



Beethoven's Ninth: A Political History

By Esteban Buch

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Who hasn't been stirred by the strains of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony? That's a good question, claims Esteban Buch. German nationalists and French republicans, communists and Catholics have all, in the course of history, embraced the piece. It was performed under the direction of Leonard Bernstein at a concert to mark the fall of the Berlin Wall, yet it also serves as a ghastly and ironic leitmotif in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. Hitler celebrated his birthdays with it, and the government of Rhodesia made it their anthem. And played in German concentration camps by the imprisoned, it also figured prominently at Mitterand's 1981 investiture.

In his remarkable history of one of the most popular symphonic works of the modern period, Buch traces such complex and contradictory uses—and abuses—of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony since its premier in 1824. Buch shows that Beethoven consciously drew on the tradition of European political music, with its mix of sacred and profane, military and religious themes, when he composed his symphony. But while Beethoven obviously had his own political aspirations for the piece—he wanted it to make a statement about ideal power—he could not have had any idea of the antithetical political uses, nationalist and universalist, to which the Ninth Symphony has been put since its creation. Buch shows us how the symphony has been "deployed" throughout nearly two centuries, and in the course of this exploration offers what was described by one French reviewer as "a fundamental examination of the moral value of art." Sensitive and fascinating, this account of the tangled political existence of a symphony is a rare book that shows the life of an artwork through time, shifted and realigned with the currents of history.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Buch . . . attempts nothing less than a cultural history of the 'Ode to Joy.' -- *The Economist*, April 24, 2003

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From the Inside Flap

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