

Arts Performing Arts
Louisville Orchestra

Orchestra season closes with a heroic Ninth

By ANDREW ADLER May 24, 2002
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When conductors grapple with Beethoven, all roads eventually lead to the Ninth Symphony. So it was inevitable that Uriel Segal would lead this defining work at some juncture with the Louisville Orchestra.

Yesterday, inevitability met compelling individuality as Segal confronted the Ninth at the Kentucky Center for the Arts.

Closing out the orchestra's current subscription season on a program that also included Beethoven's Symphony No. 1, he spun together a performance fresh enough to free this symphony from the ranks of the Unfortunately Ubiquitous. His instrumentalists, vocal soloists and chorus, arrayed before him on the Whitney Hall stage, contributed a masterly collective effort.

Beethoven's "Choral" Symphony can, of course, sometimes appear to be everywhere. Indeed, the work popped up just this past weekend at the Cincinnati May Festival, and with its celebrated imperative of universal brotherhood, the symphony makes a particularly inviting refuge in the post-9-11 cosmos. The "Ode to Joy" may be an overexposed chunk of music, but its comforting humanity can hardly be denied.

Yet if the Ninth is often thought to be about big things, any performance must begin with small elements.

The opening movement, introduced by tremulous string figures that point ahead to Bruckner in their hushed intensity, offer specific challenges that are not easily managed. Segal and the ensemble, however, got them precisely right. And a few moments later, when the entire orchestra kicked things up several notches (apologies to Emeril), the reach of Segal's account was immediately evident.

His entire interpretation was similarly cast. Dynamics that in less attentive performances seem at best half-intentioned rang out in blazing focus here. The scherzo, always distinctive by virtue of its unaccompanied timpani strokes, galloped along in tempos that could have unraveled in less confident surroundings.

Yesterday, the pulse was not only secure, it was intrinsically sensible within Segal's larger view of the score.

Briskness was not tantamount to lightheaded consideration of Beethoven's design; it was consistent with the Ninth as a swiftly moving, concentrated musical document. Besides, the third movement Adagio provided the opportunity for a more expansive perspective: Beethoven as nurturer of nature, the calm preceding the vocal detonation that was to follow. And detonate it did, heroically. Bass Kurt Link (heard earlier this season when the orchestra performed excerpts from Wagner's "Die Walkure") set the mood, delivering the most impassioned, resonant and fully characterized "O Freunde. nicht diese Töne!" I've ever encountered in live performance.

His colleagues -- tenor Daniel Weeks, soprano Rochelle Ellis and mezzo-soprano Rebecca Ellis -- made handsome sounds of their own.

But summa cum laude honors belonged to the chorus, combining members from the Louisville Bach Society, Louisville Chorus, University of Louisville Collegiate Chorale and Voces Novae. Displaying exemplary diction, balance and tonal cohesion, the singers were magnificent in a symphony that demanded no less.

8 p.m. today (May 24), Kentucky Center for the Arts, Whitney Hall,
Sixth and Main streets. (502) 584-7777 or (502) 361-3100.

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