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Vancouver Symphony Orchestra performs an effortless evening of Beethoven

By Lloyd Dykk

An ad for a sound system once asked: If Ludwig van Beethoven were alive today, what would he be into?

The suggestion was rock 'n' roll or electronic, but I thought, "No, he'd be doing something way beyond what we'd even vaguely recognize."

Take it from the *Symphony No. 9 in D Minor*, performed splendidly by the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra on the weekend. It had the power to shock generations of composers into superstition, either preventing them from writing their own ninth symphonies or making them go straight from eight to 10.

The number nine became virtually sacrosanct, and not for nothing, although some time after the initial hysteria died down, there were skeptics such as Claude Debussy, who said not as much nonsense had been written about a subject since the Venus de Milo, and German composer, violinist and conductor Louis Spohr who, though he personally liked Beethoven, claimed that the choral finale to the symphony was in ridiculously bad taste.

Spohr meant Beethoven's setting of Friedrich Schiller's poem "Ode to Joy", or rather the third of it that he used but rejigged. Even mangled, the poem's clarion call to brotherhood is revolutionary. There are reasons why "Beethoven's Ninth" has been around long enough to become a cultural cliché, and the structure of this edifice is a miracle of thought.

Beethoven's notorious insensitivity to singers' limitations makes brotherhood a hard thing to pull off. The choral sopranos have the worst of it, with an all-but-impossible high part in the *allegro energico* section of the fourth movement, and the solo baritone has a rough thing of it too, with writing placed in the weakest part of his range.

It was unbelievable how little difficulty any of the singers, including those in the Vancouver Bach Choir, had with this towering masterwork on Saturday night.

The vocal soloists—soprano Michele Capalbo, mezzo-soprano Rebecca Hass, tenor Benjamin Butterfield, and especially bass-baritone Daniel Okulich—were a dream quartet, and if there was any strain felt by the choral sopranos, I didn't hear it.

Special praise for the young visiting American conductor Andrew Grams for his authoritative, graceful way with the VSO and this symphony in particular. There was also Beethoven's *Symphony No. 1 in C Major*, a witty Haydn-esque joy. To round things off, we had the overture to *The Creatures of Prometheus*.

Three Beethoven works made it seem like a mini-Beethoven festival, and for some reason January felt like the ideal time to have one.

<http://www.straight.com/article-367709/vancouver/vancouver-symphony-orchestra-performs-effortless-evening-beethoven>