

THE ARTS

Extraordinary Beethoven Ninth Symphony Reborn

By Jonathan Richmond

MIT Symphony Orchestra
Conducted by David Epstein.
MIT Concert Chorus and
Brookline Chorus
William Cutter, Director.
Beethoven's Symphony No. 9.
Kresge Auditorium, March 14.

“It’s a big statement. It’s something I wanted to do for a long time. An appropriate way to say farewell,” said David Epstein in an interview about his final concert after thirty-three years leading the MIT Symphony Orchestra. But “big statement” turned out to be an understatement for the devastating torrent of emotion mixed with wisdom with which David Epstein ensnared Kresge Auditorium in the world premiere of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* — reborn.

To those in the know, David Epstein is no more a mere college conductor than his beloved MIT Symphony Orchestra is an amateur orchestra. His career has included major conducting engagements around the world; his compositions have attracted much praise; and his musicological scholarship places him among the greatest thinkers on the nature of music in our age.

As for the orchestra: There’s hardly a professional orchestra on this planet that can engage themselves with such concentrated rhetoric as was produced in the performance of this most powerful, delirious and crazed of works which was delivered with such freshness from Kresge’s stage.

Epstein cannot stop raving about the brilliance of his artists: “They’re a remarkable group of musicians, they really are. These people are not just very highly gifted but also... very highly accomplished in terms of their technical capacities on their instruments. They’re deeply intelligent and the combination has very much worked to the benefit of this performance in the sense that I’ve been able to discuss with them on a very probing level a lot of the issues... and I’ve seen these ideas coalesce into a performance.”

Epstein’s most notable research has been on the nature of time in music and in this regard he has departed from much modern orthodoxy. At a time when obedience to the metronome has become increasingly *de rigueur*, Epstein instead probes the structure of the work and seeks such tempi as give it a natural flow. The instant standing ovation, the cheering, the sense of elation the second the performance concluded showed that Epstein and the orchestra had found the truth of Beethoven in this work and given it a renewed lease of life.

There was somehow the most restrained and subtle violence to the opening of the first movement: Here was something unbearably massive waiting to let go. There was the occasional lapse: a delay on a cue, a momentary muddle in the strings. These were but slight glitches, however, and few other than the most hardened and mean-minded of critics would have even noted them. Far more importantly, the movement had a sense of natural unity and its flowing — ever driving — momentum captured the essence of Beethoven. Wind textures were particularly beautiful, and crisp percussion sounded the build up to a very intense climax.

Epstein points out in his performance notes that there are two approaches to the second movement, and it did not take a genius to guess that he would plunge his orchestra into the depths of the monstrously difficult one, in which, to use Epstein’s words, “One senses almost an evil presence in the music — the devil’s grin, so to speak, lurking behind the notes.” The playing here was both alert and nuanced, with orchestral voices both clearly differentiated and blending harmoniously. Most importantly, the rhythms were satanically intoxicating, pushing the music forward with tension and power.

I sat up at 2 o’clock this morning trying to prove Epstein’s approach to the third movement wrong. The problem was that I had simply enjoyed it too much. Where else had I heard such a beautiful, contemplative celebration of the inner most secrets of the human soul, and where had I heard such wondrously serene playing? The strings were intensely lyrical, the brass brilliantly illuminating. And yet, I pedantically told myself as I sleeplessly rammed on one CD after another, Epstein’s tempo was simply outrageous: far too slow.

So I listened to Norrington and Gardiner, Zander, Harnoncourt and Hogwood, and realized that while many of their politically-correct models of

Beethoven did evoke some beautiful playing, there was something missing that Epstein had found. Epstein’s performance had an inner logic that has escaped so many of the great modern conductors who try to stick closely to the written commands of the score. Epstein’s interpretation produced the most profound and human account of what is at once some of the most lonely yet uplifting music ever written.

Finally, it was time for the raptures of one of the maddest of movements in musical history and Epstein’s crew captured the massive elation of the piece. The opening emphasized leashed power again, almost tortured in its celestial understatement. The basses and cellos heralded the onset of joy followed by a gentle orchestral playing of the choral main theme. And then the power grew. And how!

Choral Director William Cutter endowed the massive chorus with the same appreciation of rhythm as Epstein produced from the orchestra, and it showed through in firm, well-shaped sounds that evoked the glory of the music.

The soloists did not stand out as much in this performance as in many other accounts of the *Ninth*. Baritone Robert Honeysucker delivered the most evocative of solo singing, with mezzo Gale Fuller adding some nice dashes of color. Soprano Margaret O’Keefe and Tenor Mark Evans seemed a bit restrained, by comparison. The choral ensemble was the true vocal hero of the performance.

Orchestral playing continued to be outstanding as the movement intensified: accurate and powerful, yet more than that, it was intensely moving; a statement of joy, a message of hope, a homage to Beethoven, a testament to the breadth as well as brilliance, the humanity as well as Humanities to be found at MIT, and of whose profound excellence the outside world should know a great deal more.

Jonathan Richmond, a Fellow at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, was a critic and Arts Editor for The Tech during much of the 1980s and early 90s.



GABOR CSANYI—THE TECH

David Epstein conducts the MIT Symphony Orchestra for the last time Saturday evening.

There really was not any need for alcohol at the after-performance presentations to David Epstein in Lobdell. Rarely has such a massive crowd seemed so high, and without the slightest of harmful side effects. And the praise for David Epstein was lavish.

Peter Child, head of Music and Theatre Arts, paid tribute to “one of our country’s most sophisticated thinkers about music,” who had led the orchestra “through a great many peaks, of which tonight’s is one of the most memorable and moving.” Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences Philip S. Khoury named Epstein a Senior Fellow in the Arts and Humanities at MIT.

Bonny Kellermann ’72 presented a folder of photos and memories of the Symphony from a large number of alumni, many in attendance at the event. The alumni also donated \$5000 to the orchestra in Epstein’s honor. Orchestra President John Erlich G said “thank you for the wonder, the joy you have given us,” and presented him with a copy of the *Ninth Symphony* score, signed and with comments from members of the orchestra, and also with a CD specially produced for the occasion with performances by the MIT Symphony Orchestra.

An overwhelmed David Epstein praised the way the Symphony learned from him, adding, however, that “the secret is that I learn more from you.” He quoted Duke Ellington: “I not only love you; I love you madly.”