

Beethoven - Sachs  
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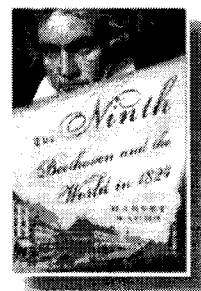
REVIEWS

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## European Union

by R.J. Stove

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*The Ninth: Beethoven and the World in 1824*

by Harvey Sachs

New York: Random House

240 pp., \$26.00

**SOMETIMES SHORT BOOKS** on great musicians markedly surpass longer ones. *Aspects of Wagner*, by British philosopher and ex-parliamentarian Bryan Magee, provides a much better guide in its 112 pages to the Master of Bayreuth than do most other Wagner-related books of seven times the size. Similarly, Edmund Morris's 2005 *Beethoven: The Universal Composer* (256 pages, all spaciously printed) contains far more genuine discernment than numerous scholarly marathons. And so with this latest concise publication by the Cleveland-born, now Manhattan-based, and for long Italian-domiciled Harvey Sachs. Sachs' earlier works include comprehensive biographies of Toscanini and Artur Schnabel, as well as a piercingly perspicacious 1982 essay on Glenn Gould (which concedes all Gould's pianistic virtues while exposing, with quiet mercilessness, Gould's fundamentally adolescent philosophizing). Any music lover—no matter how well he knows, or thinks he knows, Beethoven's Choral Symphony—will learn something new from Sachs' account, which is neither pure musicology nor pure aesthetic rumination, but a fascinating mixture of both. Herbert von Karajan's comment on Beethoven's symphonies in general accords with Sachs' attitude: "They become young-

er and younger every day; and the more you play them the more you *know* you can never get to the bottom of them." Sachs himself, with an equally refreshing scorn for the critical *Zeitgeist*, calls his own book "a vastly oversized and yet entirely inadequate thank-you note to Beethoven." A thank-you note—how bizarre! How sentimental! How hopelessly non-postmodern! But how good a précis of what Sachs has managed to produce.

Beethoven's verbal descriptions of his own music are fragmentary and few. He called the Pastoral Symphony "more an expression of feeling than of painting"; he famously dedicated the Eroica "to the memory of a Great Man" (his erstwhile hero Napoleon); but he never revealed his motivations in writing the Choral. By his silence on this point—as well as by the astounding demands which the Ninth made on its performers and audiences from the start—he left an interpretive vacuum which later composers and critics sought to fill. Far greater in length than any previous symphony, by Beethoven or anyone else, the Ninth went well beyond the realms of what musicians in 1824 considered possible. As Sachs notes,

A brand-new score that required innovatory approaches to technique; a mixture of professional and amateur instrumentalists and singers who were not accustomed to working together; vocal soloists who considered some

segments of their parts unsingable; hard-to-read, error-ridden manuscript parts for players and singers alike; and grossly insufficient time for study and preparation: under these conditions, only two rehearsals of the complete ensemble were held! One wonders whether even 50 percent of this new music could have been presented intelligibly, let alone convincingly, at the concert [in Vienna's Kärntnertor Theater] of May 7.

What remains staggering, almost two centuries afterward, is how rapidly the Ninth transcended its inauspicious debut, which Beethoven himself survived by less than three years. Within a decade of his death, the Ninth had become a staple of concert life in Paris, of all places, where Wagner heard it conducted by local maestro François Habeneck and found the result "perfect and so moving." Berlioz also championed the piece tirelessly, both on the rostrum and in his journalism. Bruckner, born a few months after the premiere, demonstrated (in Sachs' words) "what may be called a 'Ninth Symphony Obsession'" with his own output, which reveals that he never recovered from the emotional impact of the Ninth's opening bars, as frightening as they are mysterious. Brahms took so long to emerge from Beethoven's shadow—in his own estimation even more than in that of his early admirers—that his First Sym-

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phony acquired, rather to its creator's annoyance, the tag "Beethoven's Tenth." Debussy (in a passage unmentioned by Sachs) referred to the Ninth as "a universal nightmare": a characteristically spiteful remark, but not without half-truth, since even Wagner, with all his arrogance, retained a sense of the work as being a *ne plus ultra*. Much of the work's structure is conveyed by Sachs in an exegetic *tour de force* simultaneously detailed and readable, requiring no particular score-reading know-how, but with abundant revelations for those who do have the printed music handy.

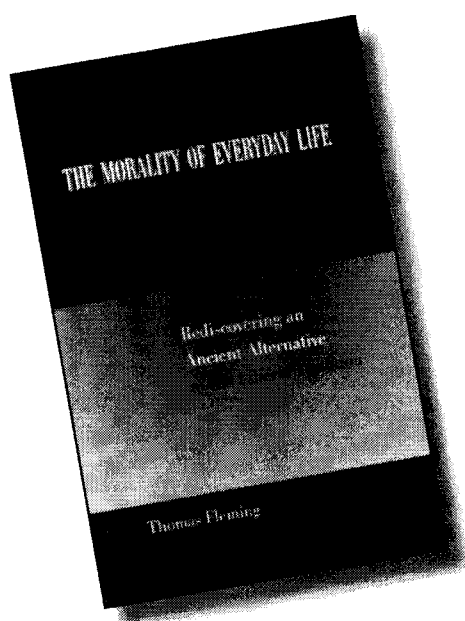
Byron, Delacroix, Stendhal, Heine, and Pushkin: All impinge on Sachs' account of life in 1824, though of the five only Heine had much interest in Beethoven, and that interest was mostly hostile (he attributed Beethoven's late compositional eccentricities to the effects of deafness). At least these artists' presence in Sachs'

narrative gives a sense of context and serves as a reminder that Europe probably came closer to being a unified nation in the years between 1815 and 1848 than at any time since. Balzac and Baudelaire cherished Beethoven as fervently as any German author could have done. Sachs cites both men; he also acknowledges later and more specialized writers on music, from the meritorious (musicologist Alfred Einstein) *via* the predominantly inane (T.W. Adorno) to the unashamedly demented (such as femocrat Adrienne Rich, who supposed the Ninth to be a "sexual message . . . [written] in terror of impotence or infertility"). Benjamin Britten once harrumphed that "the rot set in with Beethoven," this verdict being a veritable masterpiece of unconscious humor from one whose own claims to moral status consisted of draft-dodging and sharing his bed with prepubescent boys.

Sachs is at times less convincing on his subject's other music than on the Ninth. Like all self-confessed unbelievers dealing with Beethoven, he gets the *Missa Solemnis* wrong, exaggerating its doctrinal heterodoxy. After a comparison of outstanding ineptitude between the *Missa*'s "Agnus Dei" movement and Woody Allen's kvetching, Sachs calls the *Missa* as a whole "humanistic, nondenominational"—thus echoing a widespread myth painstakingly exploded by former Regensburg professor Warren Kirkendale in *The Musical Quarterly* four decades ago. These are nonetheless small faults in a book that for the most part demands, and should get, admiring attention for its elegant prose and for its intelligently unhackneyed insights.

*R.J. Stove lives in Melbourne, Australia, and is currently writing a biography of César Franck.*

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