

DISCIPLESHIP

Beethoven's Ninth Symphony

Discussion

I was raised around classical music. Even though we were poor in terms of material possessions, my mother, who loved classical piano, always made sure that we had a used piano in the house. She would often spend hours playing, and I loved hearing her play. During my undergraduate years, and with no musical talent of my own, I took Music History as an elective in order to learn more about this classical music that I, too, had come to love.

As I write this, it occurs to me that there is much that we, as Christ followers, can learn from classical music, specifically as it applies to a style of music referred to as a "symphony". According to Webster, the word symphony as refers to a musical piece with "harmonious complexity" and something "concordant in sound". Answers.com defines it as "something characterized by a harmonious combination". Orchestras, those collections of string, bass, woodwind, and (sometimes) percussion instruments, are typically central in the performance of a symphonic piece. When heard individually, each specific musical instrument appears to only play certain notes at certain times, seemingly without actually playing a "tune". However, when all sections of the orchestra are playing together, then the music, or symphony, will provide a "harmonious complexity" that produces deeply-moving music.

Symphonies are typically structured in "movements". Most symphonies have four movements, although many of them only have three. Within each movement, two competing themes typically play out in the composition, which is either played in a fast or a slow tempo. The traditional symphony that I have grown to especially like consists of four movements in a slow-fast-slow-fast style. Beginning in the 17th century, with the advent of standard definitions regarding what constitutes a specific instrument as well as standards for tuning those instruments, the composers of the day attempted to bring the voice of Opera – the music of the day – to the instrument. Mozart and Haydn turned this new approach into a real art form with the symphony.

Then, in the 18th century, Ludwig van Beethoven took symphonic music to a whole new level with the boldness in composition embodied in his 9th Symphony. Specifically, during the closing movement, the fourth, he did something that had never been done before: he added chorale voices. Up until that time, symphonies were for instruments only; so what he did was unthinkable, radical, and extremely dramatic; and with it he forever changed the symphony – most would say for the good, but not all. In 1903, Claude Debussy declared that the era of the symphony had ended with Beethoven's Ninth (even though in retrospect it had not).

So, you may rightly ask, *what does all this have to do with being a Christ-follower?*; I will answer this by asking you a question as well: *Have you ever thought of your church family as an orchestra, with God as the composer of a symphony that He has written for your church, and with Christ as the conductor?* Or, have you fallen into Debussy's trap of thinking that all symphonies must have four movements and only incorporate certain specific instruments? Can you see that although each one of us represents a different instrument in a different section of the orchestra, when we play the composition as the Composer has written it, and follow the guidance of a skilled Conductor, then we play at our very best and accomplish the original intent of the composer?

It occurs to me that this is what is at work in the local church. In other words, when something occurs outside the norm, such as Beethoven adding voice to a symphony, or such as a church adding a new ministry, or singing praise songs instead of hymns, or changing the order of worship, etc., do we embrace that anomaly and incorporate it into our symphony? Or do we reject it out-of-hand and continue to play God's symphony the way we want to, rather than trying to play what He would like to hear?

I have come to see God's hand in so much of what happens in any local church body, and ours is no different. I once saw God as a cookie maker, using the same cookie cutter in every church, i.e., each church should have a certain size staff with specific positions and ministries, each educational system should be structured the same, with the same music programs, missions programs, and community outreach. I reasoned that this was surely what God intended: that all churches be uniform and the same, and when that was not the case, something must be wrong or out of place.

Today, I see that God is actually the great composer and conductor creating marvelous symphonies within every local church. Each is different, both in composition and in orchestra components, but with a single theme: reaching mankind for eternity. I came to see that when we recognize that each church has a unique purpose and mission, with God orchestrating all of the pieces and parts of its symphony, then each church can be harmonious in its own unique way which glorifies God above all else. Perhaps this week, it will be a piece of jazz that He wants us to play; and perhaps next week, it will be a symphony. As long as we see Him as the Great Composer, and as long as we see others around us as having specific roles to play, then we can accomplish all that God intends. And while it may seem different, we will indeed be a "harmonious combination".

God is moving among us today preparing to have us play a new opus that He has written. He is moving the instruments around and bringing in some new ones as well. In the year ahead, He will no doubt be arranging us to do things that we have never done before in ways we have never done before – a brand new piece of music; how exciting! Perhaps you have been in the string section – maybe now you will be in the brass. Perhaps you were first violin – now, someone else will be given that role. Perhaps you have never played an instrument or sung a note in any orchestra before. This coming year might be your first ministry, your first church, your first Bible class, your first mission trip, or perhaps your first time working with people that you don't know or have never worked with -- all of which is true in a new orchestra or when learning a new piece.

Committing ourselves today to the work ahead, to embracing and learning the new "symphony" that Christ will accomplish with us this coming year is the first step in performing and contributing at our highest level. I'm excited, and I hope that you are as well! Learning a new piece of music is always a challenge, but it is exciting as well, especially when we recognize that God is not yet finished with us. In fact, He is just beginning. I can hardly wait to hear the first recital!

Praising God with you,

Wes