

Beethoven's Ninth, Two Hundred Years On

Wednesday, January 27, 2027 · 19:30 · Großes Festspielhaus

Christian Thielemann, conductor · Camilla Nylund, soprano · Patricia Nolz, mezzo-soprano · Klaus Florian Vogt, tenor · Georg Zeppenfeld, bass · Singverein der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Wien, chorus

approximately 68 minutes

Ludwig van Beethoven

1770–1827

68 minutes

Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125 ('Choral')

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

I. Allegro ma non troppo, un poco maestoso. The symphony begins almost inaudibly, with bare fifths in the strings, like an orchestra tuning or a world not yet formed. Fragments of a theme fall through this haze until the whole orchestra hurls it out in D minor. When the opening returns later in the movement it comes back at full force and in the major, and the effect is more frightening than consoling. The coda is built over a slow, grinding chromatic bass, like a funeral march.

II. Molto vivace. Beethoven puts the scherzo second, where a slow movement was expected. The strings start a fugue on a hammering three-note rhythm, and the timpani keep bursting in on their own. The trio turns to D major for a plain, folk-like tune that grows by repetition.

III. Adagio molto e cantabile. The still centre of the work, in B-flat major. Two long-breathed melodies alternate, and each time the first returns it is more richly decorated than before.

IV. Finale. A violent discord shatters the calm. Cellos and basses answer it alone, in the manner of a singer's recitative but without words. The orchestra offers the opening of each earlier movement in turn, and each is cut off. Then the low strings, unaccompanied and very quietly, play the Joy tune. It passes upward through the orchestra, gathering instruments, until the discord returns and a human voice takes over: 'O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!' (Friends, not these sounds).

From here the movement is a chain of variations on the Joy theme. Listen for the 'Turkish' march, where the tune is turned into a jaunty quickstep with piccolo, triangle, cymbals and bass drum and the tenor sings above it; for the slow, awed section at 'Seid umschlungen, Millionen', which sounds like church chant; and for the double fugue in which the chorus sings that theme and the Joy tune at the same moment. The last pages are a headlong race.



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