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Beethoven

SYMPHONY NO. 9

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# Beethoven: Symphony No. 9



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**CAMBRIDGE**  
**UNIVERSITY PRESS**

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1993

First published 1993

Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge

*A cataloguing in publication record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data*

Cook, Nicholas, 1950-

Beethoven: Symphony No. 9 / Nicholas Cook

p. cm. - (Cambridge music handbooks)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 39039 7 (hardback) - ISBN 0 521 39924 6 (paperback)

1. Beethoven, Ludwig van, 1770-1827. Symphony No. 9, op. 125, D minor.

I. Title. II. Series.

ML410.B42C66 1993

784.2'184-dc20 92-20451 CIP MN

ISBN 0 521 39039 7 hardback

ISBN 0 521 39924 6 paperback

CAMBRIDGE MUSIC HANDBOOKS

**Beethoven: Symphony No. 9**

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## Preface

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'A fog of verbiage and criticism surrounds the *Choral Symphony*', wrote Claude-Achille Debussy; 'It is amazing that it has not been finally buried under the mass of prose which it has provoked.'<sup>1</sup> Disquieting words indeed for the author of a new handbook! But it is worth examining what Debussy is saying. He is approaching the Ninth Symphony rather as if it were an archaeological site; he implies that we need to dig away the debris of more recent times in order to uncover the work as Beethoven created it. Or we might liken the symphony to a painting, revealed in its original colours when the accretions and encrustations of later ages have been stripped off. In either case, the aim is to get back to the original. And this has been the guiding principle of most twentieth-century musicology; the performance practice movement is merely the most conspicuous example of such historical reconstruction, the aim of which is to reveal the music as its composer intended it. But, in the case of the Ninth Symphony, is erasing the accretions of history the most profitable way to approach the music? Is it even possible?

'This Symphony', wrote F. J. Crowest in 1899, 'has that infinite sublimity and dramatic power, that sympathy with humanity which make it the most wonderful musical revelation that could be desired, or that is ever likely to be devised.' So far, so good. But then Crowest adds:

What it was all intended to convey the world knows not, at least, not from Beethoven. No programme of the music ever escaped its composer. . . . Some call it a 'monstrous madness'; some, 'the last flickers of an expiring genius'; others hope to understand and appreciate it one day. . . . The world, therefore, must build up its own conclusions.<sup>2</sup>

And the sense of perplexity that lies behind Crowest's words was shared by many earlier listeners. The Ninth Symphony seemed to go out of its way to flout established conventions. It was so difficult as to be almost impossible to perform, and so long as to be almost impossible to programme. It introduced voices into the symphony, words into the flagship genre of absolute music. It lurched from the sublime to the farcical and back again, counterpointing

the 'Turkish' music of contemporary street entertainment with the most strict and elaborate fugal techniques.

If the Ninth Symphony had been written not by Beethoven but by, say, Hector Berlioz (a student of twenty when it was first performed), then it would surely have been rejected as eccentric, wilful, and probably incompetent too. And indeed there were many critics and listeners who said just this of the Ninth Symphony, even though it was by Beethoven; the terrible misfortune of deafness, they argued, must have clouded the great man's judgement. But few can really have been happy with this conclusion, apart from the die-hards who cherished eighteenth-century values of taste and moderation, and for whom Beethoven's music had always been too exaggerated, too agitated, too noisy. Romantically-inclined listeners and critics were desperately anxious to find meaning in the final symphonic utterance of the composer universally acknowledged to be the greatest of his age. And the more resistant the work was to interpretation according to the conventions of the day, the more these listeners and critics felt there must be a deeper, more profound meaning to it, if only they could find the key.

In one of his imaginary (or maybe not so imaginary) conversations, Schumann has Karl Voigt, a patron of the arts in Leipzig, say with reference to the Ninth Symphony: 'I am the blind man who is standing before the Strassburg Cathedral, who hears its bells but cannot see the entrance.'<sup>3</sup> Each listener, like Voigt, had to find his or her own way in. Instead of offering ready-made meanings, the Ninth Symphony demanded that the listener participate in the creation of meaning. For instance, the new thematic idea at the end of the first movement (bar 513) clearly sounds like a funeral march. But why is it there, and whose funeral is it? Does it imply that the movement as a whole – or maybe the entire symphony – is a portrait, a biography in music? Or an autobiography? The music asked questions of its listeners; it demanded explanation. And so, in a way that has perhaps never been the case of any other musical work, the Ninth Symphony became a trope, a focus of cultural discourse.

