

John Eliot Gardiner leads all nine Beethoven symphonies at Carnegie Hall, and speaks about their significance

The great composer's music has "to do with social equality, revolution and counterrevolution"

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23 March 2020

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted and cancelled most plans to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the birth of the quintessential genius of Western classical music, German composer Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827). Concert halls have shut their doors, and observances on every continent have been postponed or shelved.

Carnegie Hall in New York City had announced an impressive lineup of more than three dozen concerts between January and June of this year, including performances of Beethoven's nine symphonies, his complete 32 piano sonatas, 16 string quartets and much more. The planned "Beethoven Celebration" in New York also included programs to be held at other venues, in coordination with museums and various institutions around the city. Before the cancellations that began in early March, only a small portion of these events had taken place.

The concerts featuring the London-based Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique (founded in 1989) came in just under the wire, so to speak. World-famous conductor John Eliot Gardiner, known above all for his role in the early music revival and the use of period instruments to re-create the music of the eras of Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and others, led the orchestra in five programs devoted to the nine symphonies of Beethoven.

These programs, from February 19 to 24, were originally paired with another cycle of the same Beethoven symphonies, to be presented by the Philadelphia Orchestra under its Music Director and Conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin in four concerts scheduled from mid-March through early April. The idea was to compare and contrast these famous works as performed by period instruments—those used in Beethoven's day—and the modern orchestra of today.

This writer attended two of the concerts featuring Gardiner and his orchestra. The programs included the First and the Eighth Symphonies, as well as the monumental Ninth, perhaps the most famous work in the entire classical music canon. Gardiner also participated in a panel discussion and demonstration dealing with the use of period instruments, as well as the significance of Beethoven's work.

Gardiner is a persuasive ambassador for historically informed performance, based on research into the style, technique and instruments used during earlier periods of musical history. Such an

approach was particularly controversial when it appeared more prominently in the second half of the 20th century, but is less so today. Critics have argued that it is impossible to know what musical performance sounded like two centuries ago or even earlier.

There are advocates of period instruments and early performance practice who have taken a dogmatic approach, but Gardiner is certainly not one of them. He does not deny the role of modern instruments, especially in the work of Bruckner, Mahler, Richard Strauss and other late romantics. In his talk at Carnegie Hall last month, he stressed that his approach to Bach, Beethoven and other giants of the past did not involve musical "archaeology or exhumation." He explained why he preferred the use of period instruments for Beethoven. "Modern instruments are much more advanced technically, easier to play wonderfully, but there is a danger" that the sound does not allow the listener to distinguish the different elements of the music. "As wonderful as [Wilhelm] Furtwängler, [Arturo] Toscanini and more recent conductors are, they leave me with doubts if [modern instruments are] the appropriate soundscape" for Beethoven.

Period instruments include valveless horns and trumpets, and there are also differences between period and modern strings, winds and percussion instruments. The timbres are different in some cases, and the dynamic range is accompanied by greater clarity. His performances, Gardiner continued, are "like open-heart surgery. You'll see all the inner strands, you'll see the struggle, the life." According to the conductor, his Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique puts a premium on making the music both transparent and visceral at the same time.

Gardiner spoke as well at some length on the social and political significance of Beethoven's music, an issue he also addressed, along with the matter of historically informed performance, in an interview published last month in the *New York Times*.

Expressing an interest in the historical questions rare in the field today, Gardiner told his Carnegie audience that Beethoven worked amid "a maelstrom of political events." His music has "to do with social equality, revolution and counterrevolution." He worked, Gardiner explained, in the "disillusioned, stifling atmosphere of [the conservative Austrian diplomat Prince Klemens von Metternich's]

Vienna,” the period of reaction that was ushered in by the Congress of Vienna in 1815.

Beethoven’s work is very closely connected to that of revolutionary Enlightenment poet and playwright Friedrich Schiller. “In Beethoven’s circle in Bonn, Schiller’s plays were like required reading,” Gardiner said. He explained that the young Beethoven’s original contact with the *Ode to Joy*, which was to become the text of the final movement of the Ninth Symphony, came in 1785. That is the same year that saw the appearance of Schiller’s *Don Carlos*, with its theme of resistance to tyranny symbolized by the character of the Marquis of Posa, who was later also immortalized in Verdi’s greatest opera, sharing the same title as Schiller’s play.

