

Program Notes for VSO Concert – June 6-7, 2025

Beethoven – Symphony No. 9

By Jonathan Berkowitz

Note: This biography is reprinted from program notes for a Masterworks concert earlier this season.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770 to 1827)

Ludwig van Beethoven was part of the generation that experienced the full impact of the French Revolution, with a vision of freedom and the dignity of the individual. His music reflects this heroic age in an accent never to be forgotten. The man, himself, stepped outside the confines of his art to live heroically in the world. His masterpieces tell of his “wrestling with destiny” and have never been equaled. They culminate, of course, with his Ninth Symphony.

Beethoven was born in Bonn, Germany, and baptized on December 17, 1770. His exact birthdate remains uncertain, despite some influential sources claiming it was on December 16. An abusive, alcoholic father made for an unhappy family situation. His musical education began at a young age, and his great talent was quickly recognized.

When Beethoven was seventeen, during a trip to Vienna, he performed for Mozart. Mozart is said to have commented to his friends, “Keep an eye on him—he will make a noise in the world some day.” One genius recognized another. He studied with Joseph Haydn, but Beethoven’s volcanic temperament and independent spirit were too much for the aging musician.

His pianistic abilities wowed the music-loving aristocracy, and he was welcomed by powerful patrons whose names you can find in the dedications of some of his works. Beethoven referred to them as the “princely rabble” and forced them to treat him as an equal and a friend. He said, “It is good to move among the aristocracy, but it is first necessary to make them respect you.” He was a passionate rebel. Rather than attaching himself to the court of a prince, he worked under a sort of patronage system, getting paid for lessons and compositions. He had at least a half dozen publishers and was able to set his own terms and price.

The first decade of his career was marked by youthful exuberance, and perhaps a somewhat arrogant awareness of his strength. He said, “Power is the morality of men who stand out from the mass, and it is also mine!”

But vulnerability struck quickly. Beginning to lose his hearing at the age of 26 struck a tremendous blow to his pride. His affliction symbolized his apartness and difference from others. He began to understand that if life would withhold happiness, he would create music to achieve the victory fate threatened to take from him.

He overcame a personal sense of chaos and believed that humankind could, too. This became the epic theme of his music: moving from despair to conflict to serenity, then to triumph and joy. In fostering this idea, he became the major prophet of the nineteenth century, the architect of a heroic vision of life.

Though Beethoven’s deafness is well-known, other aspects of his life are not. He supported charities, including schools for the deaf and orphanages. He was a chess enthusiast, animal lover,

avid reader of literature, philosophy, and history, nature lover, talented cook, and heavy drinker. Beethoven never married but had several relationships with women. He also enjoyed the company of close friends and colleagues. The enduring myth that Beethoven was a tortured and lonely genius completely ignores this rich and fulfilling personal life.

In the last years of Beethoven's career, he put forth an unyielding effort to get the elements of his art in line with his expressive ideals. His brilliant compositions attest to his success. The public, especially the younger generation, responded to the power of his music. Does that sound like the emergence of rock and roll, and now rap?

Outwardly, his life was uneventful. When he became totally deaf, he quarreled more with associates and friends. It is well-known that Beethoven dedicated his Symphony No. 3, also known as the "Eroica Symphony," to Napoleon Bonaparte, but later retracted it when Napoleon declared himself emperor. Beethoven died in 1827 at age 56, famous and revered then, and just as famous and revered today.

Beethoven's life and music have filled books. One massive and marvellous tome in my collection is *The Beethoven Companion*, edited by Thomas K. Scherman and Louis Biancolli. Beethoven's biography makes for just as fascinating reading as biographies of Churchill, Einstein, and possibly Steve Jobs and Elon Musk.

The last words here go to Wallace Brockway and Herbert Weinstock, from an old book called *Men of Music* (apologies for the sexist title). They begin their discussion with these words, "The history of music offers no experience comparable to that of an expanding universe afforded by the masterpieces of Ludwig van Beethoven."

Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125 – Beethoven

The concept of the GOAT, the Greatest of All Time, is well known in the world of sports. Debates rage over who was the greatest athlete of all time—Tom Brady, Michael Jordan, Wayne Gretzky. These debates rely on statistical measures of performance and intangibles such as impact on the sport, humanitarian contributions, and so on.

Is it possible to do this in music? For years, radio stations have run contests to choose the top rock songs of all time. Aside from record sales or streaming downloads, there are no objective criteria. The choice of greatest is purely subjective. Complicating matters is that "greatest" is different from "favourite."

That brings us to my question: is Beethoven's Ninth the greatest symphony of all time? The answer, of course, depends on whom you ask. Conductors, orchestra musicians, and listeners all have differing opinions. The type of instrument a musician plays will also inform their perspective.

