Beethoven No. 9 - April 29, 2017

Serenade to Music Ralph Vaughan Williams
1872-1958

One of the greatest musical institutions of London is the London Henry Wood Promenade Concerts – popularly known as The Proms – an annual 8-week summer season of daily classical orchestral concerts and other events held every summer since 1895. Originally the concerts were held in Queen's Hall until its destruction by a bomb in 1941, and since then in cavernous Royal Albert Hall. The first conductor of The Proms, and nearly its sole conductor for the next 45 years, was Sir Henry Wood, who used the popularity of the series to promote new music, especially by British composers.

Ralph Vaughan Williams wrote the *Serenade to Music* in 1938 for Wood's golden anniversary as conductor to be premiered at The Proms in the same year. Originally composed for 16 solo singers and orchestra with a text from the first scene of the last act of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, Vaughan Williams subsequently adapted it for other choral and solo singer combinations as well as for orchestra alone. Coming shortly after his harsh, modernistic Fourth Symphony, the *Serenade*, with its gentle cantabile instrumental introduction, surprised the audience at the premiere. It is a lyrical evocation of a summer evening in which the lovers, Lorenzo and Jessica preface each of their declarations of love with the phrase "On such a night..."

Vaughan Williams sets the poetry in declamatory style, one syllable per note, carefully adapting the music to the text: Introducing the call, "Come, ho! And wake Diana with a hymn," with a trumpet fanfare; and turning to somber chromatic harmony in the section beginning, "The man who hath no music in himself." He rearranged and cut some words, phrases and whole lines from Shakespeare's play and repeated two lines at the end.

Choral Hymns from the *Rig Veda*, Op. 26 Gustav Holst
1874-1934

Composer, educator and conductor Gustav Holst is known outside his native England essentially as a one-work composer. *The Planets*, composed between 1914 and 1916, gained him international fame, but he detested its popularity. As if to validate the composer's feelings, snippets of its opulent music with its broad orchestral palette have also been favorite fodder for television commercials.

Holst came from a musical family and was taught the piano by his father. He was a precocious, but not a particularly healthy, child who started composing while in grammar school. As a teenager he developed neuritis in his right arm, forcing him to give up the piano, but he picked up the trombone as a cure for his asthma. At the Royal College of Music, which he entered in 1893, he continued with the trombone in addition to composition, and from 1897 to 1903 performed as a freelance trombonist, mostly with opera companies.

A quiet, introverted person for most of his life, Holst devoted his musical efforts to teaching music from 1905 until his death at St. Paul's Girls' School in Hammersmith, where many of his compositions were written for the school's orchestra and chorus. In 1906, on his doctor's

advice, he went on vacation to Algeria and bicycled in the desert. The experience was the inspiration for the orchestral work *Beni Mora*. When it was first performed in England, one critic complained, "We do not ask for Biskra dancing girls in Langham Place." In 1932 Holst was visiting lecturer in composition at Harvard; among his students was composer Elliott Carter.

Holst was influenced by mysticism and developed his own individual blend of Indian music and English folksong. His early works were inspired by the *Vedas,* Sanskrit holy verses, which he modified and adapted for his own compositions. In 1908 he wrote a chamber opera, *Savitri*, based on a story from the great Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata*.

The *Rig Vedas* is a set of over 1000 hymns singing the praise of the Vedic ritual drink Soma, extracted from a now unknown plant by the same name; they also sing the praise of various early Indo-Persian gods. Between 1908 and 1912 Holst set 14 of these hymns to music, using his own translation from the Sanskrit. The music is decidedly Western, with a few experiments with raga scales.

Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125 Ludwig van Beethoven
1770-1827

Ideas for the Ninth Symphony first appeared in Beethoven's sketchbook in 1817-18, initially as material for a pair of symphonies, one of which was to have a choral finale with a text from Greek mythology. He did not begin sustained work on the symphony until 1822, finally finishing it in February 1824.

During this period, Beethoven was embroiled in turmoil in his personal life. When his brother Johann, who had married a woman against the composer's advice, became ill, his wife Therese shamelessly carried on with her lover.

