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BEETHOVEN'S NINTH SYMPHONY

Summary: This essay argues that the European Union's use of Beethoven's 9th Symphony as its anthem attempts to claim the ideas of freedom, peace and solidarity as particularly European. However, an historical investigation into the 9th reveals that it has been used to symbolically represent political causes across the political spectrum.

“In the universal language of music, this anthem [Ode to Joy] expresses the European ideals of freedom, peace and solidarity.”¹

With reference to the above quote, explain the significance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony in forming contemporary European political identity.

Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony has historically been used as a symbol for a variety of political purposes. In 1985 the leaders of the European Union (EU) adopted the Fourth Movement of the symphony as the official anthem of the EU.² In doing so, the EU has claimed “freedom, peace and solidarity” as “European ideals” and thus maintained a superiority of European political identity. Through a historical investigation of Beethoven’s life, his Ninth Symphony can be understood as the musical representation of European Enlightenment philosophy. As a monumental artistic achievement, the political significance of the work continues beyond Beethoven’s lifetime, and as such the Ninth can be understood as an historical artefact, whose meaning is shaped by contemporary forces acting on it. As a powerful contemporary force, in claiming the work as their anthem, the European Union uses Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony as a political tool to align itself with values that serve to maintain the liberal, capitalist political order. This historical investigation demonstrates how Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony represents an assorted range of political ideologies, of which the EU’s is only one.

Beethoven’s work was influenced by the unprecedented social and political turmoil of the European Enlightenment, where enquiry and innovation encompassed all fields of knowledge.³ In his progressive hometown of Bonn, he was exposed to a vehement cult of personal freedom and the importance of heroes at an impressionable age. Music historian Jan Swafford identifies how discussion of the then radical ideas occurred in public spaces like coffeehouses and wine bars and “Beethoven was absorbed into all that and he soaked it up like a sponge.”⁴ Alongside a questioning of fundamental beliefs, such as the relationship between church and state, the Age of Enlightenment also saw a

¹ European Union

² Having previously been adopted by the Council of Europe as its anthem in 1975.

³ Francois Mai, 2007, *Diagnosing Genius*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, pg. 4

⁴ Beethoven’s Life, Liberty And Pursuit of Enlightenment, <https://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2020/12/17/945428466/beethovens-life-liberty-and-pursuit-of-enlightenment>

dramatic development in music. Beethoven's compositional career began at the end of this period and was thus dramatically influenced by the celebrated composers, J.S Bach, Handel, Rameau, Haydn and Mozart.⁵ In this context, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony has been described as "the Marseillaise of humanity,"⁶ and is understood through themes of human unification. This is duplicated in the European Union's description of the Ninth as "of freedom, peace and solidarity." Holding a general high regard for German thinkers and writers, Beethoven expressed an affinity with Immanuel Kant. In his music, Beethoven addresses the same underlying issues found in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, an adherence to its philosophy of toleration and reconciliation.⁷ A parallel can be drawn between the two; where Kant conveys human understanding as the legislator of nature and thus synthesises empiricist idea of sensory experience and the facility of rationalism,^{8 9} likewise, the Ninth synthesises music and C F Von Schiller's poem, *Ode to Joy*, to act as a tribute to universal brotherhood in the final movement of the symphony.¹⁰ For Beethoven, it was beyond a choice of the values of varying media and musical composition but a conscious choice on maximising the expression of an ideal humanity.¹¹ At least according to Western thought, the study of history that aims for factual perfection must paradoxically coexist alongside bias; such is the limits of reason. Analogously, music's objective form and its composer's intention must lend itself to personal reception, and as in the integral character of music and history, an objective definition cannot be withdrawn from the Ninth Symphony. In investigating the way in which Beethoven viewed the world, through the political and literary milieu of his time, one may better understand the Ninth Symphony and thus the nature of art and history.

Beethoven's works have long sustained political significance within his lifetime and after it. For example, the initial dedication of his symphony '*Eroica*' was vouchsafed to Napoleon, although

⁵ Op cit. Mai, pg. 12

⁶ 'Ode to Joy,' Followed by Chaos and Despair, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/24/opinion/24zizek.html> (accessed 5th July 2021)

⁷ Op cit. Mai pg. 7

⁸ Kant: Philosophy of Mind, <https://iep.utm.edu/kantmind/> (accessed Ninth July 2021)

⁹ Great Thinkers: Immanuel Kant, <https://thegreatthinkers.org/kant/introduction/>

¹⁰ Op cit. Mai pg. 7

¹¹ Op cit. "Lass uns das Lied des Schiller": Musical and philosophical unities in Ludwig van Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

