

# Daniel Barenboim: What Beethoven's Ninth Teaches Us

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By Daniel Barenboim (Mr. Barenboim is a pianist and conductor)

Ludwig van Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was first performed exactly 200 years ago Tuesday and has since become probably the work most likely to be embraced for political purposes.

It was played at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin; it was performed in that city again on Christmas 1989 after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when Leonard Bernstein replaced the word "Joy" in the choral finale with "Freedom"; the European Union adopted the symphony's "Ode to Joy" theme as its anthem. (These days the Ninth is being played in concert halls worldwide in commemoration of the premiere. The classical music world loves anniversaries.)

Beethoven might have been surprised at the political allure of his masterpiece.

He was interested in politics, but only because he was deeply interested in humanity. The story goes that he originally wanted to dedicate his "Eroica" symphony to Napoleon — it was to be called "Bonaparte" — but he changed his mind after Napoleon abandoned the ideals of the French Revolution and was crowned emperor.

I don't believe, however, that Beethoven was interested in everyday politics. He was not an activist.

Instead, he was a deeply political man in the broadest sense of the word. He was concerned with moral behavior and the larger questions of right and wrong affecting all of society. Especially significant for him was freedom of thought and of personal expression, which he associated with the rights and responsibilities of the individual. He would have had no sympathy with the now widely held view of freedom as essentially economic, necessary for the workings of the markets.

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The closest he comes to a political statement in the Ninth is a sentence at the heart of the last movement, in which voices were heard for the first time in a symphony: "All men become brothers." We understand that now more as an expression of hope than a confident statement, given the many exceptions to the sentiment, including the Jews under the Nazis and members of minorities in many

parts of the world. The quantity and scope of the crises facing humankind severely test that hope. We have seen many crises before, but we do not appear to learn any lessons from them.

I also see the Ninth in another way. Music on its own does not stand for anything except itself. The greatness of music, and the Ninth Symphony, lies in the richness of its contrasts. Music never just laughs or cries; it always laughs and cries at the same time. Creating unity out of contradictions — that is Beethoven for me.

Music, if you study it properly, is a lesson for life. There is much we can learn from Beethoven, who was, of course, one of the strongest personalities in the history of music. He is the master of bringing emotion and intellect together. With Beethoven, you must be able to structure your feelings and feel the structure emotionally — a fantastic lesson for life! When we are in love, we lose all sense of discipline. Music doesn't allow for that.

But music means different things to different people and sometimes even different things to the same person at different moments. It might be poetic, philosophical, sensual or mathematical, but it must have something to do with the soul.

Therefore, it is metaphysical — but the means of expression is purely and exclusively physical: sound. It is precisely this permanent coexistence of metaphysical message through physical means that is the strength of music. It is also the reason that when we try to describe music with words, all we can do is articulate our reactions to it, and not grasp music itself.

The Ninth Symphony is one of the most important artworks in Western culture. Some experts call it the greatest symphony ever written, and many commentators praise its visionary message. It is also one of the most revolutionary works by a composer mainly defined by the revolutionary nature of his works. Beethoven freed music from prevailing conventions of harmony and structure. Sometimes I feel in his late works a will to break all signs of continuity.

The Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci said a wonderful thing in 1929, when Benito Mussolini had Italy under his thumb. "My mind is pessimistic, but my will is optimistic," he wrote to a friend from prison. I think he meant that as long as we are alive, we have hope. I try to take Gramsci's words to heart still today, even if not always successfully.

By all accounts, Beethoven was courageous, and I find courage an essential quality for the understanding, let alone the performance, of the Ninth. One could paraphrase much of the work of Beethoven in the spirit of Gramsci by saying that suffering is inevitable, but the courage to overcome it renders life worth living.