

A Beethoven Lullaby

Air on Ode to Joy

By Brian Balmages

For String Orchestra • FJH Music Company • Grade 1

ANALYSIS

Broad Description Setting for string orchestra of Beethoven's famous melody

Background Information

One of the most exciting events of the late 20th century was the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. The 87-mile long wall, for thirty years a symbol of oppression and the Cold War, was no more. Just a few weeks later, on December 31, 1989, musicians from East and West Germany, as well as France, the UK, the Soviet Union, and the United States (both the victors and vanquished in World War II) came together under the baton of Leonard Bernstein to perform that musical symbol of freedom and brotherhood, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. In a grand celebratory concert—still available in recordings—the choir sang “Freiheit” [freedom] as a substitute for Schiller's original “Freude” [joy].

The first performance of the Ninth Symphony, 165 years earlier, in Vienna 1824, had also been a grand event, and one of the high points of Beethoven's life. Beethoven, by now totally deaf, was not able to conduct, but sat near the orchestra, turning the pages of his score and beating out tempos. The orchestra had been instructed by the conductor, Michael Umlauf, to ignore Beethoven's gestures. This was Beethoven's first appearance onstage in twelve years. The theatre was packed.

There are many famous anecdotes about this momentous evening. One of the most touching is the story of the audience applauding wildly at the end of the Scherzo, while Beethoven, who had lost track and was still beating time to himself, did not notice. The alto soloist, Caroline Unger, walked over and gently turned Beethoven around to see the audience cheering, applauding, and throwing hats and handkerchiefs in the air, so as to be visible to the deaf composer. According to one audience member, “the public received the musical hero with the utmost respect and sympathy, listened to his wonderful, gigantic creations with the most absorbed attention and broke out in jubilant applause, often during sections, and repeatedly at the end of them.” It was one of the greatest success of his entire career; Beethoven left the theatre deeply moved.

Many books have been written about this justly famous piece exploring its meaning, its revolutionary approach to combining symphonic form with singing, its text by Schiller, and its almost constant appropriation and re-appropriation for political regimes of all types, most infamously by the Nazis. Scholars, conductors, performers, and listeners have been posing new and conflicting theories about this piece for 192 years.

It has been remarked that the Ninth Symphony is really at least two different pieces today: on the one hand, an enormous symphony of four movements with a grand finale for choir and four soloists, and on the other hand, the famous “Ode to Joy” melody beloved by many who know almost nothing about the work as a whole.

It is this “second” Ninth Symphony that seems to be known by the youngest of schoolchildren who never tire of plunking out its winsome, singable melody. This would surely please Beethoven—with the singing of his melody of joy and brotherhood by hundreds of children.

Elements of Music

Melody

- Beethoven's melody has a folk-like quality, a simplicity and innate singability. It's also easy to remember. This is mostly because it is almost entirely stepwise motion. The range is SOL to SOL—also a characteristic of many folk melodies. The final pitch of each phrase either closes the phrase or presses it forward. There are four phrases in an AABA structure. Each 4-bar phrase is in 2 small segments, the second of which tends to echo the first in motivic structure and shape. The B phrase is also stepwise motion but built of three repetitions of another short motif, which cadences on low SOL. The return of the A melody at the end gives a noble symmetry to the melody.

- Balmages: The arranger (hereafter “BB”) adapts the melody slightly, but retains the key of D major and “irons out” some of its drama, especially the leap to low SOL at the end of the B phrase. The final phrase is altered most, as if it has been transformed into something new, rather than merely a repetition/closure, as Beethoven wrote it. The melody as BB reconceives it also often does not complete its full downward descent; this sense of incompleteness tips a very *sturdy* melody into something more vague or “dreamy”. An interesting detail: the final melody note (highest sounding) is not DO but MI, the most prominent note of the melody overall.

Rhythm

- Again, since the melody was clearly intended to imitate a folk song, the rhythm is simple and straightforward—almost completely quarter notes, except at the end of the phrases. The phrase ends are mostly dotted rhythms, which have the effect of “slowing” the momentum at the end of the phrase. The 3rd phrase (B) has a sharp syncopation on the drop to low SOL and leap back up to a melody note which interrupts the expected flow. A momentary burst of ecstasy and energy that lands on a “long downbeat” (early) as a result of the quick circle of 5ths propulsion in that moment.
- The arranger irons out all dotted rhythms in the melody, in keeping with the dreamy, sleepy affect of the piece. Accompaniment notes are long values, for a slow rhythmic feel. Other interesting changes include a downbeat rest in mm. 21, 23, and 25; just at the place in the piece where more motion is required (to lift the sagging energy). This has the effect of a melodic surge upward, bouncing off a downbeat. The B phrase gets a special rhythmic treatment as well—the melody is augmented (twice as slow), which not only adds tension to the (already) anxious 3rd phrase, but sets up the final phrase to reclaim the old tempo when it enters, adding a bit of “heroic” momentum.

