

Beethoven:

A 250-Year Odyssey

by Ben Finane

Beethoven is both foundational for orchestras and the great orchestral game changer—an iconoclast who became an icon. He’s been studied, documented, put on the silver screen, fictionalized, turned into a trope and a meme. His 250th birthday in 2020 will unleash a torrent of Beethoven mania at orchestras across the U.S. But does Beethoven—despite his place in the Pantheon—remain “universal” in the 21st century?



Portrait of the artist as a young man: Ludwig van Beethoven in an 1804–05 portrait by Joseph Willibrord Mähler.



Beethoven at work on his *Missa Solemnis*, in an 1820 portrait by Joseph Karl Stieler.

*Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of modulations
driven time and again off course of his theme,
while he developed
and plumbed the depths of the symphonic form...*
[with apologies to Homer]

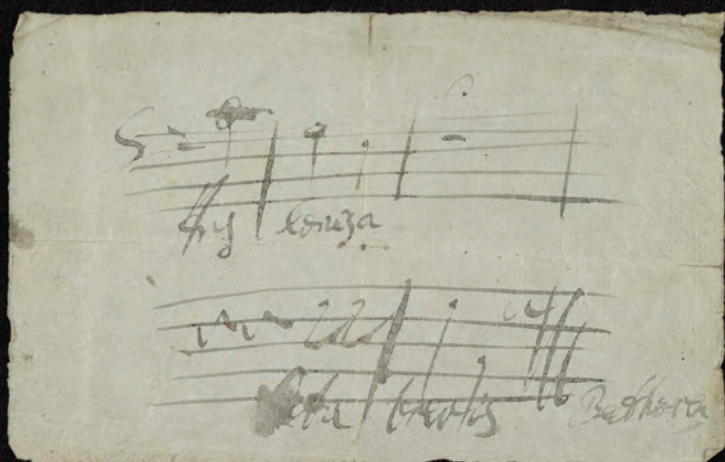
The epic myth of the scowling, hot-tempered, iconoclastic Ludwig van Beethoven, who this year would have turned 250, continues to loom over the classical arena and its programs. His epic is recited to patrons nightly in the concert hall, namely through his nine most celebrated tales: The Symphonies. Beethoven made strides in every form he put his hand to—notably the pia-



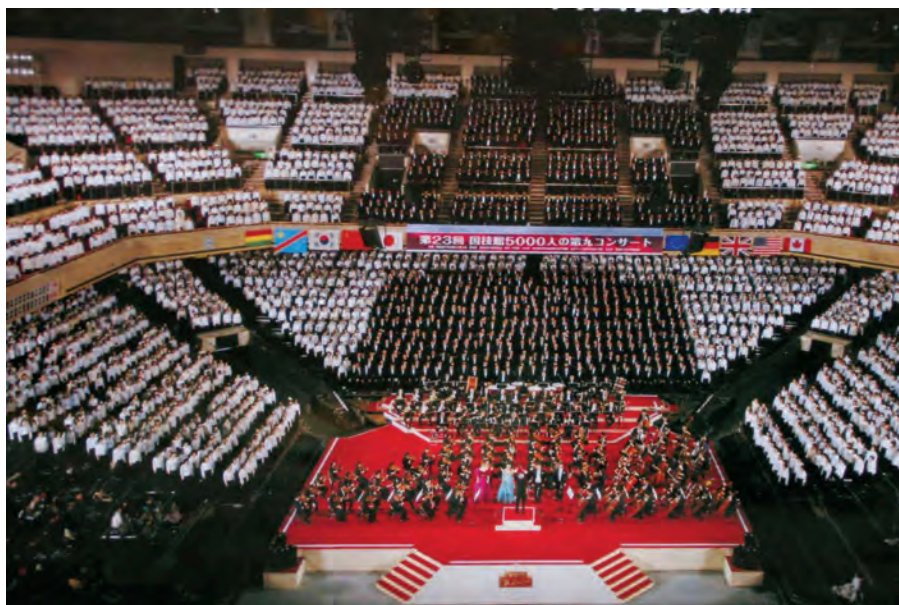
Visible on the title page of Beethoven's Symphony No. 3 ("Eroica"): the composer's erasure of the work's original dedication to Napoleon.

no sonata and the string quartet—but it is, then as now, the symphony that he lifted to the Heavens.

Let's begin with the Beethoven Basics, with a focus on how he revolutionized the Symphony. Ludwig van Beethoven's (~1770–1827) early achievements found him transforming and transcending 18th-century models, which is to say extending the Viennese Classical tradition inherited from Haydn and Mozart. Whereas those two gentlemen wrote piles of symphonies, Beethoven wrote only nine (the first eight written in a span of thirteen years), united in their individuality, and thereafter nine became a loaded number for any symphonist in his wake, from Schubert to Mahler, if they even managed to crawl out from under his shadow to pen their first. (Brahms, the greatest of orchestrators, miserably pondering his plunge into the



Art is long, life is short: a circa 1825 autograph manuscript by Beethoven at the Morgan Library and Museum in New York City states, "Ars longa, vita brevis."