Beethoven had later retracted the honour.¹² In a different time, his Fifth Symphony was used as a symbol for Allied victory in the Second World War (its opening notes corresponded with the Morse code for 'V').¹³ The Ninth was composed at the height of the Restoration, a period that saw the birth of political musical compositions, and had crowned Beethoven's legacy after his death.¹⁴ In Beethoven's time, his stature as a metaphysical civil hero in addition to being one of the greatest composers, was founded by the establishment upon the Congress of Vienna; and to his admirers, within the knowledge that Beethoven had embodied national grandeur superior to those who wielded power in Metternich's repressive government following the premiere of his Ninth Symphony in Vienna (1824).¹⁵ To the latter, the glorification of the Ninth as a symbol of human freedom lied in the definitive absence of state.¹⁶ Consequently, his stature had solidified his position as sociological symbol in succeeding political recruitments. Bourgeois governments interpreted the biography and output of the deaf Beethoven "who had risen above his physical infirmity and overthrown the musical rules of the ancient regime"¹⁷ as a personification of individual will and aspiration to universal reconciliation, a figure who spoke to their ideals of struggle and progress. Musicologist and historian Esteban Buch argues that the "duality of public vocation and private communion... made Beethoven's entire oeuvre a political metaphor."¹⁸ As Beethoven had viewed the "relation of art to society" as critical to his creative process and the reception of his works, vast interpretational possibility was enabled,¹⁹ and its extensive interpretational possibility is argued to have contributed to its significance as a sociological subject itself. During the Great War, left-wing, right-wing and centrist factions portrayed German nationalism and unity from the Ninth in accordance to their propaganda: the Left-wing saw an empowerment of the working class through unity, centrists hoped to maintain their superiority over

¹² Beethoven's political resonance, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2019/08/beethoven-s-political-resonance>

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Esteban Buch, 2004, *Beethoven's Ninth; A Political History*, The University of Chicago Press, pg. 2

¹⁵ bid

¹⁶ Ibid, pg. 1

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Op cit. *The Third Reich vs. An die Freiheit*

the working class, and the Right-wing sought to squash revolutionary sentiments of the left through their ideas of 'Germanic' attributes that integrated Beethoven and his music.²⁰ The rise of the Nazis to power led Right-wing interpretations of the Ninth to gain in strength, resulting in the Ninth to be incorporated into the propaganda machine of Nazi Germany as a "symbol of submission to authority or of engulfment in mass."²¹ Another example demonstrating the conflicting uses of the Ninth is illustrated in China, where Beethoven's concept of joy through suffering was interpreted to resonate with the Marxist slogan of victory through struggle²² and contrarily, when used in pro-democracy resistance at Tiananmen Square it came to represent "an ambience of solidarity and hope."²³ ²⁴ Conflicting interpretations of Beethoven's final symphony had been achieved by redefining its core theme of 'unity' through the amplification of independent themes existing within the piece and wielding its cultural significance. Nationalism – considered in many ways an heir of the French Revolution – in nineteenth century Europe was one of the most powerful and successful political forces.²⁵ It existed as an ideology itself and provided a way of viewing the relations between individual to society, presenting as a cultural historical phenomenon imprinted on the arts and historical understanding.²⁶ Musicologist Nicholas Cook expresses that all interpretations diverged from the Ninth is founded on the premise of its enormous importance as a cultural symbol of world unity.²⁷ Likewise, the adoption of the Ninth Symphony by the EU as its national anthem in 1985²⁸ tames the revolutionary subtexts of the Ninth by writing the symphony according to a framework of

²⁰ John Lowe, 1994, *The Great Powers, Imperialism and the German Problem*, London Routledge, pg. 126

²¹ Maynard Solomon, 2003, *Late Beethoven*, University of California Press pg. 227

²² Op cit. *The cult of Beethoven*

²³ Tiananmen Square Massacre: How Beethoven Rallied the Students, <https://billmoyers.com/content/tiananmen-square-massacre-how-beethoven-rallied-the-students/> (accessed 17th July 2021)

²⁴ How Beethoven rallied students during the Tiananmen Square Uprising, <https://www.wqxr.org/story/how-beethoven-rallied-students-during-tiananmen-square-uprising/> (accessed 19th July 2021)

²⁵ Hannu Salmi, 2013, *Nineteenth Century Europe: a cultural history*, Polity Press, chapter 4

²⁶ Op cit. *Buch* pg. 1

²⁷ Nicholas Cook, 1993, *Beethoven: Symphony No.9*, Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, pg. 4 of Preface

²⁸ Op cit. *The cult of Beethoven*

national ideals, and in consequence cultural identity. It is precisely its ability to represent ideas across the political spectrum that defines the Ninth Symphony's significance.

