

JASON GRANT

BASS-BARITONE

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 has rich history

By EVERETT EVANS Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle

Oct. 2, 2009

Among orchestral masterworks possessing built-in Event Status, Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 probably holds the place of pride in the hearts of most music lovers.

It's both the culmination of Beethoven's symphonic canon, arguably the greatest in the literature, and a breakthrough to a new level. Beyond its grandiose scale and structure, there's the innovation of its vast final movement (a symphony unto itself), setting Friedrich Schiller's *Ode to Joy* for chorus and vocal soloists. Beethoven filled this symphony not only with great music but also with extra-musical dimensions: spiritual, philosophical, humanitarian. Little wonder there's a sense that any time one hears the work performed live ought to be some sort of holiday.

Declare this a holiday weekend, then. Guest conductor Louis Langrée leads the Houston Symphony in a vibrant realization that meets the work's enormous musical challenges and conveys its joyous sense of occasion. One doesn't talk about being definitive with works of this scope. What's wanted is a sense that the work has been done justice, and that was the case at Thursday's performance. Langrée, French-born director of New York's Mostly Mozart Festival, showed decisive force in the first movement, steering from the shimmering expectation of the opening to the dynamism of its main theme. If brief stretches of the unwieldy development seemed to defy control, that may be *de rigueur* for this work: that untamable something in Beethoven asserting itself.

Langrée brought an incisive attack to the second movement, the orchestra gathering drive as the fugal scherzo evolved into the well-known galloping motif. The lovely adagio third movement became a serene idyll amid the storms of the surrounding movements, with exquisite playing in the interlude stressing woodwinds and horns, punctuated by pizzicato strings.

However great the rest of it, however, it's the *Ode to Joy* closing movement that catapults the Ninth to the stratosphere of musical achievement. As the restless introduction gave way to what may be the most beloved theme in classical music, Langrée masterfully guided its steady progression from lower strings through the entire orchestra, with ever-increasing majesty.

Bass-baritone Jason Grant, as the first soloist heard, tolled out his notes with ringing authority. Tenor John Daniecki brought vigor and dash to his later solo. Both were joined in the quartet passages by the glorious voices of soprano Jonita Lattimore and mezzo-soprano Margaret Lattimore. The rich and balanced sound of the Houston Symphony Chorale, prepared by director Charles Hausmann, achieved magnificent effects. With the orchestra maintaining its sterling work throughout, Langrée kept all the forces in balance as the movement's almost giddily jubilant closing section raced to its tumultuous finale.

With all that going on post-intermission, it seems anticlimactic to add that the first half of the program features Haydn's Symphony No. 104. Yet the two make an ideal program. Haydn's final symphony likewise is a culmination — in this case, of the master classicist known as the “father of the symphony” because he established the form and expanded its possibilities. Langrée conducted with the requisite light touch, precision and vivacity in livelier moments. The orchestra brought special delicacy to the lovely second movement, then an even more vigorous swing than usual to the third movement minuet, giving way to the brisk and spirited finale.

A sort of mini history of the symphony combining pinnacles of the Classical and Romantic eras, the program repeats tonight and Sunday.

Colbert Artists Management

111 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019

www.colbertartists.com ~ 212-757-0782