**Beethoven, Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125 (1823/24)**

It is likely that no work in the history of Western music has received more written commentary than Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, completed in the years 1822-24. With its historic length, the introduction of soloists and a choir in the last movement singing selected verses from Schiller’s *An die Freude (Ode to Joy)*, and its sense of breadth and profundity, this symphony has stirred the imagination of listeners world-wide. While in the U.S. the traditional Christmas-season work is the first part of Handel’s *Messiah*, in Japan it is Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony.

The moving story of the symphony’s Vienna première in the Kärnthnerthor Theater on May 7, 1824 was recounted differently by several eyewitnesses. The violinist Joseph Böhm declared that “Beethoven himself conducted, that is, he stood in front of a conductor’s stand and threw himself back and forth like a madman. At one moment he stretched to his full height, at the next he crouched down to the floor, he flailed about with his hands and feet as though he wanted to play all the instruments and sing all the chorus parts. The actual direction was in [Umlauf’s] hands; we musicians followed his baton only.” Whether this description, unsupported by other witnesses, is true or a dramatization by an overzealous participant, is unclear. Multiple accounts, however, speak variously of the deaf Beethoven continuing to leaf through the pages of the score or still conducting after the music of the Scherzo or the Finale had ended, and that the contralto soloist, Caroline Unger, caused him finally to turn around so he could see the audience enthusiastically applauding and take his bow.

The most frequent focus of attention in this symphony has been the last movement, with its innovative introduction of vocal soloists and chorus singing selected verses from Friedrich Schiller’s poem. Much debate has centered on the structure of this movement in its stirring presentation of the poet’s paean of human brotherhood. Far less attention has been paid, however, to the progress of the symphony through all four movements to reach this triumphant finale. But neither the finale nor the earlier movements can be properly understood without considering the whole as a single entity, leading from its amorphous beginning to the surety and confidence of its harmonious conclusion celebrating the harmony of humankind.

In order to grasp (and ultimately hear) what Beethoven was up to, the reader needs to be familiar with some basic theoretical aspects of the work. Its tonality is the key of D, but in the first movement the D is in minor mode, while in the last movement, it’s D major. Hearing the course of the journey from minor to major is essential to hearing the message of the work. (Despite the necessity for using theoretical terminology to explain the music intellectually, our ears, well attuned to the western classical tradition, pick up much of what is happening unconsciously—verbal information serves to sharpen our more immediate perceptions.)

Anyone who has ever taken music lessons has likely been told at some point that minor keys are “sad” and major keys “happy.” While this is a great oversimplification, it has been recognized ever since the 16th century that the intervals of a minor third and minor
sixth (D-F and D-B\textsuperscript{b} in the key of D minor) are appropriately associated with negative conceptions and emotional states, while the major third and major sixth (D-F\# and D-B-natural in the key of D major) are typically associated with positive conceptions and feelings. In fact, it is precisely this difference in the third and sixth notes of the D scale that defines one version as minor (D-E-F-G-A- B\textsuperscript{b}-C\#-D) and the other as major (D-E-F\#-G-A-B-C\#-D).

The “sad” and “happy” dichotomy derives from the fact that in the minor mode, the third (F) and the sixth (B\textsuperscript{b}) both tend to move downward by a half step, while in the major mode, the third (F\#) and the sixth (B) both tend to move upward by a half step. And we quite naturally associate downward motion with a depletion of energy and negative emotional states, while we equally naturally associate upward motion with exertion of energy and positive emotional states. In addition, the harmonies that occur in the minor mode evince considerably more tension than most of those in the major mode. Understanding these aspects of D minor versus D major takes us a long way toward understanding what Beethoven was intent on achieving in the Ninth Symphony.

First movement: Allegro, ma non troppo, un poco maestoso

The first movement’s opening is quite amorphous and ambiguous, even primeval, with its soft string tremolo (rhythm undefined) on the open fifth A-E, and its intermittent dropping fifths and fourths. In fact, without a third in the middle of the fifths, we can’t tell whether the harmony is major or minor, nor do the sustained notes of the tremolo establish the tonic key for us. The human mind likes clarity, and the undefined rhythm, the undefined mode and key, as well as the lack of any melodic shape other than the ambiguous fifths and fourths, all generate considerable tension. It’s as if we are at the dawn of something mysterious and potentially threatening. In fact, there is something rather threatening about the continuation. When a third is finally added, it’s the minor third (F) of the tonic chord of D minor, but part of a short incomplete, almost hammer-like motive, continuing on to the minor sixth degree (B\textsuperscript{b}). These two notes finally define the minor mode and establish some rhythmic orientation as well, but without ever producing a clear-cut theme, a stable rhythmic pattern, or a stable phrase structure. In other words, the soft amorphous beginning leads to louder, but still unstable, irregular and somewhat disturbing forms of musical expression.

