

American Philharmonic

SONOMA COUNTY

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Taking a bigger risk

American Philharmonic taking on largest production ever, Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy' at Wells Fargo Center

By Nicolas Grizzle

It was the first symphony composed with human voice, and the Ode to Joy would not be complete without it. Beethoven's ninth symphony, considered one of the finest pieces of music ever written, celebrates the joy of life in its text and music. It celebrates the spirit of community and demolishes the boundaries of class. This is why it is a perfect choice for the American Philharmonic, Sonoma County's all-volunteer, donation-based orchestra, to take on.

The concert is a one-night-only event, and even though it's free (donations accepted), tickets are already sold out. Only 100 will be available at the door, so get to the Wells Fargo Center for the Arts early for the 8 p.m. concert.

"It's taking a bigger risk," said American Philharmonic artistic director Charles Sepos, comparing the upcoming concert to the philharmonic's recent performance of Mahler's fifth symphony. "People are more familiar with it." But, he added, "We're not adverse to taking on huge pieces."

Soloists Rhoslyn Jones, soprano, Katharine Tier, mezzo-soprano and Matthew O'Neill, tenor are Adler Fellows of the young artist program of the San Francisco Symphony. "These are very high-level young soloists," said Sepos. And the star soloist is James Busterud, a baritone who has been in productions with the Metropolitan Opera, among others. "It's a privilege and a pleasure to have somebody coming who's just such a great singer," said Sepos.

The concert features the Santa Rosa Symphonic Chorus under direction of R. Daniel Earl and the Santa Rosa Junior College Concert Choir under direction of Jody Benecke.

The Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125 "Choral" is the last complete symphony composed by Ludwig van Beethoven. It was completed in 1824, when Beethoven was nearly completely deaf. The simple tune took him ages to write, and many revisions have been found of the main theme.

It incorporates text from "Ode To Joy," by Friedrich Schiller in the last movement, but the first three are without human voice. When it was first performed, the idea of using voice in symphonic composition was unheard of. But Beethoven felt there was no better way to express the joy of life than with the breath of human voice.

The fourth movement takes the form of a miniature symphony. The movement itself has four movements, each following traditional symphonic form. The choir is silent until the baritone belts out, "Oh friends, not these tones! Let us raise our voices in more pleasing and more joyful sounds!" This prompts the familiar choral entrance into the symphony.

"It's extraordinary to have a community orchestra perform any of the big works, let alone in a row like this," said Sepos.

The American Philharmonic - Sonoma County, formerly the Cotati Philharmonic, has taken on some ambitious projects since transforming into a national volunteer orchestra organization two years ago. Mahler's fifth symphony and Shostakovich's violin concerto No. 1 are two recent endeavors. Large, expensive orchestras rarely take on these pieces because of their technical difficulty, but these types of things seem to be routine for the American Philharmonic..