

DECEMBER 16, 2019

A Celebration of the Living Beethoven: The Path to Freedom Lies through Beauty

We present here an edited version of the program notes for the “Beethoven 250, Celebrated!” concert at Carnegie Hall’s Stern Auditorium, presented by the Foundation for the Revival of Classical Culture on December 16, 2019.

“To play a wrong note is insignificant; to play without passion is inexcusable.”
—Ludwig van Beethoven

For those who have perhaps never encountered the music of composer Ludwig van Beethoven in a live

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performance—and we hope that many of you are here tonight—you could not have picked a better concert to attend than tonight’s program.

Beethoven Ennobles Us

Beethoven is one of the great friends of humanity, and all humanity deserves to hear—better, even to perform—his music. As the Chairwoman of the Board of the Foundation for the Revival of Classical Culture, the singer Elvira Green, said to the chorus while preparing this performance:

The example of Beethoven teaches us that we can rise above our limitations, and we can sometimes express far nobler ideals than our times, and perhaps even our lives, may seem to support or permit from us. It was for that very needing humanity that his Ninth Symphony was written—not for the rich, but for the poor in spirit; not for the materially privileged, but for the spiritually committed. And, as musicians, despite our constraints of time and our questionable ability, the heart with which we approach Beethoven’s message is the most important factor in delivering it.

For those who struggle against seemingly insurmountable odds, and dare to meet him on his own terms, Beethoven can be an unexpected ally and a brilliant source of strength. We repeat the seemingly outrageous proposal: All of humanity should find some way to perform some music written by Beethoven.

Some years ago, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, an airline pilot by the name of Armand Diangienda decided that he wanted to find a way to unite his country after decades of war and strife. He decided that he would bring people together, no matter what their musical backgrounds, to perform the Beethoven Ninth Symphony. And they did! This was done despite the limited musical training of most involved, and despite the fact that this also required even the building of many of the instruments—violins, cellos—that people did not possess.

The 2010 [documentary](#), *Kinshasa Symphony*, tells that story. In 2012, trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, talking about the orchestra in discussion with Bob Simon

of CBS’s *60 Minutes* and Charlie Rose, said of a video of the ensemble that they showed:

I feel that it shows something about music—people—another tradition. They speak another language now—the language of Beethoven. And the music can teach you so much, when you encounter it, wherever you are. Because it’s universal music, it’s a universal statement. And that type of love and joy that they play with—I got full—when I saw it the first time—the orchestra, with their instruments. I think somebody like Beethoven—it’s one guy in the room—somewhere in his culture. They knew he was a genius, and he had a thought of universal brotherhood. He has nothing to do with the Europe that went all over the world and took stuff from people. He was *giving* something to people. So that’s why, over time, he stands to represent that ideal.

An amazed Bob Simon, reflecting on the Congo orchestra, asked Marsalis, “Do think that Beethoven would ever have expected that his Ninth Symphony would be performed in the Congo?” Marsalis, with a smile, and without even a pause, said, “He would probably have said, ‘Yeah, they will.’”

Our concert opens with the Brahms vocal composition *Nänie* (Lament). Composed to the text of a poem by Friedrich Schiller, *Nänie* begins with a proposition that would seem to be the greatest apparent challenge to human freedom: “Even the beautiful must die.” As Schiller had argued in his essay “On the Sublime,” human beings cannot truly be called free, if they can find no way to triumph above their physical mortality. It is in the realm of music, however, and that form of music known as poetry—a form which Friedrich Schiller’s poetry represented in the highest degree, according to Beethoven—that immortality is most clearly contained.

Schiller’s “Lament” itself overturns its opening proposition, and Schiller, Beethoven, Brahms and we appear, clothed in the immortality that only Beauty, itself an expression of a principle that dwells “above the stars,” provides. The path to Freedom lies through Beauty, and Beethoven the pathfinder, will always lead the way.