Music has always been integral to the Olympic Games. Music accompanies particular sports, is played at award ceremonies, is a mainstay of the Cultural Olympiads, brands media presentations, and is extensively featured during the opening and closing ceremonies.

From the very beginning, modern Olympics Games founder Pierre de Coubertin recognised the power of ceremony and pageantry in the staging and popularisation of the Olympic Games, and he assigned music a central role in the Games’ ritual presentation. “Fashions have undergone many changes over two thousand years,” he said, “but music has remained the factor which best conveys the emotion within a crowd, and which best accompanies the amplitude of a grand spectacle.” While he employed a wide variety of music genres in his fledging creation, he was invariably drawn to classical music. One of his favorite pieces was the final movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, the Ode to Joy.

Upon learning that Beethoven’s Ode to Joy would grace the opening ceremonies of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, Coubertin declared:

Nothing could make me happier, because during my childhood this particular movement stirred and moved me greatly. The harmonies of the piece seemed to communicate with the Divine. I hope that in future choral music, which is so well-suited to translating the power of the hopes joys of youth, will accompany their Olympic feats more and more.

Although he died shortly after the Berlin Games, Coubertin would no doubt have been delighted to know that his hope would be fulfilled, that Beethoven’s famed Ninth would endure as a part of the Olympic ceremonial. In fact, few musical pieces, with the obvious exception of the mandated Olympic Hymn and national anthems, have been performed as often as Beethoven’s monumental expression of human idealism.

The purpose of this paper is to trace the use of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, specifically the Ode to Joy, throughout the history of the modern Olympic Games, indicating where and when it was performed and for what purposes. I first introduce the famed work, then detail the history of the Ode to Joy within Olympic Games history, and conclude with some theoretical musings about the relevance of Beethoven’s work within the panoply of the Olympic Movement.

Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, Op. 125

Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony has assumed iconic proportions. Harvey Sachs acknowledges the work as “one of the most precedent shattering and influential compositions in the history of music”. Mikhail Bakunin, the Russian revolutionary and anarchist, told Richard

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A memorial to Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) in his native Bonn. His hearing problems soon degenerated into profound deafness, which put an early end to his career as a pianist. Thereafter he concentrated on composing.

Photo: picture-alliance
Wagner that “if all the music that has ever been written were lost in the expected worldwide conflagration, we must pledge ourselves to rescue this symphony, even at the peril of our lives”.5

Innovative and ground-breaking, it was the first example of a symphony to incorporate voices. The words sung during the final movement were taken from Friedrich von Schiller’s Ode to Joy (An die Freude), written in 1785 and revised in 1803, with changes by Beethoven. The Ninth premiered on 7th May 1824, at the Kärntnertortheater in Vienna. The programme also included Beethoven’s The Consecration of the House (Die Weihe des Hauses) and the three grand hymns of the Missa Solemnis. The respected violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh led the orchestra and Michael Umlauf, the theater’s Kapellmeister, directed the whole. The soprano and alto parts were interpreted by Henrietta Sontag and Caroline Unger. The audience greeted the work enthusiastically.6

Like the music itself, Schiller’s text celebrates the great ideals of the Enlightenment and revels in the possibility of a progressive and amicable humanity. “All men will be brothers” (Alle Menschen werden Brüder), the Ode to Joy boldly proclaims. With its heroic aspirations, awesome grandeur, and choral splendour, the Ode to Joy encodes the Enlightenment themes of brotherhood and reconciliation, equality and progress, and the possibility of human perfectibility. In the Ninth, Beethoven specifically employs Schiller’s text to portray “This kiss for the whole world” (Diesen Kuss der ganzen Welt) which originates “above the starry canopy” (über’m Sternenzelt), which must unite and touch us all, “All good” (Alle Guten) and “all bad” (alle Bösen); “Run, brothers, your path” (Laufet, Brüder, eure Bahn); “Be embraced, millions!” (Seid umschlungen, Millionent).7

Conceiving of the Ode to Joy as an enduring sonic symbol of a community of mankind, Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, the founder of the early 20th-century Pan Europa organisation, announced in 1929 that “Ludwig van Beethoven composed the melody that supremely expresses the will and desire of the masses for joy, union, and brotherhood”.8 The philosophical similarities between Beethoven’s Ode to Joy and Olympism, with its enduring emphasis on peace, joy, and universal amity are, of course, striking.

