



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

Beethoven: Symphony No. 9 ("Choral"). Philharmonia Orchestra, Zander. Brattle Media (3 CDs).

Benjamin Zander, British-born and Boston-based, is highly regarded as both a conductor and a teacher. His efforts to educate and thus maximize the appreciation of the music he loves extend to his audiences. Zander's Mahler recordings for Telarc each came with a supplemental disc of analysis exploring historical context, musicological detail, and the conductor's personal understanding of the pieces. Zander now turns his attention to Beethoven's Ninth, perhaps the pinnacle of the Western symphonic tradition, and this time the conductor requires *two* extra CDs, running a total of two hours and forty minutes for his commentary. Pretty much all of the discussion relates to a single musical metric—tempo.

Johann Nepomuk Maelzel patented his metronome in 1815. Beethoven had one within a few years and was wildly enthusiastic about the time-keeping device, having recognized that achieving the intended character of his music in performance depended on getting the tempo right. The composer specified a metronome marking (MM)—the pace in beats-per-minute—for much of his music, including 14 in Symphony No. 9. Most are close to what we're used to hearing in concert and on recordings, but a few have puzzled performers and listeners for going on 200 years: They seem way too fast. Explanations have ranged

from the suggestion that Beethoven was deranged at the time to the more generous conclusion that there was something wrong with his metronome. Additionally, the do-as-you-feel ethos of the Romantic era gave increasingly powerful conductors license to ignore *any* MM they didn't care for. Most performances of the "Choral" Symphony clock in at well over an hour—Bernstein's last reading runs 78 minutes. Benjamin Zander gets the job done in 58:39.

In his thorough discussion, Zander cogently justifies all of Beethoven's MMs for the Ninth, arguing that dismissals of the composer's instructions derive from musicological misunderstandings, plus a few mistakes in the printed score. Zander is careful not to denigrate the great Beethoven interpreters that preceded him. He emphasizes, as well, that this first-ever recording to follow all of Beethoven's tempo directives should not be viewed as a pedantic exercise: "It's not an act of self-indulgence," says Zander, "but rather one of homage." I listened to this performance of the Ninth straight through twice, before and after digesting Zander's discourse. The first time, a passage like the Trio section of the second movement Scherzo seemed almost comedic; the second time, it registered as a radically innovation on the composer's part.

For this undertaking, the conductor clearly had the full support of a great orchestra—the players of the Philharmonia Orchestra enthusiastically took on the technical and interpretive challenges of Zander's nontraditional approach. The chorus has been expertly prepared and the vocal quartet is excellent. The performance venue was London's Watford Colosseum, the site of many Mercury Living Presence recordings in the 1950s and 60s. Brattle Media's set was produced, engineered, mixed, and edited by a team that included several individuals from Zander's Telarc past, and the sound is gratifyingly robust, with realistic balances and instrumental/vocal sonorities.

Andrew Quint

Further Listening: Bruckner: Symphony No. 5 (Zander)



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Weinberg: Piano Quintet. Piano Sonata. Cello Sonata. Attacca Quartet. Golan. Steinway & Sons.

Like his close friend Dmitri Shostakovich, Mieczyslaw Weinberg (1919–1996) was a progressive Soviet composer persecuted by the regime who had the additional burden of being Jewish in a pervasively anti-Semitic society. The three works on this CD manifest the same skillful construction and exploration of painful emotional territory as does Shostakovich's substantial output of chamber music and Weinberg's Piano Quintet is worthy of comparison to the older composer's masterpiece for the same instrumental combination. Jeanne Golan joins the Juilliard-trained Attacca Quartet for the 47-minute Quintet and then plays the slighter, but far from trivial, Piano Sonata with a light touch. After this palate-cleanser, Golan accompanies Attacca member Andrew Yee for a soulful reading of Weinberg's Cello Sonata. Yee plays a modern instrument that has a dark and richly textured tone ideal for his virtuosic expressivity. The mournful lyricism of the first two movements contrasts with the nervous jocularity of the finale. Daniel Shores recorded the program at a respectful distance in Steinway Hall in NYC, using Merging Technologies Horus converters for the project. **AQ**

Further Listening: *Voices of Defiance* (Dover Quartet)