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Saturday, 14 July 2018

## A new, yet familiar piece: Benjamin Zander on his interpretation of Beethoven's Choral Symphony

Labels: [interview](#)



Benjamin Zander (Photo Paul Marotta)

[Benjamin Zander](#)'s new recording of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* (available on Brattle Media) is the result of a lifetime's study of Beethoven's score. But spend any time with Benjamin Zander and you come to realise both how absorbed by the music he is, and how his study of it was not intended to perfect his own interpretation but to divine Beethoven's intentions. I recently met up with Benjamin to talk about the new recording and the ideas which lie behind it, particularly with regard to his interpretation of Beethoven's metronome marks. Yet during our extensive conversation to talk about the new recording, Benjamin repeatedly emphasised that the new recording was not about Benjamin Zander but was about the music and Beethoven's original intentions.



So does the world need yet another recording of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. Benjamin feels that it does, and feels very strongly. He is passionate about the work he has been doing, investigating Beethoven's original score and feels that the new recording is the first time that all the musicological points have been made in the same recording.

He has worked on the symphony for over 40 years and given many performances of it. One of the focuses of his new recording is Benjamin's interpretation of Beethoven's metronome marks. Every since he was a small boy, Benjamin has been fascinated both with Beethoven and with the tempi of his symphonies. But his approach is about more than just tempi, and metronome marks, and during our interview as well go through the score of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*, it is clear that Benjamin takes a very pragmatic yet holistic view of the work.

Back in 1967 he conducted his first performance of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5* in Boston and it caused a sensation because of his approach to the tempi and to the music. No-one had heard Beethoven that way, and everyone was talking about it. And this was the period before Historically Informed Performance reached Beethoven. So, in a sense Benjamin has spent a lifetime as a pioneer and is proud of it. His recording of *Symphony No. 5* changed a lot of minds.

He points out that now, news travels fast and new interpretations are heard and shared rapidly, but back in the pre-internet days things happened slower. He readily admits that there were other pioneers before him, who experimented with Beethoven's tempi, but none of these made a global impact. He cites the work of Rudolf Kolisch from the [New England Conservatory](#) (where Benjamin taught from 1967 to 2012). Benjamin calls Kolisch a great musical mind, and his work on Beethoven's string quartets was influential. Rene Leibowitz did an important set of

recordings of the Beethoven's symphonies but though he followed Beethoven's metronome markings, he was rather wayward.

Having performed Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* a lot in Boston with his [Boston Philharmonic Orchestra](#), Benjamin took them to New York's [Carnegie Hall](#) in 1992 and Andrew Porter wrote a long review of the concert, discussing Beethoven and the metronome and saying 'Mr Zander is right, we've been listening to the music of the greatest composer in misrepresentative performances'.

Benjamin took the idea to the [BBC](#), and they were interested in his theories about Beethoven's tempos but insisted it had to be done on period instruments and eventually a BBC performance was given by [Roger Norrington](#) with a period instrument ensemble.

Benjamin was livid at the time, but is now grateful because he feels that it has taken another 30 years to absorb the music into his blood stream; now when he picks up the score he hears the music at Beethoven's tempos. He insists that it is not enough to just play Beethoven's tempos, you have to have the music in your DNA. And he quotes Debussy on the conducting of Andre Messager at the premiere of *Pelleas et Melisande* ' You succeeded in awakening Pelleas to musical life, with a delicate tenderness, the inner rhythm of any composition is called forth by the conductor'.

Recording the work with the [Philharmonia Orchestra](#), the Philharmonia Chorus, and soloists Rebecca Evans, Patricia Bardon, Robert Murray and Derek Welton, he received an enormous amount of rehearsal time, particularly for a work which the orchestra could probably play in its sleep. There were three rehearsals (the last one with chorus and soli) and five recording sessions. The response of many of the orchestral musicians was to comment that they had never really studied the piece, and the chorus members, who had not been looking forward to the recording, found it a revelation and many came out ecstatic [the chorus master for the recording was Stefan Bevier who died after the recording was made, and the resulting discs are dedicated to him].

Beethoven was very keen on the newly invented metronome, as it enabled him to be even more detailed about tempi. His Italian tempo markings in the score are quite complex, in an attempt to come to grips with delicate variations of tempo. But the metronome Beethoven was using had limitations (the speed only went down to 50), and the transcription of Beethoven's metronome marks was not done without error, and Benjamin went back to Beethoven's conversation books where an interaction with his nephew Karl clarifies Beethoven's exact intentions.

Many of Beethoven's metronome marks are uncontroversial and in the narration which accompanies the new recording, Benjamin goes through them in detail showing how the majority of conductors adhere to them. But a few are controversial, and that for the March in the final movement has caused problems. Originally it was thought to be a slow tempo (difficult to bring off, and something which Roger Norrington does in his recording), but by examining the original conversation book Benjamin came to realise that the tempo Beethoven was aiming at was far faster. Similarly in the Adagio, the limitations of Beethoven's metronome have led to further confusions.

The faster March requires the tenor ([Robert Murray](#) on the recording) to sing lightly and Benjamin points out that usual in performances tenors bellow this passage. And the orchestra is marked pianissimo at the beginning. This is another of Benjamin's key points, orchestras very rarely play Beethoven's exact dynamics, and repeatedly during our study of the score he points out places where pianissimos are ignored, where fortes are played fortissimo. The first entry of the soloists is another key point, rarely taken quietly enough and with the soprano soloist swamping the mezzo-soprano. Benjamin comments that there is a remarkable amount of piano in the score. And for the soloists and the chorus members, he asked them instead of shouting to express the emotion on the words. Some details are tricky, the final ensemble 'vor Gott' is fortissimo with a diminuendo (because the following passage is piano), and then in the following passage the piccolo is supposed to be pianissimo (Benjamin refers to the stars sparkling). It is to achieve such details that the three rehearsals were needed.