The EU claim that the Ninth stands for the European ideas of "freedom, peace and solidarity," ignores varying arguments on the aesthetic purpose of art. These views range from an entirely empirical view to an aesthetic view recognising its social role, then to the Western completely apolitical view that denotes music entirely on its 'aesthetic' value. An example of how these views may be historically expressed can be seen in differing interpretations of the role of the Ninth Symphony at 1989 Berlin Reunification Concert. Musicologist Anne Schreffler identifies that in the Cold War art – music – was viewed as 'autonomous' in Western Germany, meanwhile East Germans considered it to be unavoidably influenced and reflective of current and desirable political realities. These ideologies contended for dominance much of the Cold War and the entirety of the divided Germany.²⁹ Organizers of the 1989 Berlin Reunification concert ensured that western universalism was the forefront in Leonard Bernstein's performance of the Ninth; the alteration of the word 'joy' to 'freedom' was an ultimate symbol of Beethoven's supposed universalism. However, musicologist Michela Dimond argues that the political subtext of the performance 'belies this apolitical façade,' and that the Reunification was every bit as a political symbol, depicting the West, through an American conductor, to free the true aesthetic of freedom within the political freedom granted by democracy.³⁰ Dimond argues that this message of universalism was defined and limited to a liberal and capitalist sphere, and the antithesis of the East German ideology, validating the Eastern understanding of music's ideological power. They argue furthermore that the meaning and response to music is intrinsic to the values of a provided time and place, and music 'will never and can never be anywhere near "an autonomous work."' The ability of the Ninth Symphony to further the hegemony of Western power, is clearly significant in the framework of its aesthetic interpretation. Philosopher Agnes Heller contends that the "European anthem" represents the "death of the Ninth Symphony." Through this,

²⁹ A Musical Arms Race: Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in East and West Germany and its 'Reunification' in the Ode to Freedom, file:///Users/michellelai/Downloads/ojsadmin/fulltext.pdf, accessed 1Ninth July 2021)

³⁰ Ibid

Buch questions the integration of music as part of a political plan as it links the Ninth with a form of “European identity.”³¹

Despite what the EU may claim, the symbolic meaning of Beethoven’s 9th Symphony is not clear. Having been historically used as a symbol for a variety of political purposes, the 9th Symphony is not just the musical representation of European Enlightenment philosophy. Varying political ideologies have competed to claim this monumental artistic achievement as representative of their own values. An historical investigation demonstrates the EU’s claim is not free of such political considerations, having been constructed by the West’s triumph in the Cold War. Ultimately, Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony represents an assorted range of political ideologies, of which the EU’s construction of European identity is only one.

³¹ Op cit. Buch pg. 4

Bibliography

[1] Esteban Buch, 2004, *Beethoven's Ninth; A Political History*, The University of Chicago Press, pg. 1, 2, 7, 12

This source provided extensive detail on Beethoven's biography in relation to the politics within his lifetime, exploring and establishing the relationship between the contextual political components of his lifetime with his musical career. It outlines the 'political career' of the Ninth Symphony and its relationship throughout history as a political piece. It, however, does not clearly outline the theme of significance as it is an objective statement of facts and analysis, and extraction of the related theme had to be carefully harvested. It was also difficult to understand. The source was largely unbiased and provided a clear outlook in the political context of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

[2] Enlightenment,
<https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199291205.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199291205-e-25> (accessed 27th June 2021)

[3] Francois Mai, 2007, *Diagnosing Genius*, McGill-Queen's University Press, pg. 4

[4] Kant: Philosophy of Mind, <https://iep.utm.edu/kantmind/> (accessed 9th July 2021)

[5] 'Ode to Joy,' Followed by Chaos and Despair,
<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/24/opinion/24zizek.html> (accessed 5th July 2021)

This source, stated to be an opinion article, gave insightful and objective analysis into the appropriation of the Ninth Symphony in various circumstances, clearly outlining its quality as a versatile literary symbol. It was biased in many aspects, but provided extensive context and identified itself as speculation. It provided a detached perspective on the significance of the Ninth Symphony itself, reserving its bias for the European adaptation of the symphony.

[6] The cult of Beethoven, <http://www.doctorsreview.com/history/cult-beethoven/> (accessed 5th July 2021)

This source acted as a foundational preface in understanding the political components of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony by clearly synthesizing its historical appropriations of political ideology. It attempted to be largely unbiased - however, this caused an absence of detail for various momentous events, such as the Berlin Reunification concert. It had skimmed over the controversy and therefore, perhaps unintentionally, supported the Western apolitical representation of the Ninth Symphony it was criticized for. Ultimately, it was an informal article addressing objectively the formalities of the Ninth Symphony's politics, rendering it limiting and only to be extracted for its factual knowledge rather than its analysis. It was particularly insightful only within the initial construction of this essay.

