JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Nänie, Op.82
for choir and orchestra

Brahms composed Nänie following the premature death of his friend, the neoclassical painter Anselm Feuerbach (1829-1880); Nänie is the German form of a Latin word, naenia, meaning ‘funeral song’. Brahms set about writing the work in 1880, not long after Feuerbach’s death, completing the piece in 1881 and dedicating it to Henriette Feuerbach, the artist’s stepmother.

Feuerbach’s paintings included references to Greek mythology, so for his text Brahms looked to another neoclassical artist, the poet Friedrich Schiller, whose words had famously been set in the Symphony No.9 by Brahms’s hero, Beethoven.

Schiller’s elegiac poem inspired in Brahms a remarkably varied work, exploring the themes of human destiny and the transience of beauty. It is beauty’s fragility, rather than a specific person, that Schiller mourns in this poem, in which he draws upon numerous Classical myths – although not always explicitly, assuming a certain level of prior knowledge on the part of the reader or listener. The first section refers obliquely to Orpheus and Eurydice, whose love was thwarted by Zeus; the second describes more specifically Aphrodite mourning her lover, Adonis, before there is another veiled reference, this time to Thetis, who was unable to save her son, Achilles. Schiller’s tone throughout is essentially muted, but Brahms’s response is wide-ranging, with an array of choral textures and tonal shifts, including an airy orchestral introduction and rich fugal passages for the choir at the beginning and end of the piece.

It was in 1881, the year in which he finished Nänie, that Brahms developed a close relationship with the court orchestra at Meiningen, a highly skilled ensemble of nearly 50 musicians, directed by the great...
conductor Hans von Bülow (a figure who was pivotal in the lives and careers of both Brahms and Wagner), composer-conductor Richard Strauss, and conductor Fritz Steinbach. The orchestra performed much of Brahms’s music, allowing the composer to hear Nänie for the first time.

Joanna Wyld © 2020

**RICHARD WAGNER (1813-1883)**

**Parsifal: Act One Prelude**

*Parsifal* was Wagner's final complete operatic work, although he conceived the idea 25 years earlier in 1857, not long after making sketches for an opera, *Die Sieger*, a work he never completed but which anticipated *Parsifal*'s themes of passion, purity and redemption. Wagner thought of his operatic works as thoroughly integrated artistic visions called ‘music dramas’, but in the case of *Parsifal* he used an even more elaborate category: *Ein Bühnenweihfestspiel* or ‘A Festival Play for the Consecration of the Stage’. *Parsifal* was written for the stage at Wagner’s opera house at Bayreuth, the Bayreuth Festspielhaus or Festival Theatre, where it was first performed at the second Bayreuth Festival in 1882.

Wagner regularly looked to historical and mythological sources for inspiration; his *Ring Cycle* was based on Norse mythology, and *Parsifal* was inspired by *Parzival*, a medieval epic poem by Wolfram von Eschenbach charting the quest of the Arthurian knight, Parzival (Percival), as he seeks the Holy Grail. Wagner first read the poem in 1845, but its significance came to him again over a decade later, as he described in rather a romanticised account in his autobiography: “… its noble possibilities struck me with overwhelming force... I rapidly conceived a whole drama, of which I made a rough sketch with a few dashes of the pen, dividing the whole into three acts.” *Parsifal* was eventually finished in 1882. The Act One Prelude sets the scene: a forest near the home of the Grail and its Knights, evoked by Wagner through his characteristically long-breathed melodic lines, rich harmonies and expansive, exquisitely-wrought orchestral sonorities.

Joanna Wyld © 2020

**LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)**

**Symphony No.9 in D minor ‘Choral’, Op.125**

*Allegro ma non troppo, un poco maestoso / fast, but not too fast, a little majestic*

*Scherzo: molto vivace – presto / Scherzo: very lively – very fast*

*Adagio molto e cantabile / Very slow, in a singing style*

*Presto – allegro assai / Very fast – quite fast*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) became friends with Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) in 1794. By this time Goethe was director of the theatre at Weimar, where he regularly staged Schiller’s plays. Schiller’s poem *An die Freude* – ‘To Joy’ – struck Beethoven as a young man, and he made plans to set it to music when he was just 22. A professor at Bonn named Fischenich wrote of Beethoven’s intention in a letter of January 1793, addressed to Schiller’s wife: “He proposes to compose Schiller's *Freude*, strophe by strophe.”

The commission for the ninth symphony came much later, from the Philharmonic Society of London in 1817. Beethoven began work in the following year, although some elements have been traced to earlier sketches, and even to works pre-dating the commission. Beethoven finally completed the symphony early in 1824, just three years before his death.

