

Ludwig van Beethoven was born and baptized on Dec. 17, 1770, in Bonn, Germany. He showed promise early on as an excellent musician and composer, mastering the organ, piano, violin, and viola before age 10 and completing his first major compositions before his 14th birthday. He quickly became known throughout Europe as a gifted instrumental composer.

He was stricken with the onset of deafness by the end of the 18th century. Beethoven realized the gravity of his situation by 1801. He gradually began to understand that his condition was incurable. Regardless, he was defiant, determined to overcome it. He wrote in a letter to his close friend Franz Wegeler: "I will seize Fate by the throat; it shall certainly not bend and crush me completely."

Through the first decade of the 19th century, Beethoven wrote many operas and symphonies. This productivity was short-lived. A number of events, including his brother's death from tuberculosis and a failed love affair, caused Beethoven to fall into a decade-long depression in 1812. He produced few compositions during this period and was virtually forgotten by the public.

The Premiere

In 1822, fully deaf, he started working fervently on his Ninth Symphony, which he completed in two years. The symphony premiered May 7, 1824, at the Kärntnertortheater in Vienna. It involved the largest orchestra he had ever assembled. At the end of the performance, Beethoven was unaware of the thunderous applause he was receiving behind his back. One of the solo vocalists, contralto Caroline Unger, was reported to have pulled him by the sleeve to point out the audience's reaction. The composer then turned and bowed in astonishment to acknowledge his greatest – and last – public ovation.

Critics were not as impressed, claiming that the symphony was an eccentric mess of a work. One London critic in 1825 exclaimed: "The symphony we could not make out; and here, as well as in other parts, the want of intelligible design is too apparent." In retrospect, it was an unprecedented and groundbreaking piece. Historians now generally agree that it is not only among Beethoven's best works but stands among the greatest musical works of all time.

The Ninth's finale also marks the first use of vocals in a symphony. In addition to a complete orchestra, the finale uses four solo vocalists and a full chorus. Beethoven based the lyrics on the hymn *Ode to Joy* written in 1785 by the German poet Friedrich Schiller.

Although it follows the typical symphonic structure of four movements, the Ninth Symphony is unconventional in form. The finale has four movements of its own, making it a symphony within a symphony.

Section 1

The first section is chaotic and confusing. It is given the German name *Schreckensfanfare*, meaning "horror fanfare." The main themes of the previous movements of the symphony are

revisited and repeatedly interrupted. The confusion is alleviated briefly when the celli quietly and hesitantly mention the famous main theme. The rest of the orchestra joins in, but they are overpowered when the *Schreckensfanfare* returns. Finally, the fanfare is cut short when the solo baritone exclaims “Oh friends, not these sounds!” (these words were added by Beethoven) and encourages a more “joyful” tune. He then plunges into the main theme, no longer hesitant, and is later joined by the full chorus. The first exposition ends on several brilliant exclamations of “vor Gott” (“for God”).

Section 2

The second exposition begins in the style of a Turkish military march. Piccolo, contra bassoon, bass drum, triangle, and cymbals are used as special effects. The solo tenor sings a variation of the main theme in a drunken tone: “Thus, brothers, you should run your race, as a hero going to conquest.” The orchestra follows with further variations. The original theme then returns with the full chorus employing the text at the beginning of the hymn.

Section 3

The third section, the recapitulation, begins with the words “Seid umschlungen, Millionen!” (“You millions, I embrace you!”), with a new melodic theme intoned by male voices and trombones. This is the epitome of Beethoven’s use of philosophical metaphors. The deliberation on words such as “umschlungen,” (which means not just “embrace” but also “join” and “entwine with,”) evokes the imagery of all beings under heaven singing the song of praise as one. The statement of “Brüder” (“Brother” or “Brothers”) and “Vater” (“Father”) creates a familial relationship between the singers and the listener. Several lines of the final stanza of the hymn are repeated as the vocalists ascend higher and higher into the heavens.

Section 4

The final section of the finale, the coda, brings us back to Earth as a joyful fugue begins. Themes throughout the finale are reintroduced and imitated over a combination of instruments and voices. The fugue undergoes a dizzying array of harmonic and tempo changes, including a transitional section using the four solo vocalists. The text “Alle Menschen” (“All men”) is repeated frequently, with a metaphorical as well as literal meaning. Everyone then finally arrives at a “coda of a coda,” the exciting, fast-paced close of the symphony that also closes Beethoven’s career as a symphonist.

Through the Ninth, Beethoven arguably redefined the genre of the symphony, crafting a work built not on mere aesthetics and entertainment, but on deep moral and philosophical convictions. These novel ideas shaped music for all time.

– Valerie Lewitus