Beethoven's international appeal: In Japan, Beethoven's Ninth is frequently performed with thousands of amateur and professional choral singers. In photo: the New Japan Philharmonic performs the Ninth in Tokyo in 2008.

form: “You have no idea how it makes me feel to hear the footsteps of a giant such as Beethoven marching behind me.”) As Beethoven's style grew more and more personal, his work grew increasingly profound; he composed many of his masterworks, including Symphony No. 9, at the end of his life.

The rise of the Beethoven Symphony contributed to and paralleled the rise

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of the Artist and the rise of Individuality via originality and invention. To wit, Beethoven infected Classical form with Romantic diversion and side trips—famously in the Fifth, where a bursting, outsized Development muscles Theme off the stage, eschewing form for content. His approach contaminated Classical music to the point where we see the genre through Romantic-colored glasses. Beethoven's radical approach to composition ushered in a new “Symphonic Ideal” that expanded the range of music itself in the form of a goal-directed framework, interrelated movements, and overarching narratives.

His symphonies, generally unencumbered by programmatic concerns, freed him from any direction other than where his own vision took him. And while Beethoven eventually rejected Napoleonic imperialism (most famously in Symphony No. 3,

the “Eroica”), he subscribed to that conqueror's notion of self-made greatness. The composer's slow churn between the cheerful Eighth and the joyful Ninth yielded expression of high philosophy, spirituality, and ideology. His (successful) journey of exploration and personal expression led to his stature as the dominant classical composer of the 19th—and perhaps the 20th? and the 21st?—century.

While the luster of popular music fades with subsequent hearings, a masterwork only gains in brilliance. Yet a masterwork achieves its greatness not through rote repetition but because of a richness of craft and substance that permits it to be viewed from so many angles that a fresh interpretation is always within the realm of possibility.

Beethoven and Cultural Specificity

The interpretative possibilities for Beethoven's Symphony No. 3 will be tested in February, when the San Diego Symphony performs composer/conductor Steve Hackman's *Beethoven V. Coldplay* (premiered in 2015), “transforming [the] *Eroica* Symphony into an oratorio, weaving the melodies and lyrics of Coldplay into the original Beethoven and pairing



This May, the North Carolina Symphony performed *Watermark*, a new piano concerto by Caroline Shaw, on the same program as its inspiration, Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3. For his *Beethoven/5* commissioning project, pianist Jonathan Biss asked Shaw and Timo Andres, Sally Beamish, Salvatore Sciarrino, and Brett Dean to create new piano concertos in dialogue with Beethoven's piano concertos. In photo: with the North Carolina Symphony at the premiere are (from left) Caroline Shaw, Jonathan Biss, and Music Director Grant Llewellyn.



Baltimore Symphony Orchestra

Conductor Marin Alsop, seen here with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, will lead orchestras on five continents in Beethoven's Ninth for "All Together: A Global Ode to Joy," a year-long project starting in December to mark the 250th anniversary of the composer's birth. Each partner organization will reimagine the piece for its own community.



Kelly Hicks Photography

In February, the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra paired Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with spoken-word performances in partnership with the Central Arkansas Library System. After local spoken-word artists read pieces related to the score's themes of joy, unity, and hope, more than 300 singers from eight Arkansas choirs joined the orchestra for the Ninth, led by Music Director Philip Mann. In photo, from left, spoken-word performers Shiseido J. Wells, Brooke Elliott, and Osyrus Bolly.

them together based on context," per the press release. If this seems a bold idea, orchestras across the country are planning all manner of Beethoven celebrations, cycles, and traversals that run reactionary to radical. Carnegie Hall will offer two (2) [ii] cycles of Beethoven symphonies, one on period instruments (Gardiner, Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique), and

one for conventional modern orchestra (Nézet-Séguin, Philadelphia Orchestra). And that's just the tip of the Beethoven iceberg for those navigating the concertizing waters this year.

