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Cultural and Political Perspective on Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" as the European Union's Anthem

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to explore the cultural and political significance of the *Ode to Joy*, a tune included in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, so that tune can become an anthem for the European Union. Following the MEPs from Nigel Farage's Brexit party turning their backs on the playing of the European anthem, a discussion on this subject started. The method used in this research is descriptive qualitative approach and literature review. The research's conclusions demonstrate that both musically and politically, *Ode to Joy* has its significance. *Ode to Joy* had already come to represent Germany in Europe before it was officially adopted as the anthem of the European Union.

Keywords: anthem, Germany, Beethoven's Ode to Joy, European Union, cultural perspective, political perspective

1. Introduction

Strasbourg, 2 July 2019. The ceremony to mark the opening of the European Parliament for the 2019-2024 term continues as usual. Except for one thing that caught public attention: when the European Union's anthem was played, Nigel Farage and his 29 Brexit party MEPs took a political act by turning their backs during the playing of the European Union's anthem, as a symbol of their rejection of the European Union. Nigel Farage did the same gimmick five years earlier when he was still leading the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), during the opening session of the European Parliament for 2014-2019 (Sorensen, 2018).

Various tweets condemned the move, but not a few supported it, especially from pro-Brexit. Three months later, on 10 October 2019, more than 50 musicians from the ensemble 'Brass Against Brexit' gathered in the Westminster Parliament Square in protest against Brexit by playing the European Union's anthem. In January 2020, there are two songs competing to the top of the British chart: *17 Million F**k-Offs – A Brexit Song* and the European Union's anthem. *17 Million F**k-Offs – A Brexit Song* is a simple song by Dominic Frisby, an English comedian, while the European Union's anthem is an adaptation of *Ode to Joy*, a two-century-old masterpiece by Ludwig van Beethoven.

The name Beethoven must not be strange in everyone's ears. No other composer has left a legacy to the world of music like Ludwig van Beethoven. Beethoven called himself not a *Tonsetzer*—composer—but a *Tondichter*—an artist or poet of tones (Breuning et al., 1992). Beethoven was a global artist who broke the classical style and paved the way for the Romantic era (Pauwels, 2022). Hans von Bülow referred to Beethoven's piano sonata collection as the "New Testament" in music (Walker, 1987). To this day, Beethoven is still a star among the composers of classical music. Chuck Berry composed a rock and roll song entitled *Roll Over Beethoven*, with lyrics asking "Beethoven (as a symbol of classical musicians) to get rid of and give way to rhythm and blues". That the name Beethovens used in the title as a representative of the classic musician demonstrates how identical classical music is to Beethoven for the public. Beethoven's monuments and busts can also be found on every continent, and his works remain eternal even though he has long been gone. In 2001, one of his monumental piece, *Symphony No. 9*, was included in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register (UNESCO, 2001). Previously, the *Ode to Joy* in that symphony was adapted as the European Union's anthem (Tscherny, 2023).

Beethoven was also a politically literate. He disliked aristocracy, assuming that the title of prince was obtained by birth, while he achieved his position by his own hard work; and there were many princes and there would continue to be thousands more, while there was only one Beethoven (Beethoven et al., 1964). He sought the equality and fraternity of mankind, which impressed him with the figure of Napoleon Bonaparte, because Napoleon was regarded as the embodiment of the democratic and antimonarchial ideals of the French Revolution (Pisarczyk et al., 2017). Beethoven initially gave the title of *Bonaparte* to his *Third Symphony*, but as soon as he learned that Napoleon had proclaimed himself Emperor of France in 1804, he was very angry and changed the title to *Eroica* (Bonds, 2022).

In 1814, European heads of state convened the Congress of Vienna to discuss various post-Napoleonic issues, generally the division of territory. Beethoven, as a prominent musician at the time, was also involved in promoting his work, a cantata entitled *Der glorreiche Augenblick* (*The Glorious Moment*), as a form of support for the congress (Kwan, 2017). Ten years later, precisely on 7 May 1824 in Vienna, Beethoven performed his latest symphony, the *Symphony No. 9* (Kelly, 2000). That time, the work was not politically charged, but at that time no one thought that about 150 years later the *Ode to Joy* in the fourth movement of the symphony was adapted to the anthem of a supranational organization called the European Union.

Beethoven is a German. The *Ode to Joy* in *Symphony No. 9* uses lyrics based on a German-language poem by Friedrich von Schiller, also a German. This research will discuss the significance of the piece from a political and cultural perspective so that it can be chosen as the anthem of the European Union.

The research question is why Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* is considered significant in culture and politics, and why Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* can be designated as an anthem for the European Union, seen from both perspectives.

2. Literature Review

In compiling this research, the author also looked at and paid attention to various results and findings of previous research which were considered relevant to the research topic. These previous studies have been published in journals and printed books. Of the hundreds of articles on the topic of Ludwig van Beethoven or *Ode to Joy* that have been published, the author chose five publications that are within the same research scope as this research.

