

Augusta Read Thomas, *Aureole*

Ludwig van Beethoven, Symphony No. 9 in D minor Op. 125 “Choral”

There may be no living American composer more notable than Augusta Read Thomas (b. 1964). Her music has been performed by dozens of the top international orchestras, conductors, and soloists; she was featured on a Grammy winning CD by the virtuoso choral ensemble Chanticleer; she has received numerous awards and commissions; and she currently serves as Professor of Composition at the University of Chicago, where she founded its Center for Contemporary Composition.

*Aureole* was commissioned by the DePaul University School of Music for their Centennial First Performance in 2013. Instead of being composed as a stand-alone orchestral work, it is specifically designed to precede a performance of Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony. Thomas states that “the title, *Aureole*, refers to an encircling ring of light; radiance surrounding the head or the whole figure in the representation of a sacred personage or saint; a halo of concentric circles of light seen around a luminous body, especially around the sun or moon.” Her composition, *Aureole*, “alludes tangentially to certain fundamental tonal centers of Beethoven Symphony Number 9 in D minor Op. 125.” (She is referring to the pitches D, A, Bb, and E, which are the most structurally important to Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony.) *Aureole* is a wild and blazing work, full of fanfare, shimmering orchestral color, energized rhythms, playful woodwind solos, and lots of vigorous and punchy drumming. By the end of its 8 minutes, you’ll be hungry for more—a perfect appetizer before Beethoven!

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) completed three of his largest works between October 1822 and February 1824: his *Diabelli Variations*, a 50-minute microcosm of Beethoven’s compositional powers for piano; his *Missa Solemnis*, a ferociously difficult 80-minute work for orchestra and choir; and the legendary 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony. While the monumental *Missa Solemnis* has taken something of a backseat, the 9<sup>th</sup> remains one of the most celebrated and iconic works of classical music to this day. This was despite the fact that Beethoven composed it when he was completely deaf, unable to hear one note of the musicians rehearsing his masterpiece.

Although considered a composer of the Classical period, Beethoven pushes far beyond the boundaries set by Mozart and Haydn with his 9th symphony. The structures and development of his motivic ideas are far more complex than those of his predecessors. He also expanded the symphonic orchestra, adding contrabassoon, additional French horns (from 2 to 4), and a variety of percussion (bass drum, cymbals, triangle) not normally seen on a concert stage in the 1820’s. And of course, the inclusion of a full choir and vocal soloists into the last movement, breaking yet another barrier of a purely instrumental genre.

Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony covers a vast emotional spectrum, one that seems very personal to the composer. The first movement is dramatic and foreboding, conveying a bitter struggle—the

listener can imagine Beethoven confronting his deafness, his loneliness, life's trials and adversities. The second *scherzo* movement is lively and exuberant, perhaps depicting a quest for worldly joy. The third movement is reflective and serene, suggesting a longing and melancholy. The last movement, with its "Ode to Joy" melody, conveys a true celebration of hope and unity.

The "Ode to Joy" theme is perhaps one of the most recognizable melodies in the world, heard by many as a universal symbol of a united humanity. (An English translation of Friedrich Schiller's poem is included below.) The work has been performed at important historical moments, such as the falling of the Berlin Wall—Leonard Bernstein famously conducted a performance on Christmas day in 1989 in Berlin, changing the text in Schiller's poem from "Freude" (Joy) to "Freiheit" (Freedom). In 1972 it was adopted as the anthem of the European Union. And in Japan, "Ode to Joy" has become a yearly singalong in performances throughout the country. Truly, we are one humanity, and Beethoven's music has the power to touch us all.

--David H. Johnson

Comments? Questions? Email me at [david.johnson@gcsu.edu](mailto:david.johnson@gcsu.edu).

O friends, not these tones!  
But let's strike up more agreeable ones,  
And more joyful.

Joy!  
Joy!

Joy, beautiful spark of Divinity,  
Daughter of Elysium,  
We enter, drunk with fire,  
Heavenly one, thy sanctuary!  
Thy magic binds again  
What custom strictly divided;  
All people become brothers,  
Where thy gentle wing abides.

Whoever has succeeded in the great attempt,  
To be a friend's friend,  
Whoever has won a lovely woman,  
Add his to the jubilation!  
Yes, and also whoever has just one soul  
To call his own in this world!  
And he who never managed it should slink  
Weeping from this union!

All creatures drink of joy  
At nature's breasts.  
All the Just, all the Evil  
Follow her trail of roses.  
Kisses she gave us and grapevines,  
A friend, proven in death.  
Ecstasy was given to the worm  
And the cherub stands before God.

Gladly, as His suns fly  
through the heavens' grand plan  
Go on, brothers, your way,  
Joyful, like a hero to victory.

Be embraced, Millions!  
This kiss to all the world!  
Brothers, above the starry canopy  
There must dwell a loving Father.  
Are you collapsing, millions?  
Do you sense the creator, world?  
Seek him above the starry canopy!  
Above stars must He dwell.