken a loving wife / Let him join us in celebration !” - („*Wer ein holdes Weib errungen / Mische seinen Jubel ein !*“) is set to music and meant for the opera *Leonore* (op.72a).

1805-1806 - The same lines are taken up again and emphasized in the second version of *Leonore*.

1814 - The same lines are revised and given prominence in the final version of the opera, now called *Fidelio* (op. 72b).

1814-1815 - Two sketches in a notebook on “Joy, beautiful spark of the gods, Daughter of Elysium,” („*Freude, schöner Götterfunken, Tochter aus Elysium*”) , from the Ode to Joy.

1822 - The theme of the Hymn to Joy is finalized.

2- The musical theme of the Ode to Joy

Somewhat paradoxically, Beethoven’s successive steps towards setting the poem to music do not coincide with the various stages of the musical theme of the Hymn on the Ode to Joy, which will be finalized in 1822. Here a brief outline of these years of progressive elaboration :

1794/5 - Beethoven composes the song - „Lied“ : “Sight of one Unloved and Requited Love” („*Seufzer eines Ungeliebten und Gegenliebe*“) WoO 118.

1808 - The main theme of “Requited Love” („*Gegenliebe*“) reoccurs in the *Fantasy for piano, chorus and orchestra op. 80*.



1810 - The same theme reappears in another song - „Lied“ : “With a Coloured Ribbon” („*Mit einem gemalten Band*“) op. 83 n° 3.



1822 - The theme of the Ode to Joy is finalized.



The thematic and melodic similes between the two songs - „*Lieder*“ , the *Fantasia* and the hymn from the fourth movement are quite obvious. Yet nothing suggests nor points towards the evolution this melody will undergo until its final integration in the *Ninth Symphony*.

“Sight of one Unloved and Requited Love” („*Seufzer eines Ungeliebten und Gegenliebe*“) combines in fact two separate songs. Beethoven chose the texts from an anthology by the German poet August Bürger (1747-1794). It is most likely that he decided to make a bipartite work out of the two separate pieces between the time of their composition and the actual publication. The melodic line which shows some analogy with the future theme of the hymn is to be found in the second part : “Requited Love” („*Gegenliebe*“).

In the *Fantasia with chorus*, the melody attempts a symbiotic fusion of “pure” music and vocal music. The relation between text and structure goes one step closer in the direction of the *Ninth Symphony*. The refined writing and the hymnic character of both choral and solo parts intermingled with instrumental passages make the *Fantasia* something more than a mere successful trial run before the symphony. The text was written especially for the occasion by the Viennese poet Christoph Kuffner (1780-1817) and shows similar aspirations to Schiller’s. So, quite apart from the use of the theme of the previous Lied, the *Fantasia* appears to be a first step towards a symphony with chorus.

The song “With a Coloured Ribbon” („*Mit einem gemalten Band*”) plays on a radically different poetic register. The third of the three poems by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) that Beethoven set to music, it is of particular interest to us. The text is both pastoral and sensual, quite in Goethe’s vein. The composer paid meticulous attention to every detail : the key - F major - is pastoral *par excellence*; the vocal line is transparent, pure and tender, and the piano part is of remarkable delicacy. In particular, the afore-mentioned melodic fragment points even more clearly towards the future theme of the Ode to Joy which will actually come to life 12 years later.

3- The piece

The project of a symphony including a finale with chorus dates back to 1807, but the first sketches of the first three movements of the future *Ninth Symphony* were made in 1815/1816. There is in fact no positive evidence that they even belonged to this project of a symphony with chorus. Beethoven mentioned the project again two years later, in 1818. In the interval, the *Missa Solemnis* had kept him away from working on the symphony.

Completed during the Winter of 1823-1824, the symphony was finished in February 1824 and premiered on May 7. The same programme also featured the Overture op. 124 and three great “hymns” (Kyrie, Credo and Agnus Dei of the *Missa Solemnis*). Published in 1826 by Schott, it is dedicated to Frederic-Wilhelm III, King of Prussia.

It is impossible to assert categorically that the *Ninth Symphony* as a whole - which Beethoven in his sketch-books called the “German Symphony”- is the result of an uninterrupted composition process stretched over a long period of time (30 years for the elaboration of the text, 17 years for the instrumental part). Convergence and a certain logic show up only at the end of the continuous work in which Beethoven pushes the major elements of classical music to their outmost limits, once and for all. The fusion between learned song (in particular the German „*Lied*“ (song), of which Beethoven is one of the forerunners) and pure music, as shown by the *Ninth Symphony*, proved a definite musical gateway to the Romantic era.

Addenda : Sources and performance practice

Much has been said about the alleged orchestration and instrumentation “problems” of the *Ninth Symphony*. In our opinion, this is the result of an unfortunate misappreciation of the original texts as well as of a certain mannerism about the performance of the work. Wagner’s, and especially Mahler’s modifications are all too well-known. They reflect their time in that they go for effects - most of them gratuitous and totally useless, but quite adapted to the then prevailing conditions of performance. Since then, the symphony has been subject to radically diverging approaches, from the most sectarian to the absolute trivial.

The only way to counteract the sometimes suffocating weight of a heavy-handed historical approach is to stand back and gather as much of the original data as possible in order to base one’s reflection on solid ground.

Fortunately, there are many reliable and complementary sources. The autograph score is the essential *original* reference; the first hand-written copy, made before the first printed edition, is the most complete source; comparing the two helps clear up most problems.

All other sources are of no mean interest, either. Apart from the multiplicity of problems concerning nuances, rhythmic slurs and ties, phrasing, they also show essential notation and instrumentation differences (for ex. the use of double bassoon and piccolo flute, or bassoons doubling the *bass*). Such recurring problems are very revealing of Beethoven’s tone colour research and emphasis on polyphony.

A critical editorial approach seemed to invalidate right away all empirical experimentation, even though the richness of the piece may invite such an attitude at first. We have done a careful revision of the version used for the present recording - to our eyes, the very basics of a responsible musical approach : checking, clarifying, as the case may be, and understanding a musical text in order to get an actual musical experience which will foster one’s own means of expression.

This editorial approach enlarged our vision of the piece, especially as regards its performance, provided we remained faithful to the two guiding principles that have helped us more and more explicitly in dealing with the sources and all other data : to collect information in order to clarify, to gather knowledge in order to understand.

The 30-year (1794-1824) gestation of the symphony, the power of its stylistic and structural symbolism must be an integral part of any proposed performance. From a stylistic point of view, the *Ninth Symphony* forces a horizontal reading. Despite all attempts, considering it as a vertical block of sound does not work, all the more so as one probes deeper into the fourth movement, and most particularly when dealing with the tempi. We had to chose between turning the Ode to Joy into an hymn unfolding several variations, according to the formal logic of the score, or into a great march to the rhythm of a majestic brass-band, bringing out a monochrome effect of out-of-balance orchestral mass. Obviously, some choices are more acceptable than others.

As regards tempi, and in general, we have deemed it necessary to substitute a “metric” reading for the usual “mathematical” reading of Beethoven’s metronomic markings. This leads to some - apparently - stunning decisions, as most of the adopted *tempi* end up twice as slow as they normally would through their mathematical application. This substitution, which we consider the condition *sine qua non* of a true and faithful understanding of Beethoven’s markings, is somewhat more explicitly discussed in the article “*About tempi*”. But we wanted to make it clear that, prior to any well thought-out rendition of the piece, and especially the fourth movement, the question of equivalence, the analysis of the composition and the general conception of Beethoven’s rhythmic must all converge and be taken quite rigorously into account.