Beethoven was not consistent in his political views. There were times when he accommodated himself to the status quo, and a few occasions, though not many, when he composed inferior music, such as *Wellington’s Victory* (commemorating the Duke of Wellington’s victory over Joseph Bonaparte, Napoleon Bonaparte’s older brother, at the Battle of Vitoria in Spain in June 1813).

His main inspiration, however, was a revolutionary one. Gardiner compares him to Spanish painter Francisco Goya, and the names of English poets Percy Shelley and Lord Byron also come to mind. In the aforementioned interview, Gardiner declares, “He set out to encompass philosophical themes and even political themes, however unpalatable these might have been to the authorities in the repressive Vienna of his day. And because there are no words attached to eight of his nine completed symphonies, he gets away with it, without endangering life and limb.” The conductor goes on to say that the composer’s Third and Fifth symphonies “reflect[ed] his conviction that the values of the French Revolution that had spread like wildfire throughout Europe were now under threat and needed eloquent defense.”

Gardiner also discusses Beethoven’s significance today, rejecting the idea that the latter’s music exists in a vacuum. “I don’t think Beethoven needs an anniversary to be played a lot. I’m sure he doesn’t. But if we are going to go with this 250th anniversary, we must be very, very sure that we have something—and that he had something—to say to us now in 2020 that is pertinent to the way we look at life, society and culture. There are clear parallels between his situation in the early 1800s and ours today, between the political agitation and rebelliousness that he felt, the discomfort that he expressed in his symphonies, and the situation in which we now find ourselves.”

This living and passionate approach to Beethoven found vivid expression in the orchestra’s performances of the First, Eighth and Ninth symphonies last month.

The composer’s tendency toward more relaxed efforts in his even-numbered symphonies, alternating with the earthshaking products of his genius in his last four odd-numbered symphonies (the Third, Fifth, Seventh and Ninth), has often been noted. It is as if he had to rest after mighty labors, but the “slighter” works are, of course, anything but slight.

The rendition of the Ninth by the Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique did not disappoint. Twelve years separate the Eighth from the Ninth Symphony, a period when Beethoven composed the *Missa Solemnis*, works for piano and chamber music. The composer clearly struggled to find symphonic expression for the themes that occupied him. When the Ninth was finally premiered in 1824, its utter originality undoubtedly confused listeners, at least at first.

With the Monteverdi Choir and soloists that included soprano Lucy

Crowe, contralto Jess Dandy, tenor Ed Lyon and bass Matthew Rose, the February performance of the Ninth Symphony fully lived up to Robert Schumann’s description: “The first movement is epic, the second comic, the third lyric, and the last drama, a composite of all.” The first movement arises almost imperceptibly out of stillness, with the melody unfolding only gradually, in a fashion that is very characteristic of Beethoven.

This movement calls to mind Giuseppe Verdi’s comment that “Beethoven was not a melodist.” The statement is not to be taken literally, but is significant nonetheless. As Harvey Sachs described it in his book *The Ninth: Beethoven and the World in 1824*, “[W]hen outstanding composers have something to say that is worth hearing, it does not matter whether writing beautiful melodies is one of their principal virtues.” Of course there is melody in Beethoven, but it is often angry, restless or explosive, not the conventionally pretty kind so often associated with the word. One can only imagine Beethoven’s furious response if he heard of those classical music radio stations today who say their aim is providing “comfort” or “tranquility,” a respite from the storm and stress of daily life.

In the final movement of the Ninth, Beethoven quickly recapitulates the main themes of the first three movements, interrupting each by a brief passage with a speech-like pattern similar to operatic recitative. Briefly examining and discarding these themes, the composer then anticipates the famous Ode to Joy theme, which follows and leads to the central body of the movement, for chorus, soloists and orchestra. In this movement, virtually unique in conception, it is as though one is being asked to listen to and join in the struggle through which the composer has arrived at his final hymn to humanity, including Schiller’s words, “Alle Menschen werden Brüder” [“All people become brothers.”] The transparency to which Gardiner referred was much in evidence, along with the visceral quality that the conductor strives for. One was aware of both the parts of the work, and the whole, and the contributions of each section of the orchestra. The relatively small size of the ensemble did not diminish its power in the slightest.

While there will be no opportunity to hear the Beethoven symphonies performed on modern instruments at Carnegie Hall this spring, there are many opportunities online to compare different performance practices in Beethoven and other work. Both styles have much to recommend them. The immense power of the music comes through with both modern and period instruments, as long as the orchestra responds to the passion and inspiration of the works themselves.



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