Today we remember the contributions of professional musicians and critics such as Adolph Bernhard Marx and Richard Wagner to this discourse. (As will emerge from this book, the Ninth Symphony we know is Marx's and Wagner's as well as Beethoven's.) But ordinary music lovers took part in it too; there was no professionalized music-analytical jargon to exclude them, as there is nowadays. Of course there was a down side to this. Schumann poked fun at the superficiality, the pretentiousness, the pedantry of much that was said. He pictured a group of Beethovenites arguing about the symphony; some

asserted that ‘The work seems to contain the different genres of poetry, the first movement being epic, the second, comedy, the third, lyric, the fourth (combining all), the dramatic.’ Others ‘began to praise the work as being gigantic, colossal, comparable to the Egyptian pyramids. And others painted word pictures: the symphony expresses the story of mankind – first the chaos – then the call of God “There shall be light” – then the sunrise over the first human being, ravished by such splendor – in one word, the whole first chapter of the Pentateuch in this symphony.’<sup>4</sup> In this babble of commentary, a thousand Ninth Symphonies came into existence. And if most of them were pedestrian, a few were imaginative constructions of the first rank.

Of all the works in the mainstream repertory of Western music, the Ninth Symphony seems the most like a construction of mirrors, reflecting and refracting the values, hopes, and fears of those who seek to understand and explain it. One symptom of this is the sheer diversity of interpretations that have been put forward. This has always been the case. A brief notice in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, referring to a performance under Mendelssohn in 1841, says that

The grandiose D minor Symphony, the most wonderful, most mysterious, and most subjective work by Beethoven, closed the concert as (in a sense) it closed the artistic life of the great, eternal master. At the same time, it became the keystone of a truly remarkable artistic period, exalted by J. Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven.<sup>5</sup>

Here the tone is heavily retrospective; the critic treasures the Ninth Symphony because he treasures the past. Nothing could be more different from Wagner’s view of the symphony, first promulgated in the previous year; for him, it represented the dawning of a new age in music. From its first performance up to the present day, the Ninth Symphony has inspired diametrically opposed interpretations.

The one thing that all these interpretations have in common is that they treat the Ninth Symphony as a cultural symbol of enormous importance. It had already acquired this symbolic value by the time it became established in the repertory, around the middle of the nineteenth century. Schumann’s Beethovenites ‘stood there with their eyes popping out, and said: “That was written by our Beethoven, it is a German work – the finale contains a double fugue – he was blamed for not introducing such forms – but how he did it – yes, this is *our* Beethoven”’. And the same sense of possession attaches to the work today, only the focus has changed from the national to the international. The Ninth Symphony has become one of the great symbols of world unity. What other work could possibly have been chosen for a global



concert in which choirs and orchestras in Montreal, Moscow, Geneva, and San Francisco performed together, linked by satellite?<sup>6</sup> This is *our* Beethoven and *our* Ninth Symphony – a Ninth Symphony that has been a hundred and seventy years in the making, and that is part of the cultural, intellectual, and political history of those years.

I have incurred many debts in the preparation of this book. A principal one is to Jonathan Del Mar, editor of the *Hanover Band Urtext Edition* (1988), for contributing the appendix dealing with the complex textual problems that have plagued the symphony ever since its first performance. Qian Yuan supplied me with the Chinese articles discussed in chapter 5, while Jennifer Tong Chee Yee translated them. John Rothgeb supplied me with a pre-publication copy of his translation of the Schenker monograph, and James Webster and Nicholas Marston let me see articles in advance of publication. Irene Suchy let me see her unpublished paper on the Ninth Symphony in Japan. Eric Levi, David Brown, and Jelena Milojkovic-Djuric supplied me with historical information, although it was not always possible to fit it in. To all of these, and to Julian Rushton, my thanks. Finally, the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Musikabteilung, kindly permitted me to reproduce p. 111 of Artaria 201 as Ex. 1; Figs. 1 and 2 are reproduced by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

