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Why We Still Want to Hear the ‘Ode to Joy,’ 200 Years Later

Beethoven’s aspirational vision of unity and peace can be applied to virtually any situation or place. The music makes sure of that.

By [Joshua Barone](#)

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Even if you don’t know Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, you probably know its finale, the famous “Ode to Joy.”

Written 200 years ago, [the “Ode” is crafted like the best of pop songs](#), with easily hummable, simple phrases that use the same techniques you hear in a Taylor Swift hit today.

But the “Ode” is more than pop. It’s a supranational anthem that aspires to a world in which “all men become brothers,” as its lyrics say. Its message, taken from a poem by Friedrich Schiller, is so broad and welcoming, so unspecific, that it has been taken up by an extraordinarily broad array of people and political causes.

Since its premiere, the “Ode” has become shorthand for unity and hope, whether sincere or ironic. Sunny lyrics like “Be embraced, oh you millions!” and “Here’s a kiss for the entire world” have made it a fixture of the Olympics. It has been adopted by both oppressive regimes and the people who protest them. It sarcastically accompanies terror in “A Clockwork Orange” and “Die Hard,” but innocently entertains infants on “Baby Einstein” albums and in a sketch by the Muppets.

Why does this song still have such a hold on the world?

The answer starts with the music. Beethoven didn’t always write tuneful melodies, but he certainly knew how. He arranged popular songs, and composed memorable themes like the four-note opening of the Fifth Symphony. Nothing, though, is as brazenly catchy as the “Ode to Joy.”

Beethoven designed it to be easily sung and hard to forget. It is in common time, with four beats per measure, and unfolds in neat, four-bar phrases. Often, there is one note for each syllable of text, and, crucially, the range is an octave, with the melodic line moving either up or down the scale. People with no musical training can learn this almost immediately, unlike with most national anthems. “The Star-Spangled Banner,” for example, has a wide range and awkward leaps that trip up even professional singers.

This simple song, though, was revolutionary. Before 1824, no symphony had included a chorus. And in Beethoven’s Ninth, it comes out of nowhere. The first three movements are purely instrumental, and the finale starts in a similar vein.

That last movement begins with what Wagner, who was heavily influenced by the Ninth, later called the “terror fanfare,” a crashing theme that gives way to a recitative response, a

declamatory style resembling human speech, in the cellos and basses. Those instruments seem to defy the fanfare, behaving like a dissatisfied listener saying: "No, thank you. Next!"

The orchestra answers with a snippet of the symphony's first movement, but the cellos and basses reject that too. They do the same with bits of the second and the third movements. Then, a hint of the "Ode" is received warmly, so it builds until it includes the entire ensemble.

Before the jubilation can get carried away, the terror fanfare returns. This time, though, it is not cut off by cellos and basses, but by a baritone soloist. He breaks the fourth wall, standing in for Beethoven and performing text written by the composer, as he exclaims, "Oh friends, not these sounds!" He calls for more cheerful music instead. The chorus responds with cries of "Joy!", and the soloist begins the "Ode" proper.



The "Ode" is a setting of Schiller's "An die Freude," or "To Joy." (The word "ode" was added for Beethoven's symphony.) Schiller wrote it in the style of a "geselliges Lied," a kind of social drinking song with verses and choruses. Sprawling and based on Enlightenment ideals like trust in reason, democracy and equality, it portrays facets of joy, which Schiller refers to as the "daughter of Elysium."

When this poem was written, in 1785, Beethoven was growing up in Bonn, Germany, a progressive city swirling with the tenets of the Enlightenment that influenced Schiller and, earlier, American independence. Schiller revised his text in 1803, disillusioned by the bloody French Revolution of the 1790s and believing that his earlier version had become detached from reality. Lines that were once incendiary were tamped down; "Beggars become brothers of princes" turned into "All men become brothers." Still, he dismissed the poem as a lapse in judgment, politically and artistically.



Image: Leonard Bernstein, center, at a performance of Beethoven's Ninth in Vienna in 1970. Credit...CBS, via Getty Images

Beethoven must have been aware of the poem's flaws; when he composed his setting, he took from both versions, and even then only bits and pieces. But he was still devoted to the Enlightenment, especially in the face of revolution and resurging autocracy. He much preferred, he wrote in a letter, "the empire of the mind," which he regarded as "the highest of all spiritual and worldly monarchies."

If his decision to end his Ninth Symphony with a choir and vocal soloists was radical, so was what he did with his setting of the poem. Beethoven came of age in music's Classical era, in which symphonies often followed similar structures: a sonata-form first movement, a slow second, a minuet third and a fast, rousing finale.

