



**Esteban Buch.** *Beethoven's Ninth: A Political History.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. 325 pp. \$17.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-07824-3.



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Music, with its abstract nature and fleeting presence, is the art form most open to manipulation. Esteban Buch investigates how and for what purposes elites employed a particular piece, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, as a musical signal to society. His project is to reveal the agendas and conflicts behind "music as political discourse" (p. 2). While this project claims to focus on "official music" and provides some examples of states employing the Ninth, most of the book presents cultural elites creating a vision of the nation, at times in direct contradiction to official national agendas. The myth that Friedrich Schiller originally intended to write an Ode to Freedom, as well as Beethoven's own heroic biography, make politicizing of the Ninth lusciously tempting. States and elites projected their own desires, needs, and vulnerabilities onto, as well as the music and text of the Choral Symphony. In this study, such projections range from Wagner's declaration of himself to be Beethoven's heir to a group of nationalists in 1927 attempting to create a European anthem to the National Socialist state's cooptation of German music, ending with the European Commission's adoption of the Ninth as its official anthem.

Buch's detailed treatment of the quarrels that broke out for each incarnation of the Ninth as political fantasy is entertaining and enlightening. The chapter about the 1845 Beethoven festival in Bonn presents several of the

study's most important themes. Buch's close work on the festival shows us the tensions between elite international musicians and the local musicians and functionaries to whom Beethoven "belonged" as a fellow burgher. At stake in such disagreements was often the concept of the nation: what did it embody, and to whom? During the nineteenth century, this discussion particularly found tension between ideas of the national and the universal. Was Beethoven a German composer? Or a composer who addressed universal concerns, happening to hail from German lands? Buch belatedly makes the point that for Germans, "universality" was just as national a concept as nationalism; universality was marked by Germanic cultural and intellectual traits, and indeed, "universalism" could be understood as a kind of German cultural imperialism. These ethnocentric conceptions of universality are treated starting in chapter 9.

Buch bemoans the political application of Beethoven's work that continues to this day, from Rhodesia's national anthem of the 1970s to celebrations of the fall of the Berlin Wall. He asks, when are we going to adopt morality ourselves as well as the responsibility that accompanies it, rather than foisting it onto cultural emblems? Without the continuing criticism of artworks, Buch proposes, they "may well fall silent without that necessarily being a catastrophe" (p. 267).

The study is clearly structured in chronological chapters that at times focus on Beethoven in general rather than the Ninth Symphony itself, as in Buch's presentation of Nazi musical policy. Musical examples are fairly simple and brief, and so not an obstacle to the non-musical reader. Buch's sources include the main musical journals of the nineteenth century, such as the *Neue Zeitschrift*, the *Allgemeine Musik Zeitung*, the *Revue et Gazette Musicale*, as well as political essays. There is very little theoretical work regarding nationalism either in the study or in the bibliography. Buch's study shares the company of other post-Cold War works that engage inquiries regarding German national identity, such as the spate of new studies on Richard Wagner and his politics.[1] In light of this line of research, one aspect of the book's scope is unclear: I found myself wondering why

Eastern European nationalism was omitted. Surely there were cases, particularly in the nineteenth century, when Europeans east of Germany adopted Beethoven for their own political agendas of freedom?

#### Note

[1]. Joachim Khler, *Wagner's Hitler: The Prophet and His Disciple*, trans. and intro. Ronald Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Lawrence Kramer, *Opera and Modern Culture: Wagner and Strauss* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Michael H. Kater and Albrecht Riethmller, eds., *Music and Nazism: Art under Tyranny, 1933-1945* (Malden: Blackwell, 2000); Gottfried Wagner, *Twilight of the Wagners: The Unveiling of a Family's Legacy*, trans. Della Couling (New York: Picador USA, 1999).

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