[7] Tiananmen Square Massacre: How Beethoven Rallied the Students,
<https://billmoyers.com/content/tiananmen-square-massacre-how-beethoven-rallied-the-students/> (accessed 17th July 2021)

[8] How Beethoven rallied students during the Tiananmen Square Uprising,
<https://www.wqxr.org/story/how-beethoven-rallied-students-during-tiananmen-square-uprising/> (accessed 19th July 2021)

[9] Nicholas Cook, 1993, *Beethoven: Symphony no.9*, Press syndicate of the University of Cambridge, pg. 4 of Preface

[10] *Beethoven's Ninth Symphony: Analytical Viewpoints*,
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03796487108566316?journalCode=rmuz19>
(accessed 19th July 2021)

[11] "Lass uns das Lied des Schiller": Musical and philosophical unities in Ludwig van Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

<https://www.proquest.com/openview/61af2f23b0720ec40940355ef4805b61/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y> (accessed 19th July 2021)

This source provided the musical and philosophical context of the Ninth Symphony, enabling one to think deeper about the literary significance of the symphony. It did not link to the theme, however, and had to be supplemented by many other pieces of evidence to reach decisive conclusions about the political significance of the Ninth Symphony. It also provided insightful philosophy upon music as an expression itself, and elaborated upon the Ninth Symphony in affinity to broader nuanced concepts.

[12] *A Musical Arms Race: Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in East and West Germany and its 'Reunification' in the Ode to Freedom*, file:///Users/michellelai/Downloads/ojasadmin,full text.pdf, accessed 19th July 2021)

This source elaborated in detail of the ideological arms race of the Cold War, and the role the Ninth Symphony played in it. It initially began with an objective analysis of the ideological arms race, then gradually concluded upon a personal view that music was inherently connected to politics. It provided a background upon the Cold War that made clear links to the significance of the Ninth, and aided in the development of my arguments significantly by proposing a validation between their relationship. However, it became increasingly biased throughout the paper, blurring the lines between fact and analysis, and had to be deconstructed and synthesised repeatedly. Overall, it provided a critical perspective on Western philosophies and was useful in understanding various aspects of the Berlin Reunification concert controversy.

[13] *The Third Reich vs. An die Freiheit*,

[https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/15128895/N_Brown_The_Third_Reich_vs._An_die_Freiheit.pdf?1338128401=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DThe_Third_Reich_vs_An_die_Freiheit_Oppos.pdf&Expires=1626835114&Signature=IQx61gi~2iG9LLk9SAQqN7KBIfTgKDU0gytsXp3B-sO1uR7xudcKDCGnkJf~8RA15iFRUHzvaFoMLPJ6~vZvYDq7e9uc2hvwtgk3QtHPk71jyKTJC3uEfYtF0-ajLv5YyMUJs5szlOD9RgaOdVXVwvYgOwsBmSDYH9IveoZtli-V2w2FQh-c2mMy-m21cFE-XUId1m9tmwIK9CTeoG7aq\\$WyK4UOqdQfyeoiuehpdFtqOk7QMTPA0nvBsCJ0COLa3PIgcuW7GlmG3xBXLTf0dIMvlcxh2WMCyNZrL8Sltx47HvPJXkp~F~NIUvmHllH29ce-0Nlp1ErpLazKawA__&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA](https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/15128895/N_Brown_The_Third_Reich_vs._An_die_Freiheit.pdf?1338128401=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DThe_Third_Reich_vs_An_die_Freiheit_Oppos.pdf&Expires=1626835114&Signature=IQx61gi~2iG9LLk9SAQqN7KBIfTgKDU0gytsXp3B-sO1uR7xudcKDCGnkJf~8RA15iFRUHzvaFoMLPJ6~vZvYDq7e9uc2hvwtgk3QtHPk71jyKTJC3uEfYtF0-ajLv5YyMUJs5szlOD9RgaOdVXVwvYgOwsBmSDYH9IveoZtli-V2w2FQh-c2mMy-m21cFE-XUId1m9tmwIK9CTeoG7aq$WyK4UOqdQfyeoiuehpdFtqOk7QMTPA0nvBsCJ0COLa3PIgcuW7GlmG3xBXLTf0dIMvlcxh2WMCyNZrL8Sltx47HvPJXkp~F~NIUvmHllH29ce-0Nlp1ErpLazKawA__&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA) (accessed 21st July 2021)

[14] Maynard Solomon, 2003, *Late Beethoven*, University of California Press pg. 227

[15] John Lowe, 1994, *The Great Powers, Imperialism and the German Problem*, London Routledge, pg. 126