**First movement**

The symphony opens with one of the most extraordinary – and much imitated – orchestral sonorities ever written. Whereas much of Beethoven’s music has a very definite quality to it, here the music creeps in almost without declaring its presence. Sounds emerge apparently from nowhere, growing out of infinite space, as though we are eavesdropping on the cosmos. Then, emboldened, they grow into a statement of powerful dramatic force. The tone ebbs and flows between serene, pastoral writing and darker, knotty dialogue. Moments of high drama are accentuated by timpani rolls, and, as with so much of Beethoven’s music, there is a palpable tussle between light and darkness, a tussle which will pervade the whole symphony.

**Second movement**
In contrast with the opening of the first movement, the Scherzo begins without ambiguity. Beethoven uses a concise statement which at once recalls material from the first movement. This quick-fire movement unfolds with a strong sense of forward momentum, with light, rapid exchanges and fugal writing. The gentler Trio hints at motifs which will be more fully developed in the finale. Beethoven’s ability to use relatively simple ingredients with great inventiveness was described in the 1827 biography of the composer by Johann Aloys Schlosser:

“He may proceed from an ordinary, even insignificant theme, and explore, spin out, or develop all its inherent possibilities... In this we can compare Beethoven to Goethe. Like that great man, he sometimes begins with an unpromising subject, but its treatment, down to the smallest detail, reveals a truly original spirit.”

**Third movement**

The beautiful Adagio is one of Beethoven’s most exquisite slow movements; and, as with the entire symphony, is conceived on a more ambitious scale than in many of his previous works. Using an expansive variation form, Beethoven’s music glides between different meters. The theme and first variation are in 4/4; the second variation in 12/8; and the episodes in between are in 3/4 time. Yet the ear barely registers these shifts, so seamlessly does Beethoven slip between each section. This undulating serenity is punctuated by bold proclamations later in the movement; again, Beethoven is anticipating later events, and reminding us, too, of the tumult which has gone before. Yet it is serenity which ultimately holds sway, in music so peaceful it is almost other-worldly.

**Fourth movement**

The choral finale has been described as a symphony-within-a-symphony. On an unprecedented scale, Beethoven unleashes a movement of grand proportions and sweeping emotional range. In addition to Beethoven’s overpowering musical invention, the widespread appeal of this movement stems from the universal nature of his chosen text. Schiller’s poem combines both religious and humanist themes, revelling in earthly pleasures as well as striving towards God. Whatever one’s beliefs, there is something here which will strike a chord, whether it is Schiller’s humanist desire that ‘All men become brothers’, or his spectacular depiction of divine love:

*Can you sense your maker, world?
Seek him above the stars.
He must live above the stars.
I embrace you, you millions.*

A tempestuous flurry of notes opens the finale, after which all three of the previous movements are quoted in order, each time answered by brusque recitative-like writing for cellos and basses. It is the cellos and basses which also establish the famous main theme, which is then varied. When the opening material returns, the baritone solo performs the lines of recitative initially introduced by the cellos and basses; similarly, the choir then takes up the theme and variations first heard in the orchestra.

A climactic point is reached at the words vor Gott – ‘before God’ – a moment of electrifying intensity which would find its late-Romantic equivalent in the ecstatic zu Gott – ‘to God’ – of Mahler’s Second Symphony. There follows a section in 6/8 time, featuring prominent percussion and piccolo, in an idiom reminiscent of the marching ‘Turkish style’ which Mozart had famously adopted in his *Rondo alla Turca* and in his opera *Die entführung aus dem Serail*, and which Beethoven himself had occasionally used.

This is followed by a dramatic fugal section for the orchestra, and a fulsome choral rendition of the main theme, before a more pared-down texture and slower tempo usher in Schiller’s declaration: ‘I embrace you, you millions!’ This is, perhaps, the most profound section of the whole work, conveying a real sense of philosophical searching, combined with pure wonder. It is one of the most sublime of all Beethoven’s achievements.

The main theme is then varied using intricate textures for both chorus and orchestra, momentum building towards the scintillating final sections of the work, when the soloists take centre stage. Even amid such joyful outbursts, Beethoven includes more contemplative moments at a slower pace, as though tempering the bacchanalian aspects of Schiller’s celebration with more meditative reflections on the divine. Ultimately, profundity and unfettered joy combine in the thrilling final bars.