The Ninth does away with many of those conventions, retaining some elements of Classical style while blazing a path for the Romantic period that followed. Unfurling over 20 minutes, its "Ode" looks like recognizable forms while resisting categorization. With a remarkably free spirit, the music comments on the poem's text and spins fantasies from it, as the historian [Harvey Sachs](#) has written.

Those fantasies most closely resemble a theme and variations, a musical form in which a melody is put through a series of stylistic transformations; the melody, in this case, is the famous song we know as the "Ode." After it is first presented, Beethoven writes a topsy-turvy, bacchic version of it. Instead of one note per syllable, there are now two, rising and falling, as if performed by a drunken singer incapable of steadiness. But at the mention of God, the music becomes awe-inspiringly mighty, with beaming focus. It sounds like an ending, but after a

pause, the instruments of a military band enter with a Turkish march: a non sequitur with a touch of kitsch, perhaps, or parody.

Or maybe it's a harbinger of war, because next, a battle begins: one of keys, and by proxy the spirit, represented by a fugue, from which the radiant key of D emerges with the biggest treatment yet of the "Ode" melody. The only thing left, after all that, is to celebrate.

With the sound of sacred music, the tenors and basses, doubled by deep-voiced instruments in the orchestra, enter with the phrase "Be embraced, you millions!" In the next section, Beethoven includes the word "devout" in his instructions to the musicians, and listeners can hear a move toward the divine, "beyond the starry canopy," as Schiller describes the realm of "the Creator." Celestial awe gives way to a double fugue of holy grandeur.

Once again, the piece seems to have reached a conclusion, but it keeps going. The vocal soloists enter, repeating text from the beginning that sets up a return to the line "All men become brothers" and the escalation of a proper coda. Beethoven brings back the military instruments, and the chorus sings the first line of the "Ode" at full power: "Joy, beauteous spark of divinity." You can picture him almost warming up for a new section, but the orchestra manically, breathlessly brings down the curtain as if to shut down an argument that could go on forever.

Historically, a kind of argument did go on. Theist without being attached to any faith, as political as a "Coexist" bumper sticker, the "Ode" has been adopted across ideologies, with the music's vision of Elysium changing in the eye of each beholder.

That is why it has been used both as Nazi propaganda, even a birthday treat for Hitler, and as a cleansing start to a new era decades later. Leonard Bernstein, shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, led a performance in the former East Berlin in which he replaced the word "Freude" with "Freiheit," or "Freedom." (The Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra has done something similar; last year, it premiered a Ukrainian translation of the Schiller text into Ukrainian, with the key word being "slava," or "glory," as in the slogan "Glory to Ukraine!")

More often than not, the "Ode" signifies hope. Women in Chile sang a version while protesting the Pinochet regime's role in the disappearances and deaths of their loved ones. In Japan, the piece has traditionally been programmed on New Year's Eve as a symbol of rebirth, with choirs made up of thousands of amateurs; for the opening of the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano, [Seiji Ozawa led a performance](#) that brought in singers from around the world.

But because this music is so familiar, if not overexposed, it can be used cynically. About a decade ago, there was a wave of ostensibly inspiring "Ode to Joy" flash mob videos on YouTube, [including one](#) that has been viewed nearly 100 million times. In the end, though, that feel-good performance was just dubious viral marketing for a Spanish bank.

It's no wonder that some critics have viewed the "Ode to Joy" as too accessible for its own good. Yet that very quality is what keeps it so present and ever-changing. We still recognize, and hear, this music because it's an earworm for the ages *and* it's something to believe in. What that belief is, we may not always get right. But Beethoven must have known, as he kept putting his theme through variations and insisting that "All men become brothers," that Elysium will forever be a work in progress.

A link to the article on the NYT website can be [found here](#). (subscription is required)

Audio credits: Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and Manfred Honeck, “Beethoven: Symphony No. 9” (Reference); Baby Einstein, “Baby Beethoven”; the Muppets, “Ode to Joy”; Ian Bostridge and Anthony Pappano, “Beethoven: Songs & Folksongs” (Warner); Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and Manfred Honeck, “Beethoven: Symphonies Nos. 5 & 7” (Reference); Beyoncé, “The Star-Spangled Banner” (Sony); Leonard Bernstein and various orchestras, “Ode to Freedom”; Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra and Keri-Lynn Wilson, “Beethoven: Symphony No. 9” (Deutsche Grammophon).

Video credits: NAOC, “Nagano 1998 Opening Ceremony”; Inside Chile, “La canción de la rebeldía”; Disney, Muppet Music Video; 20th Century Fox, “Die Hard”; CBS Television in association with Amberson Productions, “Bernstein on Beethoven: A Celebration in Vienna”; Unitel, “Ode to Freedom.”

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