In 2009, the Australian ABC Classic FM radio station surveyed listeners and ask them to vote for their three *preferred* symphonies. The focus was on their favourite, not the greatest. Beethoven's Ninth ranked second. Dvořák's No. 9 (New World) was number one. In 2016, the BBC asked 151 of the world's leading conductors to rank the *best* symphonies ever written. They also ranked

Beethoven's Ninth second, but didn't even consider it Beethoven's best symphony; they ranked Beethoven's Third (Eroica) at the top.

Let's look in more detail at the Australian listeners' rankings. Here are the top ten. Beethoven occupies five of the top ten spots.

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| 1. Dvořák No. 9 (<i>New World</i>) | 2. Beethoven No. 9 (<i>Choral</i>) |
| 3. Beethoven No. 6 (<i>Pastoral</i>) | 4. Saint-Saëns No. 3 (<i>Organ</i>) |
| 5. Beethoven No. 7 | 6. Beethoven No. 5 |
| 7. Tchaikovsky No. 6 (<i>Pathétique</i>) | 8. Beethoven No. 3 (<i>Eroica</i>) |
| 9. Sibelius No. 2 | 10. Schubert No. 9 (<i>Great</i>) |

Tchaikovsky's No. 5 holds 11th place, followed by Mozart's No. 41 (*Jupiter*) and No. 40 in 12th and 13th places, with Mahler's No. 2 (*Resurrection*) and Berlioz's *Symphony fantastique* in 14th and 15th places. Having a nickname certainly helps a symphony's ranking!

The top 100 include all nine symphonies by Mahler, eight by Beethoven, all seven by Sibelius, all six by Tchaikovsky, and all four by Brahms. Other composers who appear multiple times in the list include Mozart (8), Dvořák (5), Shostakovich (5), Vaughan Williams (5), Haydn (5), Rachmaninoff (4), Mendelssohn (4), Bruckner (4), and Schubert (3).

How do these results compare with the ranking by world conductors? Here are their top twenty.

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| 1. Beethoven No. 3 (<i>Eroica</i>) | 2. Beethoven No. 9 (<i>Choral</i>) |
| 3. Mozart No. 41 (<i>Jupiter</i>) | 4. Mahler No. 9 |
| 5. Mahler No. 2 (<i>Resurrection</i>) | 6. Brahms No. 4 |
| 7. Berlioz <i>Symphonie fantastique</i> | 8. Brahms No. 1 |
| 9. Tchaikovsky No. 6 (<i>Pathétique</i>) | 10. Mahler No. 3 |
| 11. Beethoven No. 5 | 12. Brahms No. 3 |
| 13. Bruckner No. 8 (<i>Apocalyptic</i>) | 14. Sibelius No. 7 |
| 15. Mozart No. 40 | 16. Beethoven No. 7 |
| 17. Shostakovich No. 5 | 18. Brahms No. 2 |
| 19. Beethoven No. 6 (<i>Pastoral</i>) | 20. Bruckner No. 7 (<i>Lyric</i>) |

Here Beethoven gets the top two rankings and five of the top 20. Mahler also has two of the top five. A linguistic curiosity is that 12 times the composer's surname starts with B, and 5 times with M.

In 2024, Classic FM presented the 15 greatest symphonies of all time which they described as "the biggest, most emotional, most impressive and plain-old flabbergasting works ever written." As they explain, "Nothing beats the sound of an orchestra unleashing its full force at the epic climax of a symphony. With bold and brash brass fanfares, a flurry of wind instruments and strings galore, it's always an exhilarating experience. And then there's the delicate and subtle quieter sections, charged with emotion enough to move you to tears." Their list includes some lesser-known modern works but ranks Mozart's No. 41 first and Beethoven's No. 9 third. Beethoven's No. 3 came in 15th.

I asked the musicians of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra for their answers to two questions: (1) What are the three greatest symphonies of all time? (2) Is Beethoven's Ninth the greatest of all time?

Some respondents had difficulty restricting their choices to only three. They count beats much better than they count symphonies!

Our musicians love Mahler symphonies—Nos. 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 9 were each selected. Beethoven fared well, too; musicians chose Nos. 3, 5, 7, and 9. Other candidates for greatest include Mozart Nos. 39, 40, and 41, Tchaikovsky Nos. 5 and 6, Shostakovich Nos. 5 and No. 10, Brahms No. 3 and 4, Rachmaninoff No. 2, Sibelius No. 5, R. Strauss' An Alpine Symphony, and Messiaen's Turangalîla-Symphonie.

