

The anthem of the European Union

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The European Union anthem

The European anthem is the prelude to the *Ode to Joy*, the fourth movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. If we are to understand Beethoven's art, we need to know something about the moment of history in which he was writing. While this is true of any artist, it is of crucial importance in Beethoven's case because he straddled the end of one period of history and the beginning of another. Music and its conception also reflect changing ways of thinking and living. Politically, therefore, the period in which Beethoven was writing saw the French revolution, Napoleonic expansion and the Restoration. Socially, the bourgeoisie grew in importance and, spiritually, the substantial growth of German philosophy and literature and the initial and most original aspects of romanticism were a major influence. Beethoven was not just a musician like Mozart and, especially, Haydn, but was also a deep thinker who was concerned with social problems and new ideas; the French revolution left a strong and powerful mark on his thinking. For him, music did not just exist *per se*, but was pregnant with meaning and almost always embodied an idea. Most of his compositions, especially those written in his mature years and at the end of his life, are not just the expression of an amorphous sentiment, but genuine musical poems that reflect the various currents of thought and their stages, and often give life to a theme. While this was in some ways in keeping with the spirit of the times, Beethoven's music is strongly imbued with his character and his genius. Beethoven is a musician of the internal world, the realm of the mind, freeing music from any formal constraints, the idea being all-important. Beethoven's tendency to detach himself from the material became ever more accentuated when his deafness distanced him from the external world and isolated him. It was then that Beethoven entered a plane of absolute and intangible contemplation, in which the sentiment of ultimate reconciliation was a consolation for the severity of his physical condition. Seriousness is the predominant feature of Beethoven, but this very seriousness may, even fleetingly, be transformed into joy, as in the Ninth Symphony.

The melody of the *Ode to Joy* is simple, almost elementary, and of an approachable and clear musicality to which it is easy to listen. Beethoven's main concern was to strike a perfect balance between unity (and exact repetition) and variety, in a readily memorable form. In the passages commemorating the values of truth, liberty, universal fraternity and human happiness, man emerges victorious over all his physical and moral oppressions. Throughout his life, and even in its happier periods, Beethoven was beset by the torments of his deafness, financial straits, unhappiness in love and the agonies of life. The Kantian ideals of the enlightenment culture of the time, which provided a focus for Beethoven's knowledge and internal life, are brought to life and sublimated through the interweaving of music and poetry. It is precisely this exhortation to fraternity and friendship, to love and to peace, of which the *Ode* is a highly figurative symbol, that explains why the Council of Europe and then the European Communities decided to take as their official anthem a hymn to fraternity going

beyond the confines of nations and beyond the differences between peoples in order to bring about something more sublime and exceptional in European society.