

## Was Beethoven a Mason?

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**Was Beethoven A Mason?**  
**Presented to Camellia Council #98**  
**Allied Masonic Degrees**  
**By**  
**Phil Hardiman**

## **Introduction**

Why is this an interesting question? Certainly not because we think that our own self-worth is proved by our association with a society of friends and brothers which has counted the great among it in centuries past. This would merely prove our vanity! But certainly because we share with the high and low among us, and among those who have gone before, a value system which itself, in hidden and mysterious ways, may well have contributed to their greatness. This certainly inspires us to maintain our fidelity to the principles of our institution, and if our contributions are of the type to be remembered only in the hearts and minds of those we leave behind, then so be it. Soon enough the dust and ashes will cover over the books and musical scores and canvas, and reduce the great to forgotten memories, so that posterity remembers not us but the content of that which is preserved in those distant future relatives who will know our ritual but will know nothing of us..

Also, by studying the great personages of our Craft, we learn something of the history of *their* era and *their* values; we see the power of God sustaining his evolutionary intent, in spite of the follies of mankind and its ineptitude in service to Him. We see how our Craft progresses over the centuries and millennia from society to society, from civilization to civilization, changing it's outward form, but always preserving its inward beauty. We see how the high among us have used their talent to express or manifest that beauty.

So, what do the historical and contemporary sources say about Beethoven as a Mason? Very little, indeed. One source claims he was a Mason; most others do not deal with the issue, implicitly treating it as a negligible matter of concern, given the more important aspects of amassing the facts of Beethoven's life and music, and, most importantly, trying to determine the meaning lying behind the power of his music. I propose that once we establish Beethoven's Masonic background and/or sympathies, we open doors to a deeper understanding of the symbolism intrinsic to his art. It may be true that non-Masonic sources may have stimulated Beethoven to employ certain symbolic features in his music, and so any conclusions we may draw or speculation we may dream must be understood to be tentative and non-definitive. But at least we can show his Masonic sympathies, and thereby increase the likelihood that he was himself, indeed,

Masonic – not because we want to do so, but because it helps us explore the power, strength and beauty of his music in ways that have been heretofore impossible or unlikely.

## Beethoven's Era

Born in 1770 and dying finally in 1827, he matured during the Enlightenment -- a period ripe with Masonic growth and development, especially in Europe. It was, however, suppressed in Austria in 1776, where he lived most of his life. Many of his future circle of friends were members of the Order of Illuminati, a secret organization with Enlightenment notions of "progress through reason" and with quasi-Masonic ritual. (Solomon, p. 35) In fact, one biographer, "Karl Holz maintained that Beethoven had once been a Freemason; it is certain that he was well disposed toward Freemasonry, especially in his early years, when so many of his closest friends and teachers belonged to the Illuminati or the Masonic Order." (Solomon, p. 207). Haydn, one of his teachers, is among those who were members of the craft.

Gary Lachman, writing in Concerto for Magic and Mysticism, says "Neefe (*a mason*) encouraged Beethoven's interest in Enlightenment ideas of freedom and brotherhood, which would occupy Beethoven throughout his life and achieve their most powerful expression in the magnificent Ninth Symphony. In the famous "Ode to Joy ... the chorus sings: 'Joy, thou source of light immortal, Daughter of Elysium.' Like Mozart, Beethoven had other links to the Masons and dedicated his Piano Sonata Op. 28 to a leading Freemason, Joseph von Sonnenfels." ([www.theosophical.org/theosophy/questmagazine/julaug02/lachman](http://www.theosophical.org/theosophy/questmagazine/julaug02/lachman)).

Many of Beethoven's friends and teachers can be confirmed as Masons from Lodge records, but Beethoven himself cannot. "However, he did write two letters which could be taken to be Fraternal greetings ... (*and he*) composed songs for Masonic purposes, 'Maurerfragen' (Masonic Questions) and 'Der Freye Mann' (The Free Man)." ([www.stbryde.co.uk/articles/masonic\\_composers.htm](http://www.stbryde.co.uk/articles/masonic_composers.htm), italics mine). Schiller, the author of the Ode to Joy, the choral part of the 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony, was Masonic. Matthew M. Ryder writes that "Beethoven (also a Freemason) said to his biographer 'I have it! Let us sing the song of the immortal Schiller!' An unfinished novel, Die Geisterseher, and the 'Ode to Joy' by Schiller was used for Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. 'The poem's philosophy of love and brotherhood was relevant enough to the composer as a young man in revolutionary Europe that he became a Freemason, a lodge dedicated to the ideals, and he remained a member until the organization was banned in Austria in 1795.'" (<http://web.mit.edu/dryfoo/Masonry/Essays/dramatists.html>). Similar remarks are made by Nettl: "It is possible that Beethoven in his youth had belonged to a lodge in the Rhineland. But in Vienna, where the lodges had ceased to function after the death of Joseph II, he would have had no opportunity

to attend meetings and presumably he forgot his Masonic past. He may have been introduced into the lodge by his teacher, Neefe.” (Nettl, p. 127)