Harmony

- In Beethoven’s original, the constantly shifting harmonies are a feature of counterpoint in the orchestra. The folk-like tune is still, however, harmonized mostly rather simply, with just a few chords, except at the end of the third phrase (B) where a quick circle of 5ths progression spins the energy of the piece suddenly forward.
- The arranger uses harmony as one of the primary ways to “melt” the Ode to Joy melody into something more dreamy and blurry. Nearly every measure has a chord with an added tone—a suspension that resolves (or doesn’t) or a 9th or 7th chord. The effect, for the modern ear, is perhaps a little disconcerting as we typically associate these chords with light jazz or pop music (especially “lounge music”, which is normally a derogatory term). Besides the variety of extended harmonies, BB also reconceives the harmonic rhythm of the piece, and also substitutes minor vi chords for I chords, again contributing to the piece’s warmer, darker affect—less heroic, less blatantly joyful. Drones in the last two phrases (first on D/A and then on G/D also help “slow down” the closing measures of the piece.

Timbre

- The arranger uses the young string orchestra for a remarkable variety of colors within a single-affect piece. They are, however, subtle—like various shades of dark green. In most cases, since the only instrument color is strings, the color changes are the effects of dynamics and texture.

Texture

- The texture changes in the piece are subtle and contribute to subtle changes of mood and color. The thinnest texture is the opening gesture, which has a tentative, less secure feeling, a sense of “trying it out.” Gradually the texture opens up, as the lower voices enter and push the overall tessitura lower. The B phrase (at 13) calls forth a return to the opening tentativeness, but that phrase gradually expands into a return of the A phrase (21) which feels full and satisfying. The final two phrases rely on drone-type pedals which also feel like a thicker texture.

Form

Original melody is four phrases: AABA [+ BA]

The arranger adds a four measure introduction and two repeats of the final A (8 measures) as a coda.

Also, as noted above, the third phrase (B) is augmented to 8 measures.

All these “stretchings” have the effect of slowing down the energy of “Ode to Joy”, while trying to hold on to its joy.

HEART STATEMENT

The heart of *A Beethoven Lullaby* is the “softening” and calming of a once heroic melody transformed by lush, extended harmonies, gentle dynamics, and slower tempo.

Introducing the Piece (a Strategy)

THE MOST FAMOUS MELODY

We're going to take a close look at perhaps the most famous classical melody in history. What melody do you think it is, and why is it famous? Have students guess the melody and speculate as to why it's famous (inherent structure or Beethoven's biography?)

1. **Play** by ear. Check special syncopation.
2. **Sing** on solfège. Make observations (4 phrases; 1,2,4 are the same, 3 is different.)
Try different orders. Look at Beethoven's original phrase 3.

SKILL OUTCOME

Students will play slow music with bow control and even tone quality.

One concentrated study of an important skill together (with meaningful assessment) is worth *a thousand casual mentions, reminders, and scoldings.*
(G. Villasurda)

STRATEGIES

1. Scales in subdivisions

- a. Frog to tip, 1 to 100 D scale
- b. Challenge 4 beats per note. Can you do 6? 8? 10?
- c. Scale 1,2,3,4, 5, 6, 7, 8 (beats per scale degree)

2. Bow as Lever

Look at a simple lever. Talk about fulcrum, load, energy, pinkie, index finger.

When does the string itself become the fulcrum? [string crossing] How can we make that smoother? Being aware of our R elbow. Playing on the "E side of the A string, etc."

3. Telephone Game

Have students use a telephone number for length practice (on open string, or any note, or chord).

4. Bow as Ruler

Measuring out the bow in whole notes, 2 half notes, etc.

5. Bow Olympics ("Silent Set")

Have students place quickly in various locations (e.g. "Tip, E string," "Middle, D string," "Frog, A string," Balance point, G string", etc. Can also use numbers 1-100.)

6. Swells, Bumps, and Grinds

Work with a partner to listen for unintentional < and >. *Why does this happen?*

Listen for unintentional bumps in the line.

Listen for whole notes: the front end, middle, and direction change. What happens at the direction change?

7. Even Steven

Discuss the FAS ("Fast Attack Syndrome"). Why do we do this? Practice starting with no "chiff".