So, given his everlasting influence and dominance and legacy, what will this chockablock Beethoven season across the country yield? In any given year, Beethoven and Mozart already vie for



Chris Lee

This June, the New York Philharmonic and Music Director Jaap van Zweden gave the world premiere of David Lang's opera *prisoner of the state* (in photo), a contemporary retelling of Beethoven's *Fidelio*, as part of the orchestra's three-week Music of Conscience series. *Prisoner of the state* was co-commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, Rotterdam's de Doelen, London's Barbican, Barcelona's l'Auditori, Germany's Bochum Symphony Orchestra, and Bruges's Concertgebouw.

most-performed composer worldwide, so what will an assured #1 ATP ranking in the 2019–20 season do for the street rep of Ludwig on the hardcourts of the USA? Will he score winners beyond the concert hall? Will his music find market penetration beyond the rich, the white, and the established? Does he have a shot at Drake/Rihanna numbers on YouTube? Will a performance of the Ninth at the Kennedy Center this season pierce a congressman's heart and move him to take action on immigration reform?

These questions are rhetorical but point toward an actual one being raised at American orchestras about cultural specificity. In the United States of America, per the 2010 U.S. Census, 64 percent of the population self-identified as Non-Hispanic White—meaning that nearly 40% of the population identifies as another race. How, some cultural critics ask, do we justify organizations receiving disproportionate funding for celebrating Western European high-culture art with mostly all-white orchestras, conducted by

mostly all-white conductors overseen by mostly all-white orchestral board members performing the works of mostly all-white (and mostly all-dead!) European composers? Beethoven is, for better or worse, the poster boy for the Classical Establishment.

In “Are Orchestras Culturally Specific?,” a roundtable conversation published in the Winter 2018 edition of *Symphony*, Chris Jenkins, associate dean for academic support at Oberlin Conservatory, posed the question: “I’m wondering what this field



Eine Kleine Beethovenmusik

Every season brings its share of Beethoven at American orchestras. But the 2019-20 season, which coincides with the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth, unleashes an avalanche, a torrent, a tsunami of Beethoven: programming—or entire seasons—centered around the composer; wide-ranging traversals of his symphonies, concertos, chamber works; marketing campaigns prominently featuring his glowering visage; and new compositions that reflect on his relevance today. And that's not to mention the new books, studies, editions of scores, and exhibits. Some of the Beethoven programming at orchestras in the coming season will hew to tradition; other orchestras will offer more provocative re-considerations of the composer and his music.

Here's a look at just a tiny fraction of what's in store.

The **Philadelphia Orchestra** and Music Director Yannick Nézet-Seguin will perform all nine Beethoven symphonies—not only at home in Philadelphia but at Carnegie Hall in Manhattan and at Saratoga Performing Arts Center in upstate New York. The concerts also will feature newly commissioned works that explore Beethoven's legacy by Composer in Residence Gabriela Lena Frank and Iman Habibi, Jessica Hunt, and Carlos Simon. The **Chicago Symphony Orchestra** will traverse the nine Beethoven symphonies with Music Director Riccardo Muti, who is no stranger to this territory (a 2014 performance of the Ninth by the CSO and Muti racked up 14 million views on YouTube). The **Phoenix Symphony** has tagged nearly all its classics concerts, many led by Music Director Tito Muñoz, with the Beethoven brand: “Beethoven and Saint-Saëns,” “Beethoven and Tchaikovsky,” “Beethoven and Rachmaninoff,” and “Beethoven, Haydn, and Cerrone”—that's American composer Christopher Cerrone, whose new concerto was commissioned for pianist Shai Wosner by the Phoenix Symphony. In Washington, D.C., Music Director Gianandrea Noseda will lead the **National Symphony Orchestra** in a three-week festival celebrating Beethoven

and his impact. The nine symphonies will be performed over eighteen days, and recorded for future release. North Carolina's **Charlotte Symphony** and Music Director Christopher Warren-Green will play six Beethoven scores on programs with composers who influenced him or were influenced by him. The **Reno Philharmonic** and Music Director Laura Jackson will perform Beethoven scores on the orchestra's mainstage series—and offer family concerts that introduce the composer to young audiences. The **Baltimore Symphony Orchestra** and Music Director Marin Alsop will perform a new a new translation of Schiller's “Ode to Joy” by Baltimore-based rapper Wordsmith as well as a new score by Reena Esmail and music from local artists. The concert is part of “All Together: A Global Ode to Joy,” a year-long project in which Alsop will lead orchestras on five continents in Beethoven's Ninth plus works in which each partner organization reimagines the Beethoven score for its own community. The project wraps up in December 2020 at Carnegie Hall, with which Alsop has frequently collaborated on major creative learning projects. Performances are also slated for Brazil; U.K.; Australia; Austria; South Africa; and New Zealand.

