

Album review

Ludwig van Beethoven

★★★★★

Symphony No. 9

Nicholas McGegan conducting the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra (Magnatune)



PHOTOGRAPH: GUY LAWRENCE PERFORM

Leave it to a period-instrument group—traditionally the kind of ensemble that is happiest in a dusty manuscript

library somewhere—to get serious about distributing music online. Once a staple of record-store shelves, San Francisco's Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra now issues its recordings through Magnatune, a relatively new,

unconventional online store that offers albums either as pay-what-you-will downloads (the suggested fee is \$8) or as jewel-cased CDs (\$13 per disc). Recordings are available in all the major formats (MP3, WAV, etc.), which makes it possible to choose a larger file size for better sound quality. Adding a new wrinkle to this approach, the PBO is selling its latest recording of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 exclusively via iTunes for an initial two-month period.

The performance, recorded live in April 2006, crackles with dramatic intensity and power. Nicholas McGegan pushes his ensemble at a vigorous pace in the first two movements, clipping

chords at the ends of phrases to accent the urgency, and making the strings play with razor-sharp articulation. The third movement, which can sound ponderous in the wrong hands, is light and transparent. What's most distinctive about the finale is not the big choral moments but rather Beethoven's rude, sometimes funny outbursts—the raspy opening brass dissonance, some burping bassoon figures and the stinging first "Freude" pronouncement of the chorus. Given all this attention to sonic clarity, this may be an ideal Ninth for the new generation of earbud-wearing iPod users.—*Brian Wise*