Benjamin Zander conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra

But Benjamin takes a practical view of the score, there is a viola passage in the last movement which is usually never heard, Benjamin attributes this miscalculation to Beethoven's deafness. He has doubled the violas with the horns, making the musical line present in the overall texture for the first time, something he finds very satisfying. Similarly, he has adjusted the timpani parts as Beethoven was limited by the timpani of the time whereas modern timpani are more flexible, so there are notes that can be added to the slow movement fanfare passages which make more sense of the overall music.

Returning to the March in the final movement, when the full orchestra is released after it, they have to play stupendously fast and at the recording takes they only once managed the correct tempo and this was what Benjamin calls 'a white knuckle ride'. But next morning, at a session for a subsequent section, the leader of the orchestra [Stephanie Gonley](#) suggested that the string players perform the fast passage on the string rather than off it (something which would have suggested itself easily to period performances), and this made the whole thing possible. Benjamin quotes this as an example of how the orchestra was very much on his side for the recording sessions.

The double fugue in the last movement, Benjamin takes at a speed (taken from the metronome marks) which no-one else seems to, this is slightly slower and he points out that for this passage the contrabassoon part becomes playable, whereas at the traditional faster speed it is not playable, as the contrabassoon, as an instrument, is far less agile than the bassoon.

For the recitative at the beginning of the final movement, the first performance used just two double basses and three cellos, and at the first London performance the part may have been played as a solo by the double bass virtuoso Dragonetti. Benjamin tried it with just a single double bass, but in the end went for two double basses and three cellos, encouraging them to play almost identically to the baritone's vocal line as if the bass was trying to be human.

Another of the more controversial areas is the trio of the Scherzo, which one observer at the first performance referred to as having unusual exhilaration. Something that does not happen with the traditional slower speed, and Benjamin points to a motif which repeats some 27 times and he feels that the fast tempo he uses makes sense. He points out that everyone (except Klemperer) uses the fast tempo for the Scherzo, but not the Trio.

And hearing the results of the performance, which Benjamin calls electrifying, he says that we can come to understand that Beethoven was in extremis, living on the edge of the Universe and pointing to things which we can only imagine. There are passages which reach maximum joy, yet Beethoven himself was in the depth of darkness. Benjamin sees his recording as a humble attempt to go with Beethoven as far as he seems to be taking us. He feels that Beethoven knew what he was doing, what he was trying to achieve, and that we should not feel we know better.

Throughout our discussion of the score, Benjamin constantly refers not only to Beethoven's tempi and dynamic markings, but how these interact with the words in the last movement. Benjamin's interpretation is essentially a dramatic one, encouraging the singers to recognise the drama in the way Beethoven approaches the combination of music and text.

Benjamin regards the recording as not being about him, he calls himself a dutiful servant and feels that if you are interested, this is what Beethoven intended. And Benjamin thinks that whilst other recordings have taken certain issues on board, this is the first recording to take account of all the issues. And Benjamin recognises that personal preference will still come into it, people may well still prefer Klemperer's interpretation. But he feels that the recording presents a new, yet familiar piece, one which he hopes will make the world sit up and pay attention.

There is a strong didactic element to Benjamin's mission, he calls himself essentially a teacher. His Mahler recordings included explanatory discs and this new recording of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* includes two discs of introduction from Benjamin, explaining how he reached the conclusions he did regarding the tempi and other issues. The aim is something more than purely academic. He hopes that the general populace will listen to the explanations and get a deeper understanding of the music, that he is teaching people how to listen to the music.

Whilst Benjamin is comfortable that other interpretations and views of the music will co-exist, he feels that Beethoven's vision is so much more powerful when you do what he says. Not just following the metronome marks, but every detail of the score. One of Benjamin's comments sums up his attitude 'he isn't a god, he's a conductor, so let's not be careless with Beethoven's music'.

You can hear more about Benjamin Zander's performance of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* on the [trailer on Vimeo](#).

Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*, Philharmonia Orchestra, Philharmonia Chorus, conductor Benjamin Zander, with Rebecca Evans, Patricia Bardon, Robert Murray, Derek Welton:

- [On iTunes](#)
- Other links as they become available

Other Benjamin Zander recordings:

- Beethoven *Symphonies No. 5 & 7* (with discussion disc), Philharmonia Orchestra, available [from Amazon](#)
- Mahler *Symphony No. 6*, Boston Philharmonic Youth Orchestra, available [from Amazon](#)
- Mahler *Symphony No. 2*, Philharmonia Orchestra, available [from Amazon](#)
- Bruckner *Symphony No. 5* (with discussion disc) Philharmonia Orchestra, available [from Amazon](#)
- Mahler *Symphony No. 6* (original & revised versions of the finale, and a discussion disc), Philharmonia Orchestra, available [from Amazon](#)
- Mahler *Symphony No. 3* (with discussion disc), Philharmonia Orchestra, available [from Amazon](#)
- Mahler *Symphony NO. 5* (with discussion disc), Philharmonia Orchestra, available [from Amazon](#)
- Mahler *Symphony No. 1* and *Lieder eines Fahrenden Gesellen* (with discussion disc), Philharmonia Orchestra, available [from Amazon](#)

- Mahler *Symphony No. 4* (with discussion disc), Philharmonia Orchestra, available [from Amazon](#)
- Mahler *Symphony No. 9* (with discussion disc), Philharmonia Orchestra, available [from Amazon](#)