

THE DAILY GAZETTE

ASO, Pro Musica to perform Beethoven Ninth Symphony

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May 16, 2008

ALBANY — The Albany Symphony Orchestra is finishing up its season on Saturday with one of the most widely played pieces in the repertoire: Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

"It's so grand, music directors always keep it for themselves," said ASO conductor David Alan Miller from California, where he was conducting the Modesto Symphony Orchestra. "I've never done it as a guest conductor."

Joining him will be the Albany Pro Musica to sing in the final movement, with soloists soprano Lauren Skuce, mezzo-soprano Lucille Beer, tenor Scott Ramsay and baritone Matthew Burns. The first part of the program will be the world premiere of Dorothy Chang's "Along the River with Stars," which is the Chinese name for the Milky Way.



Miller conducted the Beethoven symphony for the first time a few years ago with the ASO, and the Pro Musica and has come to feel that the score is like a familiar friend. Recently, however, he has been reading articles about the work, particularly as to how it relates to the philosophy of joy.

"It's the power of Beethoven's vision, — how the poem [Schiller's "An die Freude" or "Ode to Joy"] articulates Beethoven's philosophy of life, of serving humanity," Miller said.

Beethoven had considered using Schiller's poem as early as the late 1780s, which was soon after the poem was published. Although Beethoven later set several of Schiller's other poems to music, he told his student Carl Czerny that he considered Schiller a difficult poet to set because no musician could surpass his poetry. When he finally decided to set the Ode, he used only 50 percent of the 18 sections and those he used he rearranged freely according to his own needs.

And getting those words to project with clarity is a major task, said Pro Musica director David Griggs-Janower.

"We work quite hard on the German," he said. "We work very hard on the vowels to match the colors and sounds."

Fortunately, when the 100-voice chorus isn't in rehearsal, it has an online German file the singers can work with on their own, he said. In all, the chorus will have five rehearsals with Griggs-Janower, one with Miller, and two with the orchestra.

When the ninth symphony premiered May 7, 1824, critics commented that Beethoven's use of a chorus for the final movement was a novelty, but his first three movements were written in strict classical form in the heroic style of his third symphony ("Eroica") of 1804. They also noted that 12 years had elapsed since he'd written his eighth symphony in 1812.

“It was a long time for him to develop thematic material. It was almost like creating a world,” Miller said, who has been looking deeper into the piece’s structure. “His movements one through three are like a portal into the finale. It’s like a metaphysical thing. I’m trying to find the riches and beauties that previously I might have missed . . . to refine my ideas.”

The singers, too, need a strong discipline, Griggs-Janower said. He has asked them to memorize long passages so they’ll sing straight out to the audience rather than look down at their music. Memorizing may also help them nail their notes better when it comes time to sing them.

“The parts are very hard for the voices. They hang higher. They’re in extremes,” he said. “Beethoven was asking voices to do things they’d never done. It’s deliberate. We have to catch up to his ideas.”

Recent discoveries

In recent years, two new editions of the symphony have been published, which raise questions about Beethoven’s metronome markings and dynamics, among other things. In one long passage in the manuscript, for instance, Beethoven had put a *diminuendo* (gradual softening), but traditionally that’s never done. For some reason, that was left out of the early editions until someone recently checked the manuscript and discovered it. And it makes a difference, Griggs-Janower said.

Miller, too, has noted the new editions and said he prefers to honor Beethoven’s metronomic markings. But editors couldn’t decipher two of Beethoven’s scribbles. One in particular is so contested that it confounds choral and orchestral conductors. In the section of the final movement that introduces a kind of military band music, the mark could be per beat or per bar.

“David wants it slow. It’s just before the tenor enters. I think Beethoven wanted it fast. I’ll do it medium fast,” Miller said with a laugh. “As I’ve aged, I’ve become less strict between tradition vs. the sanctity of the text and the practicalities of the performance. It’s more balanced.”

The conductors differ slightly on how to infuse passion into the work. Griggs-Janower said he felt the piece is very exciting and brilliant in its way, but choruses need to find ways to revitalize their parts.

“I want that sense of discovery,” he said.

Miller said the work’s magnificence would speak for itself as long as he did his job.

“It’s getting into it deeper rather than make it fresh — that’s my goal,” he said.

World premiere

There’s nothing newer, though, than a world premiere. Does Chang, who is one of the ASO’s four Music Alive Resident Composers, feel intimidated by being on the same bill as Beethoven’s ninth?

“I don’t think so,” Miller said. “Her piece occupies a very different space.”

“Along the River with Stars” is about Chang’s Chinese ancestry of the Tang Dynasty (618-907). Like Beethoven, Chang has chosen poetry of that era as her inspiration.

“With over 40,000 poems having survived, one is given a unique window into the lives and culture of the Tang poets,” Chang said in her program notes. “Each of the three movements reflects on a different aspect of Tang poetry.”