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## *Sketches and myths*

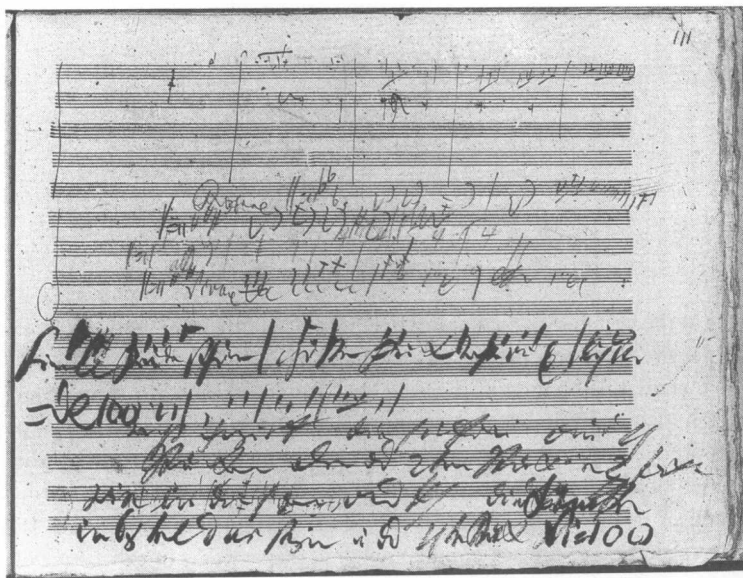
### The sketches

One of the best known facts about Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, if it is a fact, is that the work was many years in the making.

We know this because of the sketches. Beethoven sketched as many artists sketch: habitually and perhaps compulsively. He worked things out on paper that other composers of his time worked out in their heads or at the keyboard. Sometimes he doodled; there are sketches that look more like limbering-up exercises or mental diversions than serious attempts at composition. But in other sketches we can see him planning out major works in exhaustive detail, testing and refining them over a period of weeks or months, or even years, before starting to write out the final score. Moreover, Beethoven kept his sketches after the works to which they referred were completed. Every time he moved – which was frequently – the sketches went with him; they were dispersed only after his death.

In his early years, Beethoven sketched on single sheets of paper. Interesting as such sketches may be, there is a limit to what they can tell us, because there is no way of telling in what order they were used. But in 1798, Beethoven started to use sketchbooks rather than single sheets. These sketchbooks were bound before he used them, and on the whole he worked through each book in sequence from the first page to the last. This means that, when a sketchbook has survived intact, we can follow the sketching process more or less as it unfolded. The situation is more complicated when a sketchbook has not survived intact – when it has been divided into separate sections, for instance, or when it has been rebound with the pages in the wrong order. But even then, it is generally possible to work out the original sequence by matching watermarks, the printing of stave lines, the holes made by previous bindings, and the tears on pages that were originally joined together.

The problem with Beethoven's sketches is that he wrote them for his eyes only. One consequence of this is that they are notoriously difficult to read,



Ex. 1 Ataria 201, p. 111

as Ex. 1 demonstrates. But we shouldn't exaggerate this difficulty; reading Beethoven's handwriting is a skill that doctoral students routinely acquire. The real difficulty is one of interpretation. Beethoven generally jotted down no more than a melodic skeleton, perhaps with the addition of a bass line or a few harmony notes, but frequently without clefs, key signatures, or accidentals. We can make sense of so incomplete a representation of the music only by means of an imaginative reconstruction of what he had in mind. But of course this means that what we see in Beethoven's sketches depends on what we expect to see in them. Like a mirror, the sketches for the Ninth Symphony reflect the assumptions of those who interpret them. Hence the myths that surround them.

### *The origins of the first movement*

One of the most striking things about the Ninth Symphony is the opening of the first movement, a rustling *pianissimo* on A and E that builds rapidly up

Table 1 Sketchbooks relevant to the Ninth Symphony

	<i>Desk</i>	<i>Pocket</i>
1815–16	Scheide <sup>a</sup>	
1817–18		Boldrini <sup>b</sup>
1822–3	Artaria 201 <sup>c</sup>	
1823	Engelmann <sup>d</sup>	
	Landsberg 8, bundle 1 <sup>c</sup>	Artaria 205, bundle 5 <sup>c</sup>
1823–4	Landsberg 8, bundle 2 <sup>c</sup>	Rolland <sup>d</sup>
		Autograph 8, bundle 1 <sup>c</sup>
		Autograph 8, bundle 2 <sup>c</sup>

*Locations*

<sup>a</sup> library of Mr William Scheide, Princeton, New Jersey

<sup>b</sup> lost

<sup>c</sup> Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preussischer Kulturbesitz

<sup>d</sup> Beethovenhaus, Bonn

<sup>e</sup> Biblioteka Jagiellonska, Krakow

to the gigantic theme at bar 17, with its falling D minor arpeggio. This was among Beethoven's earliest ideas for the symphony, and by following its evolution through the sketchbooks we can map out the basic chronology of the compositional process. Table 1 lists the sketchbooks relevant to the Ninth Symphony, and shows the approximate dates when they were in use; it distinguishes between the large format sketchbooks that Beethoven used at home, and the small ones that he could slip into a pocket and use out of doors. The desk sketchbooks naturally tend to contain longer drafts than the pocket ones, and are therefore more important in reconstructing the compositional process.