## **Beethoven's Character**

In addition to his external relationships during the late 1700s and early 1800s, Beethoven's inner character is of great importance. He was spiritually oriented, though not particularly religious. Socrates and Jesus he claimed to be his “masters.” “Rectitude of principle, high morality, propriety of feeling, and pure natural religion were his distinctions. ... ‘As good as his word’ was his favorite saying ...” (Solomon, p 84). What could be more essentially Masonic?

He wrote in a letter of apology and explanation to a married woman he had inadvertently offended:

“It is one of my chief principles *never to stand in any other relationship than that of friendship with the wife of another man.* ... For *never, never* will you find me dishonorable. Since my childhood I have learnt to love virtue – and everything beautiful and good.” (Solomon, p. 154, italics his).

He had an interest in the “oriental mysteries” and wrote in his diary for 1816 that “God is immaterial and transcends every conception ... This transcendent God became a central theme for Beethoven ... ‘There is nothing higher than to approach more nearly to the Godhead’ ...” (Lachman)

It cannot be doubted that Beethoven was, from early on, a man of integrity. At the age of 19, he assumed responsibility for his two younger brothers. And at the age of 45, when his brother Carl died, he struggled for 5 years to obtain custody of his nephew. Reasons for this are cloudy, but it may be, as suggested in the movie Immortal Beloved, that the child was actually Beethoven's son, rather than his nephew. (<http://www.math.tifr.res.in/~pablo/mozartbio.html>).

But finally, Beethoven's struggle with deafness and despair and his ultimate ability to overcome the ‘trials and tribulations,’ the ‘slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,’ hold him up as a shining example for Masonic emulation, even if, in fact, he were not actually Masonic. As J. W. N. Sullivan has said in Beethoven: His Spiritual Development: “Beethoven's capacity for realizing the fundamental character of life in its two aspects of suffering and achievement, combined with his lack of flexibility, was the necessary condition for the development of his attitude towards life. ... The Beethoven of the C minor symphony finds the meaning of life in achievement in spite of suffering. Fate is an enemy to be defied.” (Sullivan, p. 45).

## Beethoven's Music – the internal evidence

Some of his music is explicitly Masonic, as noted above. Some compositions were dedicated to Masonic friends and mentors. “The Adagio of his Seventh quartet bears the superscription: ‘A weeping willow or an acacia over the grave of my brother.’ Both (*of his*) ... brothers were alive ... so these words probably had a masonic connection. Schindler ... mentions a handshake when visiting the composer: ‘... a grip of our hands said the rest.’”

([http://freemasonry.bcy.ca/biography/beethoven\\_1](http://freemasonry.bcy.ca/biography/beethoven_1), italics mine)

The author is not deeply familiar with all of Beethoven's compositions, and makes no pretense to being musically-informed. He brings only an amateur's appreciation for the resonating power of Beethoven's creations – in particular, the Fifth Symphony, the Ninth Symphony, and the Leonore Overture #3. Suffice it to say, as Paul Nettl has in his book *Mozart and Masonry*: “There is no doubt that many works of Beethoven as well as those of the Romantic composers are based on this humanitarian style. We would do this music a disservice by subjecting it to mechanical analysis. Some of its characteristics are the lofty arches of the melody; large intervals; serious, song-like melodies reminiscent of old choral music; quiet, simple rhythms. A more objective description is out of the question.” (Nettl, p. 59)

The Fifth Symphony begins with the famous ‘knocks’ – da-da-da dum, and finishes with an exquisitely dramatic, extended flourish that gives it its name, the Victory Symphony. In some sense the Fifth may represent ‘victory’ over fate, but it seems more reasonable to this amateur that it represents more importantly the manly quality of vitality, hence concerned with ‘fraternity.’ The Ninth incorporates Schiller's Ode to Joy in the last movement (“**All men will become brothers Under thy gentle wing.**”) In these two symphonies alone Beethoven has expressed man's possible victory over the struggle of life (shades of the resurrection in the third degree), and has taken ‘music’ (one of the seven liberal arts and sciences of the second degree) to sublime levels. I am told in the great Missa Solemnis, his funeral mass, he employed Masonic themes as well.

