

## Ode to Freedom

There is evidence that Schiller originally used the word “freedom” (Freiheit) rather than “joy” (Freude) in the poem that became the subject of the last movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. This same evidence indicates that the inspiration for the poem was the American Declaration of Independence. “Freedom” was later changed to “joy” because Prussian censorship was fearful of French revolutionary rhetoric. It may be true. If so, it could be an excuse for using “freedom” in this performance of Beethoven’s last symphony. In the end, it would only be an excuse, and not a reason. The truth is that we believe that the work is improved by making “freedom” and not “joy” the focus.

The first difference that comes to mind when comparing the two words is that “joy” is an emotion, while “freedom” is an ethical concept that is part of the basic value system of Western Civilization. Our emphasis on “freedom” and its offspring “creation”, are perhaps the most important values we have. It is important to stress that we understand freedom as the ability to think without the constraint of dogma and excessive subjectivity, and not so much as political freedom, desirable as that may be. It is possible to be a freethinker in spite of living without political freedom, as was the case of Schiller and Beethoven. On the other hand one sees so many people who have political freedom but cannot think freely.

In contrast, “joy” is simply a transitory emotional state. The evidence indicates that the poem is inspired by “the pursuit of happiness” stated as a right in the American Declaration of Independence, but again there is a fundamental difference. “The pursuit of happiness” involves action and “joy” does not. The value of freedom is the possibility of development. “Joy” may or may not be a result of this, and is difficult to maintain in time, while freedom of thought and the pursuit of happiness can be a permanent attitude in life. To make matters worse, “joy” has such a superficial connotation today as to make the “Ode to Joy” trivial. The fact that it has become the anthem of the European Union only confirms this trivialization. We expect that Schiller and Beethoven had a more transcendent and revolutionary conception of “joy”.

It can be argued that most of Beethoven’s music is a process of liberation. The first three movements of the Ninth Symphony follow a typical path in this direction, similar, albeit at the highest level, to many of his other works. Thus, an “Ode to Freedom” in the last movement is consistent with the whole thrust of the work. In addition, given the connotations of the word “joy” in our time, putting the emphasis on freedom raises the level of discourse. There is a precedent for our decision to change the word “joy” for the word “freedom”, in a performance conducted by Leonard Bernstein in 1989. It is our intention that this will, in the least, inspire us to rethink the meaning of this music.

We know that Beethoven himself struggled to find an ending to this symphony. For ten years he had not been able to compose a finale that could express the ecstasy he so often achieved up to the Seventh Symphony. At first, perhaps not understanding the problem he seemed to be having, he would try to impose an ending by hammering out chords in a somewhat unconvincing manner. The Eighth Symphony and the “Hammerklavier”

Sonata are examples of this. Later, as in the last Piano Sonata Op. 111, he became more contemplative in his endings, a much more satisfying solution than the more violent approach mentioned before.

In his Ninth Symphony, he surely felt that he needed to return to the heroic finales of old, especially since the first three movements were similar in nature to the corresponding movements of the great Third and Fifth Symphonies. There was a difference, however, in that these movements of the Ninth were literally “heaven storming”, while the previous symphonies had been heroic indeed, but at a more human level. The “cosmic” nature of this symphony is most clearly heard in the first movement. Here, one is constantly struggling with forces that are implacable and impersonal in nature. No “victory” is possible against these forces. At best, one can strengthen oneself in order to face them with integrity. The affirmation that ends this movement accomplishes this.

The second movement is an exceptionally intense *scherzo*, rivaled only by the *scherzo* of Bruckner’s Ninth Symphony. Its demonic rhythms are again implacable as it explores the same territory explored in the first movement from a completely different angle. To the integrity conquered in the previous movement, we can now add visceral strength.

Having developed the strength to face a Universe that cares little about us, we now must become one with it. The third movement is in the form of “theme and variations”. Curiously, while there is an *adagio* theme that goes through a number of variations, there is also another theme, an *andante*. It is highly unusual for a theme and variations movement to have a second theme. Beethoven always had a purpose when he deviated from classical norms, so this theme must have an important function. These two themes are, at first, very different. While the first theme is in 4/4 time and moves slowly with long notes, the second theme is in 3/4 time and is more flowing. In each variation of the former, it seems to “learn” something from the later, acquiring more fluidity and incorporating movement in triplets. This reaches a climax with the combination of the two rhythms in 12/8 time. This newfound ability to flow allows us to become one with the universe, the same way that the two themes have, in a sense, now become one.

Beethoven struggled to create a bridge with the musical setting of Schiller’s poem. The last movement begins with an unprecedented restatement of the themes of the first three movements, rejecting each in turn. We confess that we find this process tragic. The original statement of the musical theme that will accompany the poem begins darkly, in the basses. It isn’t until the ecstatic shouts of “Freiheit” (normally “Freude”) that this darkness dissipates. Still, there are, in the rest of the movement, reasons for uneasiness. Eventually, however, the music is so intoxicating that one cannot help but be caught up in it. The change from “Joy” to “Freedom” directs us more towards a triumphant affirmation than the usual joyful celebration.