

A Cathartic Close to Canton Symphony's Beethoven Festival (April 25 & 26)



by Tom Wachunas

First-time listeners to *Music Einem Ritterballet* (*Music for a Knight's Ballet*) might understandably hear more of Mozart or Haydn than Beethoven in the work. Still, the choice of this early composition (1791) to open the third concert of the Canton Symphony Orchestra Beethoven Festival on April 25, jaunty and charming as it is, ultimately served to illuminate Beethoven's separation from his classical predecessors in a steady and bold ascent to the pinnacle of his ninth symphony.

The journey continued with pianist André Watts performing Piano Concerto No. 4 and, after the intermission, No. 5 ("Emperor"). In these, all of the aspects that comprise Watts' consummate artistic integrity – his breathtaking embrace of lyrical nuance, his keen attentions to intimate dialogue with the orchestra, and the sheer force of his technical virtuosity – were wholly evident. During the intermission, I heard one audience member, wide-eyed and nodding his head emphatically, declare to his companion, "That piano player is a *poet*." Indeed.

Particularly astonishing was the lengthy (the longest I've ever heard) cadenza in the first movement of the fourth concerto, replete with sustained trills, lavish scales and chording, and crisp arpeggios that travelled up and down the keyboard like so many cascading waves. That monumental interlude seemed to foreshadow the even more electrifying piano dynamics, as well as the sumptuous orchestral textures of the fifth concerto – all of it performed with riveting panache.

A similar presaging unfolded in the final concert of the festival (April 26), beginning with the *Fantasia in C Minor for Piano, Chorus, and Orchestra*, generally known as *Choral Fantasy*, composed in 1808. Structurally unique in Beethoven's oeuvre, the work augured many of the ideas and innovations that would come to full fruition in his ninth symphony, completed fifteen years later. Both works have a choral finale, and the main theme threaded through the eight sections of *Choral Fantasy* greatly resembles that of the ninth symphony's glorious last movement, which is something of a symphony in itself.

Mr. Watts' piano work was especially enchanting as he finessed the successively more elaborate variations on the main theme, all impeccably balanced with the captivating sonority of the orchestra. The choral finale was initiated by the wondrously ethereal voices of sopranos Rachel Hall and Maribeth Crawford, along with mezzo-soprano Kathryn Findlen, tenor Timothy Culver, baritone Britt Cooper, and bass Nathan Stark (the quartet of Hall, Findlen, Culver, and Stark would return for the fourth movement of Symphony No. 9). Joining them were the Canton Symphony Chorus, the University of Mount Union Concert Choir, and the Walsh University Chamber Singers. This marvelous gathering of blissful, inspired voices paved the way to the evening's most lofty summit.



In introducing Symphony No. 9, I've never heard music director Gerhardt Zimmermann be more articulate, poignant, or sincere. He rightly referred to the work not so much as an earthly accomplishment, but an unparalleled, life-changing phenomenon - a "...miracle in music history," and a profoundly cathartic message for all humanity.

I found the performance to be just that – cathartic – from the primordial quiet, chaos and struggle of the first movement, the startlingly brisk, pounding pace of the second movement (what Zimmermann called "a maniacal dance"), the ineffable serenity and majesty of the third movement, and through to the unearthly choral power of the finale. Still, and ironically, I remain confounded by the inadequacy of words to describe what transpired. Then again, it is in the nature of the greatest music, greatly rendered, to leave one in speechless awe.

As if driven by the same forces that compelled Beethoven to find his perfected expression of the mysteries and grandeur of life, the orchestra and chorus were caught up in a benevolent conspiracy of excellence. All of the elements that have made the CSO so remarkable in the past were here elevated to an unprecedented zenith.

Cosmic silence to creation. Angst and suffering to the blessing of brotherhood and joy. Divine destiny. Here was Beethoven's rapturous "kiss for all the world," his urgent and sacred embrace of the universe, delivered by a magnificently impassioned conductor, ensemble, and chorus.

At the final, triumphant burst from cymbals, bass drum and timpani, we in the audience immediately stood as one, lifted by our own rapturous noise of gratitude and approval.
Freude!

Published on ClevelandClassical.com April 30, 2015.

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