

BEDFORDSHIRE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Saturday 22 May 2027

Corn Exchange, Bedford, 7:30pm

Conductor: Bjorn Bantock

Programme

Festive Overture, Op. 96

Dimitri Shostakovich
(1906-1975)

At the time the *Festive Overture* was composed, Shostakovich was engaged with the Bolshoi Theatre as a musical consultant. Shostakovich's friend Lev Lebedinsky relates the story of when he was visiting the composer in the autumn of 1954 and a conductor from the Bolshoi Theatre Orchestra called in to declared that the orchestra needed a new work to celebrate the 37th anniversary of the October Revolution. The concert was scheduled in three days. Shostakovich agreed to provide an appropriate work and immediately began to compose the *Festive Overture*. Within an hour, couriers arrived at the apartment to pick up completed pages which were then conveyed to the Bolshoi's music copyists to prepare the parts for performance. The premiere of the score took place on November 6, 1954 at the Bolshoi, with the house orchestra conducted by Alexander Melik-Pashayev.

After an opening stentorian brass fanfare (a recycled melody from the composer's *Children's Notebook Op. 69*), the tempo abruptly changes to breakneck speed featuring the main jaunty theme on clarinet followed by the winds. After a brief development section in which the brasses and strings humorously challenge each other, the cellos and double basses declare the second subject. An extended string pizzicato section follows in which other orchestral sections interject a contribution, then a slower section reiterates the opening fanfare before there's a sudden dash to the final closing chords.

The score has since become one of the most enduring of Shostakovich's occasional works, and the composer has described the *Festive Overture* as 'just a short work, festive or celebrative in spirit'.

Programme notes: Uwe Radok

Symphony No. 9 In D Minor, Op. 125 (Choral)

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)

Allegro ma non troppo, un poco maestoso
Scherzo
Adagio molto e cantabile
Finale

The *Symphony No. 9* in D minor, Op. 125, is the final complete symphony by Ludwig van Beethoven, composed between 1822 and 1824. The symphony is regarded by many critics

and musicologists as a masterpiece of Western classical music and one of the supreme achievements in the history of music.

In his ninth symphony, Beethoven reached the pinnacle of symphonic writing. Like so much of his music, Beethoven worked long and arduously over its composition, writing and rewriting over several years. The first sketches of the work date back to 1809, although he first expressed the desire to set Friederich Schiller's poem *Ode to Joy* as early as 1793. At one time he considered using the poem in a concert aria, but it was not until the symphony was partly written that Beethoven thought of completing it with a choral movement, using Schiller's *Ode*.

That Beethoven was greatly worried about introducing voices into the last movement is plain. He did in fact write an instrumental finale which later became the last movement of the *A minor String Quartet Op. 132*. Then, having made up his mind to take this completely unprecedented course, he set about writing the choral parts and the orchestral variations, but left the vital connecting passages until later. He struggled for some months to find a solution, and then found the answer in the dramatic solo baritone declaration, '*O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!*'

Despite the fact that the Philharmonic Society of London had commissioned Beethoven to write the symphony and paid for its first performance, the work received its premiere in Vienna on 7 May 1824, when Beethoven was 53. It was the third work on the programme and Beethoven stood beside the conductor overlooking the score so that he might at least see the entries of chorus and soloists, for he was utterly deaf.

The story of the Ninth Symphony's premiere is a famous one. Because of his deafness, it was impossible for Beethoven to conduct. Instead, Michael Umlauf assumed those honours at the first performance, which took place on May 7, 1824. Beethoven had supervised rehearsals, and during the performance, he was on stage, following the work with a score in his own inimitable way. The audience response at the conclusion was resounding, and Beethoven, engrossed in his score, did not notice that the performance had ended. The contralto soloist, Caroline Unger walked over and gently turned Beethoven around to accept the audience's cheers and applause. It was to be the composer's last appearance in public before he withdrew into the final introspective years of the late string quartets.

In the first movement of the symphony, from a sombre, mysterious introduction the principal theme bursts dramatically from the entire orchestra. In contrast, the second theme emerges quietly and lyrically in the key of B flat, but soon the rhythmic throb of the music sweeps the movement onward through the development and recapitulation sections to an extended *coda*. Towards the close the impulse slackens and then after a thrilling crescendo and uprush of notes the whole orchestra declaims a fragment of the principal theme to complete the movement.

