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Beethoven: Symphony No. 9, Opferlied, Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra



A Period-Instrument Ninth

By [Michelle Dulak Thomson](#)

A decade or so back, there was some talk of a planned, independent-label Beethoven symphony cycle from Nicholas McGegan and the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, all the recording to be done in concert. Since then, PBO has taken to issuing live recordings on its own label, and the Beethoven project appears to be taking slow shape. A disc coupling the “Eroica” and the Eighth Symphony appeared in 2005, and last year was joined by this Ninth.

This, the first Bay Area period-instrument Beethoven Ninth to hit the market, was not actually the first recorded. That distinction goes to Jeffrey Thomas' exceptionally well-played and -engineered [recording](#) with the American Bach Soloists and a couple of assisting choirs. The ABS Ninth was recorded in conjunction with the ensemble's performance at the inaugural Berkeley Early Music Festival in 1994, but it was issued on disc only late last year, by which time this PBO performance had already been on sale for several months.

PBO's recording derives from the Berkeley performances in April 2006 (see [SFCV's review](#) of the San Francisco performance from the same set). The performance finds the orchestra and McGegan operating in characteristic synergy. I don't think anyone, asked to match a Beethoven symphony with McGegan, would think first of the Ninth — the friskier even-numbered symphonies, especially the Second and the Eighth, offer more scope for McGegan's effervescent sense of gesture — but in the event, he neither miniaturizes the work nor smoothes it over.

Indeed, if you want to hear what period instruments, and an ear honed for the most part on earlier music, can do *for* the Ninth rather than *to* it, start here. The places where you are most likely to be struck by the “periodness” of the sound are also those where it works unusually well.

Solos Shining With Style

The timpani pack a ferocious punch, while the winds, especially the oboes, have a plangent keenness to them, the brass a raspy edge. Where instrumental solos occur, they have tremendous panache. This orchestra's winds shine top to bottom: Two of the high points of the finale ([listen online](#)) are the marvelously limber and accurate piccolo playing and the magnificently flatulent contrabassoon note that launches the solo tenor's march. (The famous C-flat-major scale for the fourth horn in the slow movement is, needless to say, immaculate. [Listen online.](#))

The strings, meanwhile, tend to sound outgunned, though valiant. This is not necessarily a bad thing. The dominance of the winds, together with the quickish tempo — those familiar with period Ninths will know what to expect, but others may be startled — turns the variations of the slow movement almost completely inside out from the standpoint of “modern” practice. The fluid wind chorale becomes the

heart of the second variation, and the ornate violin line that we are accustomed to hearing in the foreground winds itself decoratively around it.

The first movement is a shade disappointing in its straightforwardness ([listen online](#)). I would have expected McGegan to inflect the long development more demonstratively than he does. But the Scherzo is terrifically incisive and nimble ([listen online](#)), and the slow movement preserves a rare feeling of spaciousness even while shaving a few minutes off the timing of a typical “modern” performance.

As for the finale, McGegan has at hand the forces for a grand romp, and that’s what we get. The three combined choirs sound big but also disciplined — rhythmically alert, focused, accurate, and reasonably crisp with the words. And the solo quartet is quite fine: well-matched and well-balanced, impressive while singing individually and as an ensemble. Kudos especially to Lynne Dawson for not allowing her cadenza to drown in its own vibrato. Hers is a substantial voice, but there is, thank heavens, a focused core to it.

As you’d expect from a concert recording, there are some flubs here and there, not only in the finale’s whirlwind of jubilation but in the earlier movements, as well. Only a few of these are likely to become annoying on repeated listening. McGegan’s tempo for the Scherzo’s trio is a touch slower than the one he reaches in the accelerando at the end of the Scherzo proper, and it takes the winds a couple of seconds to agree on the new speed. And I wish that the first violinists had come to some sort of understanding on the distance between F-natural and C-sharp in the slow movement’s first and second variations — the rest of the line is so supple and suave that that one dubious interval grates.

As an appetizer (and a proper solo opportunity for Mary Phillips, who had the smallest solo assignment in the symphony), the recording also includes the Op. 121b *Opferlied*, a hymnlike work for mezzo-soprano with chorus and orchestra written two years before the Ninth ([listen online](#)). The piece gets off to an unfortunate start, with mistuned woodwind octaves and a little wobbliness from the soloist, but later on the performance achieves a fine, uncomplicated serenity.

If you’re interested in the Ninth Symphony, in the state of period-instrument playing in the Bay Area, or in both, you ought to hear this.

Michelle Dulak Thomson is a violinist and violist who has written about music for *Strings*, *Stagebill*, *Early Music America*, and *The New York Times*.

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