

# JASON GRANT

## BASS-BARITONE

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## Grand Rapids Symphony, chorus lift audience in joyous song

by Jeffrey Kacmarczyk

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Leonardo's "Mona Lisa," Michelangelo's "David," Shakespeare's "Hamlet" are among the icons of Western civilization.

Comparing art, literature and music isn't easily done, but if there was a list of Seven Wonders of the Artistic World, Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 almost certainly would be on it.

With that 70-minute piece in hand, music director David Lockington and the Grand Rapids Symphony took an audience of 1,632 to the mountain top Friday evening in DeVos Performance Hall.

It was an uplifting performance.

An imperfect one in some respects, from a degree of tepidness at the outset to a struggle to settle on a center where intonation was concerned.

A wobbly podium delayed the concert's start while it was being shimmed steady. A couple of unplanned thumps crept into the performance.

But the point of a live concert isn't perfection so much as shared experience along the journey.

In his Ninth Symphony, dubbed "Choral" for its finale with soloists and chorus, Beethoven hammered into existence an expansive musical work that turns the traditional symphonic form inside out. Themes from the first three movements return in the fourth, as if uncertain questions about life, the universe and everything are asked and answered.

Each of the three answers is no, and the famous "Ode to Joy" theme appears, from the bottom up. Cue the singers. Ambiguity no more as Beethoven, in the words of poet Friedrich von Schiller, proclaims the universal brotherhood of humanity.

Lockington led a performance more of cohesion than of contrast. Others might make the louds louder and the softs softer and be done with it. Lockington massaged the sound, working the nuance of the rhythms in the scherzo, the subtleties of orchestral colors in the adagio. The ensemble played enthusiastically.

**Soprano Kishna Davis, mezzo soprano Jennifer Lane, tenor Robert Bracey and bass baritone Jason Grant joined the performance for the finale.**

**Grant, an operatic singer from top to bottom, kicked it off with his dark voice, luminous as well as cavernous.**

The Grand Rapids Symphony Chorus, after 45 minutes of cooling their heels, weighed in heroically with mighty, but nonetheless very musical, shouts of joy.

A solid, four-minute standing ovation was the reward from the audience that's the biggest the symphony has seen so far this season.

The program opened with Igor Stravinsky's Symphony in Three Movements. Why Stravinsky? Plenty of reasons.

Both dominated their eras. Beethoven kicked off the romantic era in music. Stravinsky all but killed it. The two share certain similarities of compositional style. Both were sobered by the horrors of wars, in their times and upon their doorsteps.

Lockington led a tightly knit performance, focused with laser-like precision. The orchestra supplied a laudable level of solidarity.

Beethoven's Ninth Symphony has been used to celebrate many things, from the beginning of the New Year in many Asian countries to the fall of the Berlin Wall at the end of the Cold War in Europe. Today, in uncertain and changing times, Beethoven reminds us we're all in this together.

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