1924 Paris

While conventional histories suggest that Beethoven’s Ninth was first performed at the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936, it is possible that it may have actually been played at some point during the 1924 Paris Olympics celebrations. According to one historian, W. E. Künstler, Coubertin expressed his desire as early as 1912 that the Ode to Joy be performed at the 1916 Berlin Olympics because “he [Coubertin] considered the words to be the best expression of the Olympic spirit”.9

Carl Diem, General Secretary of the 1916 Olympic Games, records that in 1912 Coubertin, in a postcard to Diem, expressed his wish that Beethoven’s Ninth be included in the opening ceremonies.10 While Diem does not indicate whether it was played during the 1924 Games, Künstler asserts that the symphony was, in fact, “performed for the first time at the Games in Paris, at the Théatre du Champs Elysées”.11 It is possible that the timing of the performance was a coincidence and had nothing to do with the Games themselves.

1936 Berlin

Although Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony may or may not have been performed as part of the 1924 Paris celebrations, it was certainly played as part of the Berlin Olympics. Having been elected General Secretary for the 1936 Games, Diem notes that another postcard from Coubertin appeared on his desk renewing Coubertin’s wish that the symphony be part of the Olympic ceremonies. According to Diem, Coubertin did not want to overburden the opening ceremony with the Ninth Symphony, but suggested rather that it be performed on the evening of the opening day.12 As a result, it was performed on the evening of 16 August 1936 as the climax of the Festspiel, a pageant that immediately followed the official opening ceremonies in the Olympic Stadium and featured 10,000 performers. Allegedly, Coubertin followed the performance of the festival on the Geneva radio programme.

When the 1916 Games were awarded to Berlin, Pierre de Coubertin encouraged the idea of including Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony in the opening ceremony. But he had to wait 20 years for this. When he spoke on the radio for the first time on 4th August 1935, he was able to announce that his dream would finally be fulfilled in the following year.

Photo: IOC/OSC Archives
Written and conceived by Carl Diem to exemplify the romantic theme of youth, the pageant began at 9:00 pm, and, according to New York Times reporter Frederick Birchall “surpassed in sheer beauty even the picturesque pageant of nations”.\textsuperscript{13} As historian Richard Mandell describes it: “Row after row of boy and girl gymnasts, planted on the brilliantly illuminated sward, swayed and stretched like animated tulips”.\textsuperscript{14}

Following on the heels of Mary Wigman’s presentation, ‘Dance of the Mourners’, the first few bars of Beethoven’s Ode to Joy, conducted by Fritz Stein and featuring the soloists Ria Ginster, Emmi Leisner, C. A. Walter and Rudolf Watzke, rang around the stadium. A voice was heard singing Schiller’s famous poem and a chorus of 1500 joined in to present what Birchall called “the most ambitious and, in the opinion of many, the most beautiful pageant ever before attempted in any land”.\textsuperscript{15}

The pageant was repeated on 3rd August and two more times after the Games. According to Mandell, the most enchanted participant in all the pageants was the Führer.\textsuperscript{17} But the various ceremonies also clearly impressed Coubertin, who invoked Schiller’s lines in extolling “the physical harmony stronger than death itself” that was being forged under the auspices of the Olympic Flag, and he warmly thanked the German people and their leader.\textsuperscript{18} Despite the Ninth’s reputation as a manifesto of universal solidarity, for the German organisers the music was more pragmatically and politically conceived as a proclamation of Nazi Volksgemeinschaft.\textsuperscript{19} Hitler’s strategy was to use the Games to present Germany as an “island of peace” and himself as the “chancellor of peace”, and he used both the good name of Coubertin and the joyful universalism of the Ode to Joy to accomplish his political goals.