It is this instability and lack of clear definition that characterizes the entire first movement. We never hear a full-blown first theme, and every effort to establish a melodic phrase or a definite rhythmic profile is quickly interrupted and thwarted. In his other symphonies, Beethoven tends to bring his first theme to a clear-cut close before introducing his second theme, but here he slides through a modulation directly into the abbreviated second theme in the relative major key of B\textsuperscript{b} without creating any sense of structural separation. This key, like the first, doesn’t establish anything stable in the way of melody, rhythm or phrasing; every effort at doing so is contradicted by something else. This new key, the traditional key for the second theme in a minor-key movement, though major, is rooted on the minor sixth note of the D scale. In the Ninth Symphony, this traditional use of the relative major key has a special significance, because several bars
later Beethoven suddenly slides up momentarily to the key of B major before sliding right back down to B♭. This is highly unusual, and introduces for the first time the dialectic between the note B♭, one of the two notes defining the key of D minor, and B-natural, its counterpoise helping define the key of D major. Here, early in the first movement, this dialectic, which will be fundamental to the progress of the entire symphony, is only briefly adumbrated.

The second theme, like the first, does not conclude with any strong cadence, but rather slides directly into what sounds like it’s going to be the traditional repeat of the exposition, but instead proves to be the beginning of the development. The keys Beethoven explores in his developments are always meaningful in relation to the tonic key of the movement and principal notes of the first or second themes. The Ninth is no exception. The development, like the exposition, is fragmentary, never establishing anything concrete. Beethoven’s first new key is G minor, whose defining minor third, significantly, is B♭. Next comes C minor—a drop of a fifth, just as in the opening motivic fragment. This fifth serves as the basis of a fugue, a contrapuntal technique Beethoven had often used in development sections from much earlier in his career. But since C minor has B-natural as its leading tone, the fugue eventually turns to the key of B♭, once again placing side-by-side the dichotomy between the two versions of D’s sixth scale degree. Beethoven’s developmental fugues tend eventually to dissipate, and as this one does so, it takes a new tonal direction, first to A minor, and then to the only major key of the development, A minor’s relative major, F. A minor’s own sixth scale degree is the note F, and together with the new key of F major, the two post-fugue tonalities emphasize the minor third of the D scale. That this is quite deliberate on Beethoven’s part (what note of his isn’t?) is proven by the development merging right into the recapitulation without any intervening cadence or pause. The surprise is that the recapitulation immediately begins in D major and fortissimo rather than the opening’s pianissimo. By introducing the major version of D, the note F of the keys of F major and D minor is dialectically opposed to the F♯ of D major. Likewise, the fourth degree of the F scale, B♭, is opposed by the B-natural sixth degree of D major.

Just as B major in the exposition appeared only briefly, this D major soon yields to the expected D minor, but when the second theme returns, it does so in the traditional manner—it is transposed from its original key back to the tonic. But since the second theme was in the major mode, its reappearance now will be in D major. For the first time, the major version of D takes center stage, all the way to the end of the recapitulation. Beethoven, of course, could have ended the movement here, after a cadential passage to reinforce the concluding key, but that would have resolved his dialectic in favor of the major mode and left nothing of significance tonally for the subsequent movements to deal with. Instead, as he had been doing for many years, his recapitulation leads into an extended coda, which re-establishes D minor as the predominant version of D in the first movement. Even here there is a brief passage in D major, so that the dialectic is not abandoned altogether. Finally we come to a close with the only strong cadence in the entire movement.
While I may have taxed some reader’s patience with the technical details, we can now step back and understand the principal character of the first movement. Beethoven associates the tensions of the minor mode with incompleteness, instability and lack of clarity. There is no complete eight-bar theme anywhere in the movement; most often we hear only short fragmentary motives. There is no regularity of rhythm—as soon as a pattern begins to be established, it is interrupted by something else, often in a different dynamic and with a different character. There are no strong cadences until the very end of the movement, and the traditional subdivisions of exposition, with its first and second themes, development, recapitulation, and coda run almost imperceptibly from one into the other without pause or demarcation. It is a deeply conflicted movement that plumbs the depths of contrast, mystery and uncertainty, while briefly offering us glimpses of another, brighter perspective. In this first movement Beethoven is preparing us for the gradual change in style and character of each subsequent movement, leading eventually to the stability, regularity, and simplicity of the “Ode to Joy” theme of the last movement in D major, qualities that for Beethoven musically represent Schiller’s brotherhood of man.