8. Time-Space-Energy (Dalcroze)

Discuss the relationship between time, space, and energy in making sound, as well as moving a bow. When one variable is adjusted the others must be too, or what happens? Have students roll a tennis ball across the floor (in pairs or larger groups, with others standing around). Change bow directions when the tennis ball changes direction. Match the time, space, and energy that's being visually displayed.

9. Words for What We Do

Sometimes having a word in mind helps us with the physical task. Have students generate words, metaphors, analogies, and imagery (e.g. "paintbrush" stroke, "massage the edges", etc.)

Assessment

1. Keep it Going

Every assessment above can be used as a formative or summative assessment, and all can be used for self-assessment and peer assessment. Students (as an assessment strategy) could devise a rubric for any aspect of the "slow-mo-bow" project.

2. Make Up a Bow Game

Have students create their own "slow-mo-bow" games and patterns (études) and lead them with the class. Have them explain the physics of their bow game, and how they will assess it.

KNOWLEDGE OUTCOME

Students will identify compositional techniques and their effect on musical mood, especially augmentation and chords with added tones.

STRATEGIES

1. Augmentation

Help students discover the one phrase that is augmented and slowed down. Why does the arranger do this? Why *this* phrase and not the others?

2. Analyze the Form

As students are learning to play each section of the piece, assign it a formal name [introduction, A phrase, B phrase, coda, etc.] Review these sections throughout the rehearsal period and refer to the sections as rehearsal markers. Help them discover who has the melody in each section, and what the other sections are doing.

3. Added Tones (Extended Harmony)

Review with students how to make a chord (triad)—take a note, skip a note, etc. Show a visual example. Have students add a 9th. *What is the effect? Who likes it more than the plain triad?* Try the added tone with just its dissonant neighbor—*Do you still like it?* Show how this note might resolve from *dissonance* to consonance. Label it a **suspension**.

Use the “Find the Color Note” strategy to train students’ ears to do this work. Begin by finding tones to add visually. Then do it by ear. Then listen to chords and find the color note by ear.

4. Composer vs. Arranger

Ask students to decide “who wrote this piece.” Discuss with students the difference between the work of a composer vs. an arranger. Do a Venn diagram or two column list of features of the piece that are properly the work of the composer and those of the arranger. Discuss who is most important in this piece: the composer or the arranger.

Assessment

1. Give students examples of triads in written notation and have them add 9ths, 2nds, 7ths, and even suspensions.
2. Have students improvise a variation on *Ode to Joy* in a key or style of their choice.
3. As a final project, have students choose a melody (folk song, hymn, pop song, etc.) to arrange. Differentiation: If their skills are adequate, a student can actually create an arrangement using notation software. For most students, a prose description will convey their plan. Encourage them to consider structure, orchestration, and the skills they acquired through analyzing this piece.

AFFECTIVE OUTCOME

Students will make informed opinions about what makes a piece “great.”

STRATEGIES

1. Greatness in Simplicity

Have students analyze Beethoven’s melody for greatness.

1. Play the melody by ear. Have students play it in several keys, by ear.
2. Favorite note? What makes it memorable? Singable? What is the character of the melody?
3. 4 phrases, Phrase B is different (has more energy); look for patterns in the melody

2. Words Matter: Part 1 (Lyrics)

Have students listen to the 9th Symphony Finale. (Excerpt: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-mvutiDRvO>). Have students find words to describe it (“noble”, epic, exciting, etc.). Try to choose the most expressive word possible. Explain to students the importance of the words to this piece. Have them sing the English translation. What makes this piece great? Some would say the text.

3. Uniqueness is greatness

Explain to students how influential this piece was in combining words and music, and the cult of Beethoven’s genius. Anxiety of Influence: Brahms said, “..you have no idea how it feels to hear behind you the footsteps of a giant like Beethoven..”

4. Words Matter: Part 2 (Titles)

Beethoven’s symphony was significant as the first symphonic work to use text. Words matter. Share Mendelssohn story (Marc Andre Souchay). Have students share examples of a title of a piece that really shaped their “entrance” into the piece. Play the piece and have students immediately generate their own idea of its title. (Reminder to take this task seriously.) Have students play “A Beethoven Lullaby” and come up with titles.

5. The Big Question

I don’t typically do educational music and I rarely discuss musical quality with you students. But now I want you to answer the question: is this a great piece of music? (Not: do you personally like it?)

Assessment

1. Have students write an essay making a case for the greatness of Brian Balmages’ *A Beethoven Lullaby*. They can create a video (15 minutes or less), write an essay, or find another medium of their choice. 2. Have students invent a title for the piece and write a short explanation of it.