Further afield, the **New Zealand Symphony** will take Beethoven on tour, performing the nine symphonies in Auckland and Wellington, led by Music Director Edo de Waart. In Wellington, listeners can binge on Beethoven when the orchestra plays the symphonies from August 28 to 31—that's some 350 minutes of Beethoven in four days. The **Melbourne Symphony Orchestra** will give the Australian premiere of *Nine*, a new composition by MSO Artistic Ambassador Tan Dun. The choral work is Tan's response to Beethoven, co-commissioned by the MSO and the Philharmonic Society of London—the group that originally commissioned the Ninth Symphony in the 1800s. Leading the concert is Melbourne Principal Guest Conductor Xian Zhang, who is also music director of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra. —*The Editors*



For its BeethovenNOW project this season, the Philadelphia Orchestra commissioned Composer in Residence Gabriela Lena Frank (in photo) and three composers from her Creative Academy of Music to write new works that explore Beethoven's legacy today. The Philadelphia Orchestra will premiere works by Frank and Iman Habibi, Jessica Hunt, and Carlos Simon in Spring 2020, pairing each piece with a Beethoven score.

will look like if in 50 to 100 years a classical music fan can be someone who says that they like Julius Eastman and William Grant Still and David Baker [all black composers], and they don't like Beethoven that much—but that's okay. What if that can be the paradigm of a classical music fan? That is what actual diversity looks like." In the discussion, Alex Laing, principal clarinet at the Phoenix Symphony, stated: "In performance at the Phoenix Symphony, I'm the only black person on the stage, one of the handful of black people in a room.... What I heard Chris saying was an imagined future whereby other groups could be affirmed culturally, if you're not white, within this art form and its presentation. The displacement of Beethoven

Beethoven has gotten the cinematic treatment many times. The thuggish antihero of Anthony Burgess's 1961 novel *A Clockwork Orange* adored Beethoven—but it was Stanley Kubrick's 1971 film that pitched Beethoven into the pop-culture pantheon, to unsettling ends. The 1994 film *Immortal Beloved* depicted a charismatic, tortured, and sexy Beethoven (played by Gary Oldman) in the throes of an overheated love affair. Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 14 ("Moonlight") keeps

Chris is talking about isn't necessarily a clapback or some sort of reparative act. It's people just feeling that Beethoven doesn't resonate with them in the same way as this other music that they're getting this other thing out of."

Beyond Beethoven

I came here to praise Beethoven, not to bury him. He has withstood the test of time like few others. There is always something to be gleaned from his symphonies; seek them out and hear them live performed by an American orchestra near you. But be assured there is no shortage of Beethoven symphonies to be heard in a

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non-anniversary year. And there are so very many voices, dead and living, to hear. Let's ask Toni Morrison, America's own recently departed Homer, to close. Here, in an excerpt from a 1981 interview with *The New Republic*, Morrison responds to a suggestion from writer and critic Thomas LeClair that white readers will not be able to understand a certain scene in her novel *Sula*:

There is a level of appreciation that might be available only to people who understand the context of the language. The analogy that occurs to me is jazz: it

In May, Symphony Tacoma gave the world premiere of Hannah Lash's *In Hopes of Finding the Sun*, the composer's response to Beethoven's Ninth and Friedrich Schiller's poem *Ode to Joy*. Symphony Tacoma commissioned the new work, and performed it on the same program as Beethoven's Ninth. In photo, from left with the orchestra: Symphony Tacoma Concertmaster Svend Rønning, Hannah Lash, and Music Director/Conductor Sarah Ioannides.



is open on the one hand and both complicated and inaccessible on the other. I never asked Tolstoy to write for me, a little colored girl in Lorain, Ohio. I never asked Joyce not to mention Catholicism or the world of Dublin. Never. And I don't know why I should be asked to explain your life to you.

Morrison acknowledges the potential barrier to entry in her language (and to jazz!) while asserting the impossibility of creating a universal message without specificity, owning that she is writing the particularity and specificity of an African-American existence, which is the only one she knows.

My fellow Americans, step out of your comfort zone and seek out the voices and stories of those who don't look or talk like you. Reach out, empathize, and discover the universal in their very particular stories: in Homer's *The Odyssey*, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, in Heitor Villa-Lobos's *Preludes*, in Thelonious Monk's *Brilliant Corners*, in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, in Björk's *Homogenic*, in Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*, in Joni Mitchell's *Blue*, in Berg's *Wozzeck*, in Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly*, in Scott Joplin's "Solace," in Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez*, in Amy Beach's Piano Quintet, in Bright Sheng's *The Nightingale and The Rose*, and in Beethoven's Symphony No. 9. Genius knows neither color nor genre. *Freude* is universal. **S**

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popping up in films not only as a soundtrack, but as a central theme. In the 1934 British film *Moonlight Sonata*, a couple is brought together by the pianistic ministrations of Ignace Jan Paderewski (cast "as himself"). The 2019 film *Moonlight Sonata*, released this summer, explores the impact of deafness and Beethoven's music on a contemporary American family, inspired by the sonata that Beethoven wrote as he began to go deaf.