

TAMPA BAY TIMES MASTERWORKS

# Beethoven's Symphony No. 9

WITH THE MASTER CHORALE OF TAMPA BAY

Jan 28 - 30, 2022

**Jake Runestad (1986- )**  
**A Silence Haunts Me**

In 1802, Ludwig van Beethoven sat down to write a letter to his brothers, Johann and Caspar. The world he loved was fading, and he struggled with thoughts of suicide.

“How can I possibly admit an infirmity in the one sense which ought to be more perfect in me than in others, a sense which I once possessed in the highest perfection?”

These words reveal Beethoven's distress over his growing deafness. In the next two decades he would compose some of the greatest masterpieces in Western music, but working in silence, his life “hopelessly afflicted.” Though possessed with a determined and fiery temperament, Beethoven found it impossible to say to people, “Speak louder, shout, for I am deaf.”

Known as the Heiligenstadt Testament, after the German town where it was written, the letter is a searing document of an artist struggling with hope. Beethoven's dilemma makes his biographies all the more intriguing, and inspired one Minneapolis-based composer, Jake Runestad, to write a choral piece about it. The Florida Orchestra and The Master Chorale of Tampa Bay offer the work as a prelude to Beethoven's crowning achievement, the *Ninth Symphony*, in concerts Jan. 28-30.

“*A Silence Haunts Me* is a dramatic choral monologue based on that letter,” says Brett Karlin, artistic director of the choir. “It quotes from Beethoven symphonies, and toward the end the musicians play but without making any sound, so it reflects Beethoven's loss of hearing. It's unbelievable.”

Runestad came across a facsimile of the letter during a 2017 trip to Vienna, where he toured the Haus der Musik Museum. Deeply impressed, he viewed it as confession, medical analysis, prayer of hope, last will and testament, and suicide note.

Then in 2019, the American Choral Directors Association offered him a commission, and he began working on a piece about Beethoven's declaration. During his research, he ran across the *Creatures of Prometheus* overture, and felt a connection.

“Just as Prometheus gifted humankind with fire and was punished for eternity, so did Beethoven gift the fire of his music while fighting deafness and an impending silence,” Runestad notes on his website. “What an absolutely devastating yet inspiring account of the power of the human spirit.”

The length of Beethoven's letter made it difficult to set to music verbatim, so Runestad turned to Todd Boss, a librettist and poet also from Minneapolis, who had written his own tribute to the composer. Runestad created a musical monologue, with the choir singing Beethoven's “voice” against excerpts of the *Moonlight Sonata*, the *Funeral March* from the *Eroica Symphony*, and the *Ode to Joy* theme of the *Ninth*.

The result is a stark but elegant portrayal of Beethoven's journey. The music makes its impact near the end, when the conductor continues to direct a choir that no longer sings, but has fallen silent.

**Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**  
**Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, Op. 125, Choral**

Duration: ca. 65 minutes

What new can be said about Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* that hasn't been said a thousand times in the past two centuries? No single piece of music roared so loudly at its birth or influenced so many for so long, just as it continues to resound in concert halls to this day.

The literature on this symphony is exhaustive, as are recordings, cultural references and opinions. For good reason. The *Ninth*, arguably, is the defining moment in Western music, a timeless expression that pushed the orchestra to its limits and introduced the voice as a conduit to the infinite. Its expression of universal friendship echoes today, perhaps more than ever.

"It's such a huge and important piece, and there's always a sense of wanting to go deeper into the music," says TFO Music Director Michael Francis. "It's the Sistine Chapel of music, and it's hugely important today because people instinctively understand it."

For a century after its premiere in 1824, the symphony held an almost-mythical grip on other composers, not only for its size and ominous key but because of the number itself. Schubert, Bruckner, Dvorak, Mahler and Vaughan Williams all completed nine symphonies and may have sensed an omen. None got to number 10.

"The *Ninth Symphony* came down like an avalanche," writes Lewis Lockwood in his book *Beethoven: The Music and the Life*. "No symphonist after Beethoven could avoid its impact, and many who were not symphonic composers were spellbound by it."

Cast in four divergent movements, the work is known to millions through the concluding *Ode to Joy* hymn of praise. Here – and for the first time in a symphony – Beethoven introduces the human voice. Having exhausted what he considered to be the instrumental potential of the genre, he turned to choir and soloists to express his most profound utterance as a symphonic composer. Much of what he had left to say found its way into the late string quartets.

The score wasn't created in situ. It was loosely based on the *Choral Fantasy*, Op. 80, for piano, chorus and orchestra, from more than a decade earlier. Beethoven forged the finale of his last symphony from "the style of my fantasia but on a far grander scale, with vocal solos and choruses based on the words of Friedrich Schiller's immortal song *An die Freude*."

But the *Ninth* is Beethoven's most futuristic canvas, its roiling D-minor introduction alone bordering on a form of abstract expressionism. Like the opening "chaos" of Haydn's oratorio *The Creation*, the music appears from a primordial mist, as emerging life, and soon becomes a turbulent and forbidding funeral march with an elusive tonal center. Descriptions of "cataclysmic" stick to this movement like glue.

The scherzo – which normally sits in the third slot of a conventional symphony – leverages its rhythmic might as kettledrums announce the strings in down-leaping octaves and agitated counterpoint, all running *moto perpetuo* from start to finish. Then, we come to the symphony’s core, a sublime adagio, an oasis of calm that removes listeners from what just passed – and what is about to happen.

“Surely in music there has never been a more beautiful, a more profound evocation of tranquility, of freshness and perfection of gesture and pace,” writes Jan Swafford, author of *Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph*. “What follows is a rending scream.”

The shattering opening of the finale, which ushers in the famed *Ode to Joy* hymn, mirrors the unsettled dissonance of the first movement but with a fusillade of sopranos, altos, tenors and basses. Now, we realize that Beethoven has given us three incomparable essays with one purpose: to support a gigantic vocal coda, operatic in dimension and so demanding as to test the limits of any choir.

But for all its strenuous and dark passages, the music turns poetic as Beethoven brings to life Schiller’s words, “O friends, no more these sounds! Let us sing more cheerful songs, more full of joy!” In an affirmation of universal brotherhood and freedom, the choir unites us, singing “You millions, I embrace you.”

Beethoven never heard a note of this music. By then stone deaf, he composed the *Ninth* over six years in silence, his health declining from diseases of the liver and bowel. Following the symphony’s premiere in Vienna in 1824, the audience erupted in tremendous applause, and Beethoven – standing on stage – couldn’t hear a sound.

Only after a musician turned him around to face a cheering crowd did the composer realize what mattered most: He was never beyond the world that he so sublimely altered.

Listeners of this music, and all that Beethoven composed, might wonder what makes him so mesmerizing, so impactful, and so timeless. The early 19th-century writer E.T.A. Hoffman may have said it best when he described Beethoven’s music as a storm that “sets in motion the mechanism of fear, of awe, of horror, of suffering, and wakens just that *infinite longing* which is the essence of Romanticism.”

*Program notes by Kurt Loft, a St. Petersburg-based writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.*