The first research that caught the author's attention was an article written by Conor Farrington entitled *Beyond the Ode to Joy? The Politics of the European Anthem*. The article was published in the journal *The Political Quarterly* volume 90, issue 3, 20 June 2019. According to Farrington, anthems are conventionally seen as being able to help unite and mobilize populations by generating a sense of shared identity (Farrington, 2019). Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, which is currently a European anthem, is in the gray area of European Union symbols. Whether performed with or without Schiller's original text, the work raises important questions about the nature of the European Union and the purpose of Beethoven's music in contemporary European politics. Nevertheless, given that any alternative would also raise the same questions and difficulties, Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* could be considered a gateway to further discussions regarding the future of the European Union, especially if it were reunited with the text of Schiller's *An die Freude*.

Esteban Buch has a critical view of *Ode to Joy*. In his book entitled *Beethoven's Ninth: A Political History*, Buch said that all groups from various sects felt represented by *Ode to Joy*, both German nationalists and French republicans, both communists and Catholics (Buch, 2003). Buch traces the complex and contradictory uses and abuses of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony since its premiere in 1824. Buch shows that when composing this symphony Beethoven consciously utilized the European tradition of "musical politics", combining sacred and profane,

military and religious themes. Nonetheless, Beethoven clearly had his own political aspirations for the work. He wanted the work to express ideas about the ideal.

Esteban Buch in his article entitled *Beethoven in the Shadows of Berlin: Karajan's European Anthem* published in the Fall 2009 edition of *Dissent* discusses aspects of the music composed as the European Union anthem by Austrian musician and conductor, Herbert von Karajan. It should also be noted that the musical work is an instrumental melody on the *Ode to Joy* theme which is based on Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* which was created in the 19th century. The article explores the relationship between the national anthem, the European far right, and the fact that Von Karajan had joined the German Nazi Party in the era before the Second World War, how the musical symbol of the European Union was the work of a former member of the Nazi Party (Buch, 2009). The European Council formalized the melody as the European Union's anthem in 1985. This decision was the realization of plans that had been set on July 8, 1971 in West Berlin by the Council of Europe, the first post-war European institution whose main goal is to defend human rights. The official arrangement of the new anthem was composed by Herbert von Karajan who was then director of the Berlin Philharmonic, published the music through the publishing house Schott Music, made a recording with the music label Deutsche Grammophon, and promoted it in the media with his orchestra. Karajan's arrangement is protected by copyright, and the copyright holder was a member of the Nazi Party from 1935 to 1945.

The European Union's Anthem is still known as Beethoven's music. However, the anthem, which has no words, differentiates itself from the original music with a slower tempo and fuller orchestration, giving the work a ceremonial "anthemic" style. So, except for those details, all Karajan did was sort of cut and paste three fragments of Beethoven's work. As a form of art, it can be done by anyone. Nevertheless, the work bears Karajan's signature, and reminds us that this symbol of Europe was born, as it were, in the shadow of the Berlin Wall.

According to Buch, in 1971 Karajan was recruited to create a new European Union symbol because of his celebrity status. At that time he was dubbed *Generalmusikdirector* of Europe, conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, principal guest conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic, artistic director of the Salzburg Festival, his association with the Paris Orchestra and various other prestigious orchestras; his recordings, especially with Deutsche Grammophon, made him the most famous and highest paid classical musician in the world.

Beate Angelika Kraus views Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* more positively. In her article entitled *Be Embraced, Millions! – On the Reception of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony*, she highlights that when François Mitterrand won the French presidential election, during his inauguration in Paris on May 21, 1981 there were 2 pieces of music played by the Orchestre de Paris: *Marseillaise* and Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* (Kraus, 2017). This can be interpreted as symbolizing respect for Beethoven and culture, but also a commitment to "Europeanness", because Karajan's arrangement of the Ode to Joy has been heralded as a European anthem, even though this was not formalized by the European Union until May 1985.

The fifth research that concerns the author is Allison N. Zieg's research entitled *Joyful, Joyful! The Musical Significance of Beethoven's Ninth*. According to Zieg, of Beethoven's nine symphonies, *Symphony No. 9* had the greatest impact on classical music, because it drastically changed the future of classical music (Zieg, 2022).

3. Research Methodology

This research will use a historical science approach using descriptive historical writing methodology. Historical science is a science that describes or studies events in the past with the view that past events or happenings are the roots of current events. Vice versa, there are no present events that are not related to events in the past (Kuntowijoyo, 1995). Meanwhile, according to Louis Gottschalk, writing history is a process of critically examining and analyzing the records and remains of the human past (Gottschalk L. R., 1950). Imaginative reconstruction of the past is based on data obtained, or is called historiography.