But the author's hypothesis is that he used the three Overtures to his single Opera, *Fidelio*, for a distinct Masonic purpose. The Opera was originally entitled *Leonore*, but changed by the theater company responsible for the performance. The Opera revolves around Florestan, imprisoned unjustly, whose wife, disguised as a man, attempts to rescue him. “A psychoanalyst would not fail to note that the descent in to the bowels of the prison ... carries resonance of birth and rebirth. ... In this sense, *Fidelio* can be seen as an opera about resurrection as well as rescue.” (Solomon, p. 200). “Florestan (*the husband*) is not only imprisoned but entombed; Leonore and Rocco descend with their spades not to dig his grave but to exhume him from his sepulcher.” (Solomon, p. 200, italics mine). Of the three Leonore Overtures #2 was composed first, followed by #3, and #1. These three pieces stand independently of the opera itself, which also

has an overture performed now with the same name as the opera. The Fidelio Overture was actually written last. However, it seems to the author that this sequencing does not necessarily detract from the hypothesis that Beethoven conceived the three overtures to be understood as composing a natural sequence from the less dramatic to the more dramatic, from the simpler to the more complex, from the simpler to the more glorious.

The reader may want to listen to all three Leonore overtures sometime for your own entertainment.. Let his music speak for itself – is he Masonic...? Wagner is said to have described this piece as “less an overture to a music drama than a music drama itself.” You may hear in this music, as the author does, the type of progress from the First to the Third Degree that we experience in our Masonic ritual? You may also hear the opposition of light and darkness, and the progress from darkness to light. The closing crescendo may represent, as it does for the author, a kind of rising from a grave of ignorance and foolishness to an enlightened state of awareness and ‘being.’

Masonic or not, in fact, I count Beethoven a brother!

# Schiller's Ode to Joy

Text and translation of Symphony No. 9's Finale, by Friedrich Schiller, with a little intro by Beethoven.

## BARITONE

O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!  
Sondern lasst uns angenehmere  
anstimmen, und freudenvollere!

Oh friends, not these tones!  
Let us raise our voices in more  
pleasing and more joyful sounds!

## ODE TO JOY (Friedrich Schiller)

### BARITONE, QUARTET, AND CHORUS

Freude, schöner Götterfunken, Tochter aus Elysium, Wir betreten feuer-trunken, Himmlische, dein Heiligtum!	<b>Joy, fair spark of the gods, Daughter of Elysium, Drunk with fiery rapture, Goddess, We approach thy shrine!</b>
Deine Zauber binden wieder, Was die Mode streng geteilt; Alle Menschen werden Brüder, Wo dein sanfter Flügel weilt.	Thy magic reunites those Whom stern custom has parted; <b>All men will become brothers Under thy gentle wing.</b>
Wem der grosse Wurf gelungen, Eines Freundes Freund zu sein, Wer ein holdes Weib errungen, Mische seinen Jubel ein!	<b>May he who has had the fortune To gain a true friend And he who has won a noble wife Join in our jubilation!</b>
Ja, wer auch nur eine Seele Sein nennt auf dem Erdenrund! Und wer's nie gekonnt, der stehle Weinend sich aus diesem Bund!	Yes, even if he calls but one soul His own in all the world. But he who has failed in this Must steal away alone and in tears.
Freude trinken alle Wesen An den Brüsten der Natur; Alle Guten, alle Bösen Folgen ihrer Rosenspur.	All the world's creatures Draw joy from nature's breast; Both the good and the evil Follow her rose-strewn path.
Küsse gab sie uns und Reben, Einen Freund, geprüft im Tod; Wollust ward dem Wurm gegeben, Und der Cherub steht vor Gott.	She gave us kisses and wine And a friend loyal unto death; She gave lust for life to the lowliest, And the Cherub stands before God.

### TENOR SOLO AND CHORUS

Froh, wie seine Sonnen fliegen Durch des Himmels prächtigen Plan, Laufet, Brüder, eure Bahn, Freudig, wie ein Held zum Siegen.	Joyously, as his suns speed Through Heaven's glorious order, Hasten, Brothers, on your way, Exulting as a knight in victory.
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### CHORUS

Freude, scho"ner Go"tterfunken,  
...

Seid umschlungen, Millionen!  
Diesen Kuss der ganzen Welt!  
Bru"der u"ber'm Sternenzelt  
Muss ein lieber Vater wohnen.

Ihr stu"rzt nieder, Millionen?  
Ahnest du den Scho"pfer, Welt?  
Such'ihn u"ber'm Sternenzelt!  
U"ber Sternen muss er wohnen.

Joy, fair spark of the gods,  
...

Be embraced, Millions!  
Take this kiss for all the world!  
Brothers, surely a loving Father  
Dwells above the canopy of stars.

Do you sink before him, Millions?  
World, do you sense your Creator?  
Seek him then beyond the stars!  
He must dwell beyond the stars.



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