The second movement, marked *Scherzo*, is one of the finest examples of the form ever written. The tempestuous scherzo is of vast proportions contrasting with the flowing counterpoints of the Trio.

The slow *Adagio* movement is a magnificent set of variations, a form Beethoven often used to express his deepest emotions, and is based on two beautiful melodies which the composer alternately varies. and decorates. 'The slow movement is one of the most expressive slow

movements in all of Beethoven's music, and Beethoven explores melody to its inmost depths,' wrote musical analyst Donald Tovey about the *Adagio*. The second serene, pastoral-like theme is placed episodically between extended variations of the first.

The fantasia-like introduction of the fourth movement, which recalls each of the earlier movements in turn, is interspersed with recitatives accompanied by darkly sounding 'cellos and basses. Then the 'Ode to Joy' theme emerges, thoughtfully at first and then taken up by the whole orchestra. Just when it seems as though Beethoven is turning away from this new-found theme, the baritone soloist breaks in, 'O friends – Let us raise a song of sympathy, of gladness, O Joy let us praise thee'! Then begins the great choral and orchestral variations, a joyful sound, a triumphant, glorious shout of praise.

Schiller's 'Ode to Joy'

O Freunde, nicht dies Töne.
Sondern laßt uns angenehmere anstimmen, und
freudenvollere.
Freude, schöner, Götterfunken
Tochter aus Elysium,
Wir betreten, Feuer-tunken,
Himmliche, dien Heiligthum!
Deine Zauber binden wieder,
Was die Mode streng getheilt;
Alle Menschen werden Brüder,
Wo dein sanfter Flügel weilt.
Wem der grosse Wurf gelungen,
Eines Freundes Freund zu sein,
Wer ein holdes Weib errungen,
Mische seinen Jubel ein!
Ja, wer auch nur eine Seele
Sein nennt auf dem Erdenrund!
Und wer's nie gekonnt, der stehle
Weinend sich aus diesem Bund!
Freude trinken alle Wesen
An den Brüsten der Natur;
Alle Guten, alle Bösen
Folgen ihrer Rosenspur.
Küsse gab sie uns und Reben,
Einen Freund, geprüft, im Tod;
Wollust ward dem Wurm gegeben
Und der Cherub steht vor Gott.
Froh, wie seine Sonnen fliegen
Durch des Himmels prächt'gen Plan,
Laufet, Bruder, eure Bahn,
Freudig, wie ein Held zum Siegen.
Seid umschlungen, Millionen!
Diesen Kuss der ganzen Welt!
Brüder, über'm Sternenzelt
Muss ein lieber Vater wohnen.
Ihr stürzt nieder, Millionen?
Ahnest du den Schöpfer, Welt?
.. Such' ihn über'm Sternenzelt!
Über Sternen muss er wohnen.

O friends, no more these sounds continue,
Let us raise a song of sympathy of gladness,
O joy, let us praise thee!
Praise to Joy, the God-descended, Daughter of
Elysium;
Ray of mirth and rapture blended,
Goddess, to thy shrine we come.
By thy magic is united
What stern Custom parted wide,
All mankind are brothers plighted,
Where thy gentle wings abide.
Ye to whom the boon is measured
Friend to be of faithful friend;
Who a wife has won and treasured
To our strain your voices lend.
Yea if any hold in keeping
Only one heart all his own
Let him join us, or else weeping,
Steal from out our midst unknown.
Draughts of joy, from cup o'erflow- ing,
Bounteous Nature freely gives
Grace to just and unjust showing,
Blessing ev'rything that lives.
Wine she gave to us, and kisses,
Loyal friend on life's steep road,
E'en the worm can feel life's blisses,'
And the Seraph dwells with God.'
Glad as suns his will sent plying
Through the vast abyss of space,
Brothers, run your joyous race,
Hero-like to conquest flying.
O ye millions, I embrace ye!
Here's a joyful kiss for all!
Brothers, o'er yon starry sphere
Sure there dwells a loving Father.
O ye millions kneel before him,
World, dost feel thy Maker near?
Seek him o'er yon starry sphere,
O'er the stars enthron'd, adore him!

Programme notes: Margaret Murray

Several of these notes were supplied through the Programme Note Bank of Making Music, the National Federation of Music Societies, and from other sources.