The Ninth Symphony was next heard during the 1952 Oslo Winter Games as accompaniment to the gold medal performances of German athletes in the two- and four-man bobsled and the figure skating pairs. From an historical perspective, the use of the final chorus of the Ninth in the Oslo Games stemmed from a disagreement between Chancellor Adenauer and President Heuss over the most appropriate anthem for the Federal Republic of Germany, as well as, to some extent, Heuss’ desire to appease the anti-German feelings that were still prevalent in Norway.

While Adenauer supported a return to Weimar and the anthem Deutschlidade, Heuss objected to the refrain ‘Deutschland, Deutschland über alles, über alles in der Welt’, and favoured in its place a text which he had written called Hymne an Deutschland. But Heuss’ hymn found little favour with the German public and Heuss agreed to Adenauer’s compromise proposal to raise the third verse of the Deutschlidade, with the theme ‘Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit’, to the rank of a national anthem.

However, Heuss, under the law, delayed his signature until after the Games in Oslo because he felt that the Norwegians might construe the playing of the anthem as an affront. As a result, Beethoven’s final chorus rather than the German national anthem marked the three German victories in the Oslo Games. Although the new anthem was adopted in time for the Summer Games in Helsinki, it was never heard because Germany failed to win a gold medal.\textsuperscript{20}

From 1956 Cortina d’Ampezzo to 1968 Mexico City

Beethoven’s Ode to Joy melody was subsequently heard as a mitigating factor in the Cold War, as deteriorating political relations between East and West Germany spilled over into the Olympic arena.\textsuperscript{21} Post–World War Realpolitik confronted idealists who optimistically hoped that the spirit of Olympism would overcome political differences and bring East and West Germany together as one nation competing under the Olympic banner.

At the International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) 50th Session in Paris in 1955, the National Olympic Committee (NOC) of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was provisionally accepted on the grounds that the two Germanys would carry out the necessary steps to send a joint team to the 1956 Games. Seeing this as a positive step forward, in what were hitherto stymied negotiations, the East and West German NOCs both agreed to compete under a non-partisan flag, a banner with the German colors of black, red and gold, with the five Olympic rings set in white in the middle, and a neutral anthem, Beethoven’s Ninth.
Consequently, during the opening ceremonies of the 1956 Melbourne Summer Olympics, the combined German team marched into the stadia to the accompaniment of Beethoven’s widely-recognised Choral Symphony. Even though the IOC Congress in Madrid in 1965 authorized separate teams to represent East and West Germany at the 1968 Winter and Summer Games, it did so with the stipulation that they would still march into the stadium using the compromise Olympic flag as well as share the choral theme from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony as their victory anthem.22

Despite the IOC’s mandates, however, the Ode to Joy was, in fact, only used during the Melbourne Games. During the negotiations on the formation of a united German team, it was agreed that for individual winners at Cortina d’Ampezzo the anthem of the relevant state would be played, but that in the case of a team victory a minute’s silence would be held in order to draw attention to the partition of Germany.23 As a result, the third verse of the Deutschlandlied accompanied the giant slalom victory ceremonial for West Germany’s Ossi Reichert.

While in 1956 there was no problem with the adopted flag because both Germanys had the same black, red and gold banner, a new situation arose in 1959 when, in connection with the 10th anniversary of its founding, the GDR changed its flag to include an additional state’s emblem in the red section of the flag. A compromise was engineered by IOC President Avery Brundage, and between 1960 and 1968 both Germanys adopted a flag with white Olympic rings on a red background.24

Furthermore, in order to avoid the danger that the so-called Becher Anthem would be played at subsequent Summer Games (Auferstanden aus Ruinen und der Zukunft zugewandt, lass uns Dir zum Guten dienen, Deutschland einig Vaterland), West Germany insisted on returning to the music of Beethoven. This arrangement was maintained until 1964, and, as resolved by the IOC, until 1968. By the time of the 1972 Munich Games, both German Olympic Committees had obtained full recognition by the IOC, and both marched into the stadium under their own flags and their victorious athletes were honoured with their own national anthems.