As Edward Said puts it in the book *Parallels and Paradoxes*: 

---

*In contrast with the opening of the first movement, the Scherzo begins without ambiguity. Beethoven uses a concise statement which at once recalls material from the first movement. This quick-fire movement unfolds with a strong sense of forward momentum, with light, rapid exchanges and fugal writing. The gentle Trio hints at motifs which will be more fully developed in the finale. Beethoven’s ability to use relatively simple ingredients with great inventiveness was described in the 1827 biography of the composer by Johann Aloys Schlosser:*

“He may proceed from an ordinary, even insignificant theme, and explore, spin out, or develop all its inherent possibilities... In this we can compare Beethoven to Goethe. Like that great man, he sometimes begins with an unpromising subject, but its treatment, down to the smallest detail, reveals a truly original spirit.”

**Third movement**

The beautiful Adagio is one of Beethoven’s most exquisite slow movements; and, as with the entire symphony, is conceived on a more ambitious scale than in many of his previous works. Using an expansive variation form, Beethoven’s music glides between different meters. The theme and first variation are in 4/4; the second variation in 12/8; and the episodes in between are in 3/4 time. Yet the ear barely registers these shifts, so seamlessly does Beethoven slip between each section. This undulating serenity is punctuated by bold proclamations later in the movement; again, Beethoven is anticipating later events, and reminding us, too, of the tumult which has gone before. Yet it is serenity which ultimately holds sway, in music so peaceful it is almost other-worldly.

**Fourth movement**

The choral finale has been described as a symphony-within-a-symphony. On an unprecedented scale, Beethoven unleashes a movement of grand proportions and sweeping emotional range. In addition to Beethoven’s overpowering musical invention, the widespread appeal of this movement stems from the universal nature of his chosen text. Schiller’s poem combines both religious and humanist themes, revelling in earthly pleasures as well as striving towards God. Whatever one’s beliefs, there is something here which will strike a chord, whether it is Schiller’s humanist desire that ‘All men become brothers’, or his spectacular depiction of divine love:

*Can you sense your maker, world?
Seek him above the stars.
He must live above the stars.
I embrace you, you millions.*

A tempestuous flurry of notes opens the finale, after which all three of the previous movements are quoted in order, each time answered by brusque recitative-like writing for cellos and basses. It is the cellos and basses which also establish the famous main theme, which is then varied. When the opening material returns, the baritone solo performs the lines of recitative initially introduced by the cellos and basses; similarly, the choir then takes up the theme and variations first heard in the orchestra.

A climactic point is reached at the words vor Gott – ‘before God’ – a moment of electrifying intensity which would find its late-Romantic equivalent in the ecstatic zu Gott – ‘to God’ – of Mahler’s Second Symphony. There follows a section in 6/8 time, featuring prominent percussion and piccolo, in an idiom reminiscent of the marching ‘Turkish style’ which Mozart had famously adopted in his *Rondo alla Turca* and in his opera *Die entführung aus dem Serail*, and which Beethoven himself had occasionally used.

This is followed by a dramatic fugal section for the orchestra, and a fulsome choral rendition of the main theme, before a more pared-down texture and slower tempo usher in Schiller’s declaration: ‘I embrace you, you millions!’ This is, perhaps, the most profound section of the whole work, conveying a real sense of philosophical searching, combined with pure wonder. It is one of the most sublime of all Beethoven’s achievements.

The main theme is then varied using intricate textures for both chorus and orchestra, momentum building towards the scintillating final sections of the work, when the soloists take centre stage. Even amid such joyful outbursts, Beethoven includes more contemplative moments at a slower pace, as though tempering the bacchanalian aspects of Schiller’s celebration with more meditative reflections on the divine. Ultimately, profundity and unfettered joy combine in the thrilling final bars.

As Edward Said puts it in the book *Parallels and Paradoxes*: 

---
“With Beethoven, the feeling is that of trying to piece together a philosophy from fragments that exist around him. He was very influenced by Goethe, obviously, Schiller means a lot to him; and he was preparing his own music for that. But you have a sense that Beethoven is sustained by an abiding, rational faith. I think, obviously that’s why people keep coming back to him: [his] faith in humanity.”

Beethoven conducted the premiere of his Ninth Symphony at the Kärntnertortheater in Vienna on 7 May 1824. It has been reported that at the end of the symphony – some accounts say at the end of the Scherzo – Beethoven stood in front of his score, leafing through it, unaware of the thunderous applause from the audience behind him. It was not until the contralto Caroline Unger tugged his sleeve, and pointed to the audience, that Beethoven turned around. He saw, at last, the rapturous reception, and bowed. The audience had recognised a quality articulated by the professor at Bonn so many years earlier, in 1793, when he had written about Beethoven to Schiller’s wife: “I expect something perfect, since he is wholly devoted to the great and the sublime”.

Joanna Wyld © 2020