4. Results and Discussion

The author will discuss the significance of the *Ode to Joy* and Beethoven himself from a cultural and political perspective.

4.1. Context of the Creation of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9

Vienna, Austria, May 1824, was a metropolitan and cosmopolitan city, the center of a large multinational empire (Sachs, 2010). If we had lived in that year, we might have experienced many important historical events. There was the American Revolution that took place decades earlier, but if we were rulers of an empire that was difficult to maintain and full of oppression and secret police and spies and censorship, we might be a little nervous when society rose up

and overthrew the authority of a king. After that there was the French Revolution, which not only declared independence from the kingdom, but also beheaded the king (Bickford, 2014). From this revolution, Napoleon Bonaparte emerged who controlled almost all of Europe, including Vienna (Acemoglu et al., 2009). After Napoleon suffered defeat at Waterloo, in 1814 a meeting was held in Vienna, known as the Congress of Vienna, attended by all the victorious parties in the war to discuss the region boundaries of the post-Napoleonic War (Kwan, 2017).

That's Vienna, Austria, in May 1824, with a lot of local and international history international history related to this moment. And in that month, on May 7, 1824 to be precise, the people of Vienna will hear for the first time a new symphony by Ludwig van Beethoven, a well-known old musician at that time (Kelly, 2000). At that time, no one knew that this symphony would be the maestro's last; not the audience, not even Beethoven himself. Today, almost everyone in the world knows the symphony, or at least recognizes its melody. This is a symphony that contains vocal solos and choirs as part of a large orchestra, and at the end of the symphony, we are heard a beautiful melody with lyrics about joy, about human brotherhood (Zieg, 2022). Today, the tune is used for almost everything, from cigarette advertising jingles, to hymns in Protestant churches, to the anthem of the European Union.

There is so much to say about this symphony, and it has been said for hundreds of years since its first appearance. One of them may be because Beethoven included a kind of message of universal brotherhood by taking Schiller's poem which talks about "*Alle Menschen werden Brüder*". This message was very important to people at that time, and remains important to us today. In the end, the symphony was the culmination of the extraordinary Viennese symphonic tradition, not only from a musical point of view, but also from a cultural point of view.

4.2. Cultural Perspective on Beethoven's Ninth

Symphony was not something strange to European society at that time. All the audience who attended the premiere of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* at that time already had an idea in their minds about what they would hear (Kelly, 2000). A symphony is a kind of psychological journey consisting of a series of parts. Of course, not all symphonies are the same, but there are certain standards and structures in common. Usually a symphony begins with the main theme which is fast and loud, full of tone and lively, extroverted in nature, then the music ends. Then, the symphony moves on to the next movement, contrasting with the first movement (McDonald & Wöllner, 2023). This second movement is usually contemplative or more emotional, with a

tempo that tends to be slower. After listening to fast movement followed by a kind of slow tempo introvert movement, the third movement contains dance music that is easy to listen to, so that the audience can listen while "relaxing" a bit. Then, the symphony will end with a fast-paced finale so that the audience will go home happy. These are the things that Beethoven audiences expect when they see the word "symphony".

However, this is not the case in Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*, making it quite different from other symphonies. In terms of duration alone, this symphony is much longer than other previous symphonies. Beethoven also indicated from the start that this symphony was a big and serious thing. A symphony usually opens with loud, fast-paced music to attract attention, because at that time the atmosphere in concert performances was not like it is now, generally the audience was still chatting with each other. Beethoven begins this symphony in a very different way. The symphony opens very subtly, approaching nothingness, a kind of cosmic hum, a kind of background noise that makes us not quite sure what we are hearing. Then from that background sound emerges the smallest musical event: the string section plays two notes. From what we hear, we cannot yet know whether the tempo is fast or slow, whether the tonality is major or minor, we do not know anything except the musical event itself. Gradually, the bits of cosmic dust gathered and assembled themselves into a theme, as if to confirm that this was part of a larger, or even very large, cosmic scale.

Just the opening gives an idea of the enormity of the piece, and also of the size of the symphony. Another thing about this symphony is its meaning, in that it represents the end of an ongoing struggle with a kind of victory. Beethoven "swapped" the two inner movements of the symphony, with relatively lighter dance music placed in the second movement. After that, we come to the very long final movement, which has the most extraordinary beginning. This final movement opens with chaos, then Beethoven quotes pieces of musical themes from the first to the third movement, then all of this is "rejected" by the cello and bass. After that the orchestra "suggests" a theme, the *Ode to Joy* theme, accepted by the cello and bass, then we arrive at a series of variations of that theme. So, the fourth movement of this symphony can only make sense if we listen to the previous three movements, the kind of technique he also used when writing *Symphony No. 5*. *Symphony No. 9* also opened with the tonality of D minor, a very dark place, and after a very long journey finally ended majestically on D major as a symbol of victory and joy.