1968 Mexico City

In Mexico City, Beethoven’s Ode to Joy was, for the first time, played during the closing ceremonies, a tribute to the next Olympic Games to be held in 1972 in Munich. The Ode to Joy theme was followed by a thousand mariachis sounding the gay notes of La Negra, the bold notes of Guardalajara, and the poignant notes of Mexico’s traditional song of farewell, Las Golondrinas. After the official declaration of the closing, the flag was lowered, and the flame extinguished. When the scoreboard changed from Mexico 1968 to Munich 1972, fireworks filled the night sky.25

Mexico City was also the last time Beethoven’s Finale was mandated as the anthem for East and West Germany. According to Dr. Eduardo Hay, a member of the Mexican presentation committee, the East Germans actively lobbied to secure their own national anthem for the closing ceremonies. When the official Mexican band explained that they could not learn a new symphony on such short notice, the East Germans found a band that said they could, to which Pedro Ramirez Vázquez, the President of the Mexico City Organizing Committee, retorted: “They are Mexicans. If you asked them to play Beethoven’s Eleventh Symphony, they would tell you they could do it.”26 The Germans paraded to Beethoven’s Ninth.

1972 Sapporo and Munich

While the Ode to Joy did not feature in the Sapporo Games celebrations, several of Beethoven’s pieces, including the Eroica, his Third Symphony, as well as his Fifth Symphony, were performed as part of the Arts Festival.27 Nor was the Ode to Joy performed during the Munich Games. But, in certain respects, its omission was more significant than its inclusion. Otl Aicher, the head of the design department for the Munich Olympics, purposely eschewed Beethoven’s Ninth and the Nazi aesthetic of monumentalism – what organising committee chair Willi Daume described as “the bombastic style of the Third Reich”28 — and argued instead that there should be “no enormity of scale” or “ceremonial awe”, no “gigantic choirs” or “blaring military bands”, but rather an atmosphere of “playful improvisation”29 that featured “fresh innovative, formulations”.30 His intentions were to transform what

At the 1960 Winter Games in Squaw Valley, a combined German team marched behind the black, red and gold flag superimposed with white Olympic Rings.

Photo: Volker Kluge Archive
cultural historian Paul Betts called “the wreckage of the past into a brave new work of post-fascist modernity”. Even though a regular Arbeitskreis Musik, which included Carl Orff, Werner Egk, and Herbert von Karajan, strenuously lobbied for the retention of Coubertin’s “favorite classical melody” Beethoven’s Finale, which they envisioned being performed by three Munich orchestras, Aicher’s modernist approach demanded music of a more “carefree and relaxed” nature that displayed an “openness to the future”. As a result, the opening ceremonies in Munich showcased music such as Herbert Rehbein’s Olympic Fanfare, a Dutch-manufactured Glockenspiel that played Kalinka and Jingle Bells, as well as the German Volklied Muss I denn, Carl Orff’s Sumer is icumen in, and Kurt Edelhagen’s selection which included American Swing.

On the Spielstraße, avant-garde theater maker Frank Bruckner also proposed Beethoven’s Ninth – interestingly interspersed with the sounds of machine-gun fire and bomb salvos – as a way to directly confront Germany’s past, but Daume objected on the grounds that reminding the world of 1936 was not the most prudent way to represent the new modern Germany of 1972. The idea was dropped and Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was dismissed from the Munich Games.

1980 Moscow

During the 1980 Olympics in Moscow, Beethoven’s Ninth was used more than once. The piece was used twice, both times as an acknowledged expression of Olympism and global harmony, even amid the Cold War, and even in the face of the US-led boycott of the Games. During the opening ceremonies, Beethoven’s Ode to Joy acted as background music.

The piece echoed throughout the Grand Arena of the Central Lenin Stadium while eight Masters of Sports of the USSR carried out the Olympic Flag. Marching behind them were 22 other Masters of Sports. The tune was played on loudspeakers rather than by live orchestral, and there were no accompanying voices. It played for only one minute. Spectator response was subdued. During the closing ceremony, the audience was more animated as the Ode to Joy, played while the Olympic Flag was lowered, blasted out across the loudspeaker system as fireworks “boomed and whooshed like rocket guns exploded in the dusky sky”.