Second movement: Molto vivace

The second movement of a four-movement symphony is normally the slow movement, followed by a minuet and trio or scherzo and trio. But in the Ninth, Beethoven reverses the two. The reason is not difficult to fathom. The lyrical slow movement normally serves as a counterbalance in a different key to the dramatic contrasts and resolutions of clear-cut themes or motives in the sonata-form first movement. But in the opening movement of the Ninth, there are only fragmentary contrasts, conflicts and instabilities with no resolutions. A slow movement to follow would sound out of place, attempting to balance something chimerical. On the other hand, the Scherzo, which typically is in the main key of the symphony, offers the possibility of establishing clear rhythmic definition and phrasing, bringing temporal order out of the rhythmic instability of the first movement. And this, of course, is precisely what Beethoven does, with a hammer-stroke opening and sharply defined rhythm and meter in a four-bar phrase that regularly repeats in imitation every four bars. D minor has for the first time been tamed by orderly rhythm, meter and phrasing, giving a powerful forward drive to the movement.

The extra-large and dynamic first movement requires an equally large and dynamic Scherzo and Trio. Therefore Beethoven expands the typical AA|BABABA| structure of the Scherzo to a full-scale sonata form introducing a second theme in a contrasting key in the A section (though accompanied by the first-theme’s hammer strokes) and enlarging the B section into a Development. In the B section the main motive is recast in three-bar phrases, before returning to four-bar groupings to prepare for the Recapitulation (the return of the A section). But when the second theme returns in the tonic, as it should, that tonic is briefly D major, restating the minor-major dialectic for the first time in the second movement. Where that dialectic becomes much more prominent, however, is in the Trio, whose key throughout is D major with its F♯ and B-natural. Here D major asserts itself prominently as a contrast to D minor, even basing the Trio’s theme on the second theme of the Scherzo with a four-bar repetitive phrase structure. In contrast to the
structural complexity of the Scherzo, the Trio reveals a quite simple CC|DCDC pattern, repeating the main theme several times and never deviating from D major. In this movement we have D minor and D major juxtaposed as the keys of the two principal sections, but the D major Trio is much shorter and of lesser import than the Scherzo, which is repeated after the Trio in the typical Scherzo-Trio-Scherzo format. D minor is still dominant, though now with a strong rhythmic and metrical profile and embracing symmetrical four-bar phrases.

Third Movement: Adagio molto e cantabile / Andante moderato

Beethoven continues his unusual approach to musical structure with the slow movement. Many slow movements comprise a theme and variations, a fundamentally static structural principle based on repetition of the same melody, harmony and phrase structure in which the tonic key prevails with only occasional deviations. But in the Ninth Symphony, Beethoven writes two sets of theme and variations, in different keys and tempos, which alternate with one another. All the keys are for the first time in major, marking a transition toward the predominance of the major mode in the unfolding of the Symphony. But the first key is B♭ major, whose tonic and dominant pitches emphasize the minor sixth and third of the D scale. The theme itself, after a two-bar introduction, starts simply, with the notes D-A-B♭-F in a four-bar phrase, but then becomes more irregular, both in its rhythms and phrase lengths. The key of B♭, with its references to the D minor mode, is not yet a key for the regularity of a four-square structure. That is reserved for the second theme, in the key of D major. Its simple 4-bar + 4-bar repetitive structure begins on F♯, highlighting one of the two critical notes of the shift from D minor to D major. This ornamented theme shortly gives way to the return of the first theme in its first variation, again in B♭ major. So once again Beethoven explores the dialectic between F and F♯ and between B♭ and B-natural. That dialectic is reinforced with the return of the second theme in its first variation, but a fourth higher in G major. The third degree of G major is B-natural, and the theme itself begins on that B-natural, which is why Beethoven has transposed it from its original D major. He’s placing the critical pitches of F# and B in the forefront of the listener’s ear.

Before the return to the first theme in B♭, there is an interlude in the key of E♭ (a fourth up from B♭), leading into an even more highly ornamented form of the first theme. Following the pattern so carefully established, we now expect a return to the second theme, back in its original key of D major. But it doesn’t come. Instead, a fanfare announces an abrupt and dramatic shift to D♭ major (!), introducing a closing coda in B♭ based on the first theme. By now it has been a long time since we’ve heard the expected four-square theme in D major; Beethoven has incited an unrealized anticipation in our ears.

Fourth movement: Presto / Allegro ma non troppo / Adagio cantabile / Allegro / Allegro moderato / Allegro / Allegro assai

The key of D does finally come—at the beginning of the fourth movement—but D minor instead of D major after a violent fortissimo opening. The fourth movement has been the
focus of the majority of attention accorded the Ninth Symphony because of its innovative, unique structure and the introduction of soloists and chorus into the work. Many different proposals have been made for the organization of the movement: sonata form, variations, bar form, rondo form, first movement concerto form, and a miniature four-movement symphony structure. All have some justification, since Beethoven combines elements from each. However, the variation principle, upon which other structural elements are superimposed, is fundamental.