As it happens, the first trace of the opening of the Ninth Symphony is not in a sketchbook at all; it is on a single sheet of paper in the Liszt archive at Weimar (Ex. 2).<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, this sheet also contains a sketch for a canon called 'Das Schweigen', the final version of which is dated 24 January 1816. So we know that Beethoven had conceived the first few bars of the main theme of the Ninth Symphony, or at any rate of what was to become the main theme of the Ninth Symphony, by early 1816. After that, however, there is no further trace of the theme until the winter of 1817–18, when it turns up in the Boldrini sketchbook. Unfortunately this sketchbook (whose name came from an inscription inside the front cover) went missing at the end of the nineteenth century. This means that we have to rely on the transcriptions from it that

Ex. 2 Sketch of the opening, now in Weimar



were published in the 1870s by Gustav Nottebohm, who was the first scholar to work intensively on Beethoven's sketches, and whose publications laid the foundations for all subsequent sketch studies. Among these publications was an essay on the sketches for the Ninth Symphony, from which Ex. 3 is taken.<sup>2</sup>

While Nottebohm's transcriptions are generally accurate, they are selective. He transcribed what he could read (which often meant what corresponded to the completed composition) and ignored what he couldn't. And he juxtaposed passages regardless of their original position in the sketchbook. But we can still draw some interesting conclusions from his transcription of the Boldrini sketches. The first entry in Ex. 3 has a general resemblance to bars 63–9 of the first movement – the passage leading up to the modulation to B $\flat$  major – while the second is almost identical to bars 469ff; even the instrumentation is shown. Technically speaking, this second entry is simply a major-mode variant of the third and fourth bars of the main theme. But in the context of the coda it becomes one of the most memorable moments of the movement, because of the way in which the D major emerges from D minor, only to fall back into it. It is hard to imagine that Beethoven could have conceived this passage, complete with its instrumentation and with the counter-melody in the second horn, unless he already had some conception of the struggle between D minor and D major that is a feature of the first movement as a whole, and that makes this particular passage so poignant.

The fourth entry in Ex. 3 shows the first four bars of the main theme, much as it appears in the Weimar sheet, together with an abbreviated version of the opening of the symphony as we know it, with its tremolandos on A and E and its descending fourths and fifths in the first violins. There is even something like the D pedal that begins in bar 15 of the finished movement, if Nottebohm's transcription is to be trusted. But the 'u.s.w.' ('and so on') at the

Ex. 3 Sketches from the Boldrini sketchbook, transcribed by Nottebohm

*Zur Sinfonie in D* *Corno 1.*

*Corno 2do*

*etc.*

*letztes*  
u. s. w.

end of the transcription is exasperating. Is it Beethoven's 'u.s.w' or Nottebohm's? Does it mean that Beethoven didn't know how to continue the theme, or just that Nottebohm couldn't read what came next? Fortunately there is some additional evidence that we can bring to bear here. In the archives of the publishers Schott, in Mainz, there is a single sheet of paper that dates



Ex. 4 Sketch of the opening, now in Mainz



from around the same time as the Boldrini sketchbook (Ex. 4).<sup>3</sup> Here we see a fuller version of the opening, followed by the first six bars of the main theme in precisely the same form as in the Weimar sheet (including the repetition of bars 3–4 an octave higher), with a new continuation moving towards the dominant. The route to the dominant is still quite unlike that in the final version of the theme. But another single-sheet sketch, dating from a few months later, supplies the missing passage, corresponding to bars 21–4 of the finished movement.<sup>4</sup>

The picture so far is of a remarkably leisurely compositional process, spread over two and a half years, in which the essential elements of the symphony's opening emerged bit by bit. At this point the process came to a complete halt for more than four years – years during which Beethoven was occupied with