Now we have various rankings, but we still haven't addressed whether Beethoven's Ninth is the GOAT. It is certainly highly regarded on a number of levels: monumental scope and emotional depth, symbolic significance, innovations in form, personal meaning, and cultural impact.

CHAT GPT research states, "Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is widely considered one of the greatest symphonies of all time, and often called 'the greatest.' It's known for its groundbreaking inclusion of a chorus and vocal soloists in the finale, as well as its powerful message of universal brotherhood and hope, symbolized by the 'Ode to Joy'". But CHAT GPT doesn't have ears. What do humans say about it?

Frederick Stock of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra remarked, "Embracing all phases of human emotion, monumental in scope and outline, colossal in its intellectual grasp and emotional eloquence, the Ninth stands today as the greatest of all symphonies." He goes on to say, "The Ninth is unquestionably the greatest of all symphonies not only because it is the final résumé of all of Beethoven's achievements, colossal as they are even without the Ninth, but also because it voices the message of one who had risen beyond himself, beyond the world and the time in which he lived. The Ninth is Beethoven, the psychic and spiritual significance of his life."

Phillip Huscher, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's program annotator, writes, "There's something astonishing about a deaf composer choosing to open a symphony with music that reveals, like no other music before it, the very essence of sound emerging from silence. It is as if the challenges of Beethoven's daily existence—the struggle to compose music, his difficulty in communicating, the frustration of remembering what it was like to hear—have been made real in a single page of music."

The VSO is performing Beethoven's Ninth 201 years plus one month after its premiere on May 7, 1824. In one of the most bitter of ironies, by then Beethoven could not hear. The composer who did more, perhaps, than any other to change how we hear music was profoundly deaf. It is told that when Beethoven conducted the Symphony's premiere, he was unaware of the rapturous response and needed the orchestra musicians to point out the cheering audience.

The VSO's Associate Concertmaster Timothy Steeves remarked that the Ninth is not Beethoven's best symphony, nor his best work for orchestra and vocalists, nor the best expression of his late style. But Steeves goes on to say, "What I do not think can be disputed is that the Ninth Symphony has had a greater aesthetic and political footprint than perhaps any other symphonic work. The work has influenced centuries of composers and has been the subject of innumerable re-interpretations. The work has also survived many bad faith readings, and even the rather superficial way in which the work is now read, as an appeal for global brotherhood."

Steeves poses a provocative question. Can attributions of greatness be made independently of political, religious, and aesthetic values? A full discussion will need to wait for another day. He concludes his comments by saying, “That the piece holds such intellectual and artistic depth is a testament to its enduring value as a work of art.”

Father Raymond J. De Souza’s, writing for *The National Post* in May 2024 on the occasion of the bicentennial of the Ninth commented, “The soul that does not love the Ninth is not capable of love...In the entirety of human history, the Ninth is surely a contender for the greatest single achievement. Beethoven composed it as he was going almost completely deaf. It is one of those rarities that can only be believed because it is true; otherwise, it would remain impossible to conceive.”

The opening movements of the Ninth are not as well-known and beloved as those of Beethoven’s Third and Fifth Symphonies. In some ways, the fourth movement’s Ode to Joy is a slight rejection of the first three movements. Beethoven needed the human voice to turn the symphony into a true “dedication to all mankind.”

The Ode to Joy has been a symbol of the European Union since 1985. On the EU’s official website, it says, “In the universal language of music, this anthem expresses the European ideals of freedom, peace and solidarity.” As the choice of nations which include Germany’s former enemies, the piece has reached beyond the German Christian culture in which it was composed. The Ode to Joy was also played by Chinese students protesting for liberty in Tiananmen Square in 1989.

Just weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Leonard Bernstein conducted the Ninth twice, in West Berlin and East Berlin on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. The orchestra and choir comprised Germans from west and east, as well as nationals of the four former occupying powers of Berlin. The Jewish conductor noted that the Ode to Joy was a direct echo of King David’s Psalm 133, “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” Bernstein had reached the summit; he died a few months later. For over 200 years, the Ode to Joy has symbolized hope, unity, and fellowship across borders and through conflicts. The Ninth resounds in every heart, regardless of race.

Rarely do “wonders of the world” live up to advance billing. Beethoven’s Ninth is indeed a wonder of the musical world. Opinions about it are shaped by the weight of hyperbole about it. I am reminded of the story of someone who goes to a performance of *Hamlet* for the first time and comments that it was full of clichés. To be or not to be the best; that is still the question.

For me it does live up to, and exceed, expectations. How can one not get goosebumps hearing the final movement? To borrow a colloquialism, this symphony “nails it” on every level.

Is Beethoven’s Ninth the Greatest of All Time? The answer is... maybe. That’s up to each listener to decide. For this listener, the answer is yes! But that’s just my opinion.