Beethoven did many things with this symphony that no one had ever done before, and it is in the context of knowing what Beethoven's audience expects in a symphony that we can understand what is new, unique, and special about this symphony (Zieg, 2022).

4.3. Beethoven in the World of Music and Art

Erich Hertzmann in his article entitled *Beethoven: His Historical and Artistic Significance* in 1955 highlighted that Beethoven was at the top in the history of development of music. He absorbed various trends in 18th century and perfected them through his works. At the same time, he worked with new idioms in music that would have a fundamental influence on the stylistic trends of the 19th century and could still be seen developing in the early 20th century. Thus, Beethoven occupies the most important position in the history of music: completing one era and starting a new one, and music historians of the 19th and 20th centuries recognize this (Hertzmann & Rogers, 1955).

Nevertheless, Hertzmann continued, there is no unanimity among music critics about the artistic value of Beethoven's works. Aesthetic judgments depend on the critic's tastes and views. The cultural background and feelings of the era also play a role. Aesthetic judgments are largely a product of the times, relying on contemporary schools of thought.

There is a big difference between historical and aesthetic value (Tenen, 2020). The history of music, art, and literature has shown that nothing is constant and that relationships vary widely (Brown, 1970). A work of high artistic value may not be very important from the point of view of historical development, and vice versa. Examples of extreme cases like that are certainly rare. However, there are many examples of works that have quite important historical value even though their artistic value is relatively small. Hertzmann gives the example of the first opera in Florence at the beginning of the 17th century having a revolutionary influence on the development of music, although its artistic value was not very great. On the other hand, Handel's oratorios and operas are great works of art that are full of music that is rich in expression and require high technique in the spirit of the Baroque, and historically take hundreds of years of development to get to that point, but do not lead us to further developments towards the future. From these two examples it can be concluded that the value of art lies in the exploitation and combination of techniques and expressions that were already established at that time; while the value of history lies in the rejection of the old and conventional and in the encouragement of the new and experimental. In general, works that

have great artistic value are retrospective, while those that have high historical value are works that look to the future (Hertzmann & Rogers, 1955).

Therefore, as long as the factual material is sufficient, it is certainly easier to see the historical value. On the other hand, it has always been and will always be difficult to judge the work of a particular composer or compositional style, especially if the connection and familiarity with a once living tradition has been lost (Livingston, 1999). In such cases, further research should be carried out on the basis of contemporary assessments and it is seen how unreliable they are in the case of Beethoven.

4.4. Beethoven and Politics

Ode to Joy is one of Schiller's important poems. This work is nothing new in the art world. Since the poem was released in 1785, there have been many attempts to use it as lyrics, such as by Christian Gottfried Körner in 1786. In 1792, Carl Friedrich Zelter used it for his choral music. Apart from the two of them, there were still Johann Friedrich Reichardt (1796), Ludwig-Wilhelm Tepper de Ferguson (1796), Johann Friedrich Hugo von Dalberg (1799), Johann Rudolf Zumsteeg (1803), and Franz Schubert (1815). In 1824, Beethoven took the work to a higher level, by integrating it into symphonic music, something that had never been done before (Zieg, 2022). Since then, *Ode to Joy* has been closely linked to Beethoven's work. If someone mentions the words *Ode to Joy*, what is meant is Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, not the work of another composer.

Western classical music, especially until the early 19th century, usually considered itself apolitical. Never mind politics, music and art in general have nothing to do with anything other than music. *L'art pour l'art*, *Kunst für die Kunst*, *ars gratia artis*. Art is just for art's sake. But not for Beethoven. Beethoven himself was a political man. His *Ninth Symphony* also has political value for Beethoven, so it is not surprising that Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* also often being used in events related to politics (Mathew, 2009). *Ode to Joy* is an example of a musical work that has multiple interpretations, which can represent both good and evil values (Farrington, 2019). Adolf Hitler greatly admired Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*. Jewish musicians who were awaiting their death in Nazi concentration camps were ordered to play it, metaphorically twisting Beethoven's call at the end of the symphony about brotherhood and universal joy into something terrifying, which diminished the light in the human soul.

More than four decades later, Leonard Bernstein gave several concerts to celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall (Robinson, 2016). In this concert, of course, Bernstein performed Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* and changed the word *freude* (joy) to *freiheit* (freedom). Emmanuel Macron chose this music as the backdrop for his victory speech after winning the 2017 French presidential election, as a symbol of his view about Europe.

5. Conclusion

Beethoven had a very important role in the development of classical music. Apart from being a musician, he is also known as a thinker and idealist. Therefore, it is not surprising that his works have more meaning than just musical pieces, for example *Ode to Joy*. Both musically and politically, the work has its significance, so it is no surprising that it was chosen as the European Union's anthem.

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