1984 Sarajevo and Los Angeles

Beethoven’s famous tune adorned the opening ceremonies during both the Winter and Summer Games of 1984. In Sarajevo, 48 countries marched into the Koševo Olympic Stadium on 9th February, to the sounds of pop and disco, folk and traditional music, but also to the sounds of Mozart, Bach, and Beethoven’s Ninth. In Los Angeles, the Ode to Joy played after the administration of the Olympic Oath as 2000 Los Angeles residents from numerous ethnic groups, all in native dress, marched onto the track, “an appropriate musical expression of a global humanity”, as one witness commented.

1992 Albertville and Barcelona

Beethoven’s Ode to Joy was used extensively during the 1992 Albertville and Barcelona Olympics, as a neutral anthem and as a component of the opening and closing ceremonies.

Reflecting the dramatic reconfiguration of Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a newly constituted Commonwealth of Independent States consisting of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, marched into the opening ceremonies of both the Winter Games in Albertville as well as the Summer Games in Barcelona as the Unified Team. The traditional red flag bearing the hammer and sickle was replaced
with the Olympic banner of five interlocking rings, and the State Anthem of the USSR was retired in favour of Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy*. But the Unified Team, at least in Barcelona, was not alone in its use of Beethoven’s esteemed work.

On 6th November 1991, Sam Ramsamy, President of the NOCSA, announced South Africa’s acceptance of an invitation to participate in the 1992 Barcelona Games. He further revealed that South Africa’s team would discard the traditional Springbok emblem and orange, white and blue flag, as well as the traditional anthem, *Die Stem van Suid–Afrika*, acknowledging that each were considered by many as notorious symbols of apartheid. Consequently, in the Barcelona Games, South Africa marched under a new flag of cascading brown, blue, and green bands set against a mountain, and a new anthem, Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy*.

Ironically, in 1974, another African country, the Republic of Rhodesia, also adopted the tune of Beethoven’s Ninth as its national anthem.⁵⁹ Although no Rhodesian athletes ever competed in the Olympic Games, had they marched in the opening ceremonies, or won a gold medal, the world would have heard yet another rendition of Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy*, this time under the rubric of ‘Rise, O Voices of Rhodesia’.

The opening ceremony of the Barcelona Olympics were touted by many as one of the most spectacular and stylish of all time, an elegant expression of Catalonia’s message of culture and sport. Held in the neo-classical Olympic Stadium on Montjuïc, a live audience of 65,000 was treated to a cavalcade of music and singing that included a tasteful festival of opera, “music for the universe”, that consisted of 17 arias performed by six of the greatest opera singers in the world – Jaume Aragall, Teresa Berganza, Montserrat Caballé, Josep Carreras, Plácido Domingo and Joan Pons. Following the rousing ‘Triumphant March’ from Giuseppe Verdi’s *Aida*, the lone voice of 13 year–old Eleazar Colomer delivered the first verse of Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy*.⁶⁰

The *Ode to Joy* was also used in the closing ceremony as part of an array of music, including the Olympic Anthem sung by Plácido Domingo, Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Amigo Para Siempre*, performed by Sarah Brightman and Josep Carreras, and Manuel de Falla’s *Cancion del Fuego Fatuo* delivered by Teresa Berganza. As *New York Times* reporter Michael Janofsky noted, the world was entertained by ceremonies that were “dazzlingly untraditional” in their combined “eclectic theatrics”.⁶¹

1998 Nagano

Nagano hosted the most extensive, and, possibly the most spectacular, certainly the most global, rendition of Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy* to date.⁶² The beloved piece was performed twice during the Nagano Festival of Culture and Arts as part of Nagano’s thematic One Heart–One World programme. Among the 264 cultural events held at numerous venues within the Nagano Prefecture and in major metropolitan areas around Japan, Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was presented in February 1997 in Matsumoto City⁶³, and, in January 1998, in Nagano City, performed by a massed chorus of 5,000.