Professionally, Beethoven was both clearly over his head in commitments and also beset by debts. He was putting the finishing touches for publication of the *Missa Solemnis* while trying to manipulate a secret bidding war for it among three publishers, each of whom were expecting the work. He used a bait-and-switch maneuver involving a Mass in D (that was never written), as an excuse to each publisher for not delivering the *Missa Solemnis.* He had also undertaken several other commissions, some of which remained incomplete or never started.

One unfulfilled commission spurred the completion of the Ninth Symphony. Always an admirer of the British, Beethoven had sent inquiries to the Philharmonic Society of London and had received a positive reply with the promise of £50 for a new symphony. He would have liked to visit London, perhaps to experience the accolades showered on his former mentor, Franz Joseph Haydn, but the visit never materialized and the commission never fulfilled. It was, nevertheless, an incentive to finish the Symphony. The score was completed in February 1824, and Beethoven, disgusted with the musical taste of the Viennese, was planning to premiere the work in Berlin. But it had been ten years since he had given a public concert of his work in Vienna, and his friends and admirers signed a petition begging him not to disappoint his public any longer. Although he eventually gave in, it took three months of haggling with the Imperial "Pooh-Bahs" and reluctant singers to finally schedule the concert for May 7 at the Kärntnertor Theater. Artistically the Symphony was a wild success but –

because of the huge forces required and the large copying costs – a financial near-disaster.

Starting from the mysterious descending open intervals of the first movement, the symphony must have amazed its first hearers. Out of them gradually emerges the powerful first theme into classical sonata form. The contrasting second theme, like many of the composer's melodies, is made up of several distinct motives that he later develops separately. The movement ends in a long dramatic coda with an ominous ostinato in the cellos and basses.

The second movement is a massive scherzo that opens *Molto vivace* with hammer-blow descending octaves, an oblique reference to the descending intervals in the first movement. This motive is immediately picked up by the violins as the first bar of a fugue – an unusual but not unheard of structure for a scherzo. A driving ostinato rhythmic motif underlies the scherzo section, with the timpani periodically banging out the signature octaves and motivic rhythm. A playful trio brings respite, but the insistent scherzo returns with a short coda and a final hint at the trio.

The slow third movement is a free variation form comprised of the simultaneous transformation of two themes; its gentle intensity is in marked contrast to the powerful, driving music that preceded and will follow it. If anyone ever doubted that Beethoven was a Romantic, this movement will dispel the doubt, especially with the heartfelt second theme.

For a long time Beethoven had been unsure about what to do for the Finale. Material for a purely instrumental one ended up in 1825 as part of the string quartet Op. 132. Once he fixed on a choral finale, he had difficulties settling on its two main components: the melody and the text. The sketchbooks reveal that he had a surprisingly difficult time developing what ultimately became such a simple straightforward tune. In its first manifestation it appeared in a song, "*Gegenliebe*" (WoO 118) from 1794 and, in a closer version to the melody he ultimately settled on, as a main theme of the *Choral Fantasia*, Op. 80, of 1808.

It was not until November 1823, only three months before he finished the symphony, that Beethoven decided to use Friedrich Schiller's "*An die Freude*" (Ode to Joy). He had been toying with the idea of setting the Ode since 1793, when he considered it for a song. Again, in 1812, he incorporated part of it into a choral overture, a project he abandoned. Now, he took the opportunity to combine his desire and set the poem into the new choral symphony.

The long introduction to the Finale begins with a surprise, a recitative for the cellos and basses that, between recitative passages, recaps in order the first themes from the three preceding movements and anticipates a snatch of the chorale theme. But these recurrences serve as deliberate "false starts."

After the introduction by the full orchestra, Beethoven uses his own words for the repeat of the recitative, now sung by the baritone, to introduce Schiller's poem. In structure, the body of the Finale is a set of variations, one for each stanza of the poem plus a substantial coda. As poems go it's a bit over the top, and Schiller himself did not care for it. Beethoven's music, coupled with judicious rearrangement and strategic deletions in the text, transformed it into a cultural icon. At the climax of the movement, Beethoven abandons the variations for a lengthy dramatic coda in which the soloists and chorus restate the text of the poem and freely develop the musical material. However constrained in form the variations may have been, Beethoven handles the coda as an operatic finale, recalling the heady celebration that concluded his opera *Fidelio.*

Program notes by:
Joseph & Elizabeth Kahn
Wordpros@mindspring.com
www.wordprosmusic.com