The famous introduction to the final movement is Beethoven’s way of indicating that what he has written so far isn’t adequate. The opening outburst is interrupted by a contradictory recitative-like passage in the cellos and contrabasses, with the opposition between the two passages repeated once more. To remind the listener of what already passed, Beethoven briefly reviews the themes of each of the previous three movements in their original keys, each time rejecting them by means of the contrabass and cello recitative. Finally, after the third movement theme has been rejected, a new theme is introduced, now in the long delayed key of D major. It is the simplest of themes with regular rhythm, uncomplicated harmony and stable four-square structure, almost folk-like in character. This is the goal toward which Beethoven has been gradually and systematically striving the entire symphony: a stable D major characterized by music diametrically opposite the first movement’s unstable D minor. Once the theme has been introduced in the very cellos and contrabasses that had rejected the other movement’s themes, it is repeated several times in ever-increasing orchestration and dynamics until it reaches a forte climax. But this isn’t enough to resolve all the tensions generated by the previous three movements, and Beethoven once again bursts out with his violent opening contrasted by a rejecting recitative. This time, however, it’s a baritone recitative with the words, “O Friends, not these tones! Rather, let us intone more pleasant and joyful ones.” These more joyful tones are the same D major theme we’ve been hearing, but now with soloists and chorus singing excerpts from Schiller’s ode. As before, this “Freude (joy) theme” is repeated several times with increasing orchestral and vocal resources.

But the triumph of D major over D minor, of stability and symmetry over ambiguity, fragmentation and irregularity, is not so easily won. The chorus climaxes by preparing a modulation to the key of B♭, reintroducing the pitch references to D minor. The following passage is the Turkish march that has often been denoted as unusual in this context, but only rarely has its musico-dramatic function been considered. Turkish marches, with their piccolos, cymbals and bass drums, were popular in instrumental music in Vienna, reflecting the Janissary music of the Turks. But the most important point is that this is battle music, and the battle between D minor and D major is not yet over. Indeed, the principal text phrase of the march reads “Run, brother, your course, like a hero to victory.” The march begins with a variant of the “Freude” theme in B♭ and repetition once again builds the orchestral and vocal forces until the voices cease and a furious instrumental fugue begins, with its subject based on the “Freude” tune. The fugue represents the battle itself; near the beginning B♭ turns to G major, with its B-natural third, but from thereafter, all of the keys for an extended period are flat keys until suddenly, almost imperceptibly, they give way to B minor, with its B-natural and F♯. From that point on the contrapuntal struggle is over, though the rhythmic energy...
continues until the fugue comes to a fortissimo close on the pitch F♯. The “Freude” theme is gradually reintroduced, with a brief, nod toward D minor, until it bursts forth in glory in D major into what must be its final triumph.

Or is it? This is a very complex symphony, and even while extolling the simplicity of its principal theme, the structure of the last movement is filled with complexities. The tempo changes to Andante moderato for a triple-meter hymn declaring belief in a Heavenly Father abiding above the stars. The key is G major, with its B-natural and F♯, though once again B♭ and F make their appearance to address skepticism and urge belief. The conclusion of the hymn brings back the “Freude” theme in D major, now in a compound triple-meter dance rhythm, and the hymn itself proves to have been devised as a countersubject to the “Freude” theme so that rejoicing in brotherhood can be shown to be under the gaze of the Heavenly Father. The minor mode also reappears, but it is B minor, with its D major pitches of B-natural and F♯. After a last admonition to seek God, the “Freude” theme is recapitulated once again in D major in a fast tempo (with a brief adagio in E to feature the soloists) followed by a Prestissimo ending. The Prestissimo transforms the hymn, accompanied by motives from the “Freude” theme, into a rousing final cadence, complete with the piccolo, triangle, cymbals and bass drum from the Turkish March. Simplicity, clarity, symmetry and certainty, all represented by D major, are finally accorded their final glory after the long journey from the mystery and tension of primeval chaos at the beginning of this monumental symphony.

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iii Sanders discussed the structural importance of the Turkish March in “Form and Content.” See also Lawrence Kramer, “The Harem Threshold: Turkish Music and Greek Love in Beethoven’s ‘Ode to Joy’,” 19th-Century Music 22/1 (1998): 78-90.
iv Sanders, in “Form and Content,” noted the significance of the victory of B-natural over B♭ in the fugue, though he did not extend it to the symphony as a whole.