During the opening ceremony in the Minami Nagano Sports Park Stadium, Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy* was aired and performed worldwide in an unprecedented hi-tech spectacular. As the finale of the opening ceremony, the *Ode to Joy* was performed by choirs on the five continents represented by the five Olympic Rings. Live images of Seiji Ozawa conducting the Nagano Winter Orchestra, eight soloists chosen from around the world, and the Tokyo Opera Singers at the Nagano Prefecture Hall, were displayed on the gigantic video screens in the stadium.

Images from locations on five continents – in front of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, on the steps of the Opera House in Sydney, in the General Assembly Hall of the UN in New York City, in front of the Shenwa Gate of the Forbidden Palace in Beijing, and at False Bay near Cape Town – were carried live via satellite to the 50,000 spectators in Nagano.⁶⁴ The entire global performance was delivered by a 2000 strong chorus in the stadium and an additional 200 singers worldwide. Eighty ballet dancers circled the stadium floor.⁶⁵ In true Olympic fashion, the live audience was asked to stand and join the 2,000 athletes from more than 80 countries in singing the hallowed phrase, “*all men will become brothers*” (*Alle Menschen werden Brüder*). “People all around the world singing together about joy – that’s the purpose”, said Ozawa.⁶⁶

2010 Vancouver and 2012 London

In Vancouver and London, Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy* melody took on both commercial and artistic overtones. Although the *Ode to Joy* was not performed as part of the Vancouver ceremony, it ran as background music in one of five commercials in official Olympic sponsor General Electric’s advertising series entitled ‘Healthy Living’ that aired during the telecast of the opening ceremonies.⁶⁷ Another major sponsor, Samsung, used the melody in the televisual run-up to the 2012 London Games to promote their new product, the Galaxy Note Phone. The commercial featured their Olympic Ambassador, Los Angeles Galaxy midfielder David Beckham, playing the theme by kicking footballs against specially tuned drums: Olympic idealism in the service of Olympic commercialism.

More traditionally, Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was granted a signature role during the London Cultural
Olympiad as the culminating concert in a complete cycle of Beethoven symphonies. At 6:30 pm, on 27th July 2012, the evening of the opening ceremony in the Stadium in Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, Daniel Barenboim raised his baton in the Royal Albert Hall to lead the West-East Divan Orchestra in a rendition of Beethoven’s Ninth that included contributions from the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain featuring bass René Pape, mezzo-soprano Waltraud Meier, soprano Anna Samuil, and tenor Michael König. “What better way to mark today’s opening of the London 2012 Olympics than Beethoven’s ultimate hymn to universal brotherhood?” the BBC asked. Equally inspiring was the fact that only a few hours after laying his baton down, Barenboim joined seven other noted humanitarians to carry the Olympic Flag in the opening ceremony.

1988 Calgary–2014 Sochi: As Highlights Reel and Tribute

For many years, the American television network ABC and, subsequently, NBC, ran the Olympic highlights reel at the end of the closing ceremonies to various renditions of Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy*, most notably after the 1988 Calgary, 1992 Barcelona, and 1996 Atlanta Games. The 1992 Barcelona Games’ highlights reel was accompanied by the Cleveland Orchestra under the baton of Lorin Maazel and showcased the voices of Elena Obraztsova, Lucia Popp and Jon Vickers. The 1996 Atlanta highlights reel, considered by many as the best of the closing sports reels, featured Sir Georg Solti and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the soloists Yvonne Minton, Pilar Lorengar and Stuart Burrows. The 2002 Salt Lake City highlights reel, played to the *Ode to Joy*, was uploaded onto YouTube by remedimmus, and, in 2014, following the Sochi Games, Steve Gilkes uploaded a stirring tribute to the Winter Olympics Team Canada medal winners set to Beethoven’s famous tune.

In all cases, these visual tributes were inspirational and wistful, full of joy and pathos, and ultimately a rousing and reverential homage to Olympic athletes and the Olympic Games.

Conclusion

Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony is more than just a universally popular piece of classical music; it is what semioticians would call an “empty signifier”, a symbol that is apt to receive any meaning. For much of its history, the *Ode to Joy* was, in fact, what *Times* writer Igor Toronyi-Lalic describes as “a companion to the most murky and murderous of political extremes”. It served the Nazi propaganda machine, was redeemed by many during the Cultural Revolution in China as a piece of progressive class struggle, was adopted in 1974 as the national anthem by the white supremacist régime in Rhodesia, was played in 1989 during the student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, and blared out across airport runways in Japan during Second World War as kamikaze pilots boarded their planes. But, as Toronyi-Lilac also notes, the “misappropriation of the ode by evil people does not affect the beauty and good intentions of the original”. Beethoven’s grand piece was also adopted by the Council of Europe in 1972 as Europe’s anthem as well as selected in 1985 as the anthem of the European Union, performed in Berlin in 1989 to celebrate the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, featured in the Last Night of the Proms in September 2001, just days after the 9/11 attacks, and included in numerous hymnals as the hymn, *Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee*.

Even though the *Ode to Joy* may have “been swallowed up by ideology” – to use Nicholas Cook’s phrase – it has mostly been interpreted as a musical expression of faith and hope that speaks, like Olympism, to a sense of human community and peace, a blaring affirmation of joy and harmony, and a paean to triumph over struggle. As the *Official Report of the Nagano Organizing Committee* acknowledges, the “global performance of the *Ode to Joy* is the embodiment of the Games’ message to the world of hope for peaceful harmony in the coming century”. Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy* remains today, as it has always been, what the writer Jere Longman aptly describes as “an inspiring, if temporary validation of the symphonic Olympic ideal that all men will be brothers”.

The original manuscript of the Ninth Symphony is in the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin. It runs to 200 pages and was inducted into UNESCO’s “Memory of the World” register. The final movement, for which Beethoven chose the ode *An die Freude* by Friedrich Schiller, is today set as the official anthem of the European Union (EU) and of the Council of Europe.

Photo: picture-alliance


Sachs, op. cit., 3.


Sachs, op. cit., pp. 15–19.

Levy, op. cit., pp. 9–12.


Künstler, op. cit., p. 336.


Birchall, op. cit., p. 33.

Mandell, op. cit., p. 154.


As reported in Witherspoon, Kevin B., Before the eyes of the world: Mexico and the 1968 Olympic Games, DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008, pp. 138–139.


Schillers and Young, op. cit., pp. 139–140.

In a somewhat ironic twist, Beethoven’s Third, the Eroica, was performed in Munich as the world commemorated following the tragic hostage crisis that compromised the Munich celebrations. While IOC President Avery Brundage had once proudly stood as Beethoven’s Ode to Joy was used as the victory anthem for the combined German team, now he was forced to listen to the plaintiff strains of the second movement of the Eroica. See Guttmann, Allen, The Games must go on: Avery Brundage and the Olympic Movement, New York: Columbia University Press, 1984, p. 253.


Personal correspondence with Dr. Donald B. Chu, 15th December 1984.


From 1965–1979, the Republic of Rhodesia comprised the region now known as Zimbabwe. The current national anthem is Blessed be the Land of Zimbabwe.


Incidentally, Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony has taken deep root in Japan, widely performed during the month of December as part of the annual celebration of a new year.

Matsumoto City is the first and oldest Olympic Sister City to Salt Lake City.

The performance was made possible by technology developed by the NHK Engineering Service, a branch of Japan’s national television company, and time-lag adjuster technology.


In 1938, it was performed as the highpoint of the Reichsmusikfest, the Nazi music festival, and, as arranged by Joseph Goebbels, broadcast live on the radio to honour Hitler’s birthday.

An interesting electronic version was recorded by Wendy Carlos for the 1971 film, A Clockwork Orange (Dir. Stanley Kubrick).

As expressed in the IOC’s Olympic Charter, “The goal of Olympics is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity.” Lausanne: International Olympic Committee, 2015, p. 13.


